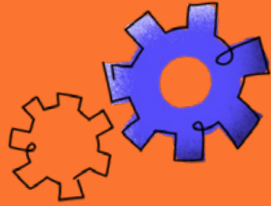


GET TO KNOW

Catalyst Maria High School



Mark Lenz
Director of
Scholar Support
and Interventions

TYPE OF SCHOOL

Charter school

LOCATION

Chicago, Illinois

TOTAL STUDENTS

600-700 students
in grades 6-12

THE VISION

Strong academics starts with strong connections

For Mark Lenz, an administrator at Catalyst Maria High School in Chicago, forming strong connections with students is foundational to meeting the needs of their diverse student population—both academically and socially. Building and maintaining strong teacher-student relationships is one of the school's core values, as is making students feel safe and also feel comfortable taking risks in the classroom.

“We see academics and social emotional learning as inextricably linked. One affects the other,” said Lenz. **“We have to start with relationships with the work we do. Teacher-student trust is essential to really move the needle academically with kids. Kids learn best when they have a connection with the teacher and have investment in the classroom community.”**

That's what brought their community to Along, which they used this year as part of a pilot to help both new and veteran teachers establish regular touchpoints with students.

“We are creating more opportunities for how to build a stronger community as a whole,” added Lenz. “Culturally

Responsive Pedagogy is a foundational framework for Catalyst Maria. This translates into the tools we use, and we saw Along as another way to bring student voice into the classroom.”

THE STRATEGY

Start any class with a moment of reflection

Teachers at Catalyst Maria sparked conversation in both homeroom and content classes using Along.

Their strategies varied depending on each class set-up, however most tried posting an Along reflection question as a bell ringer activity. **By sharing a question for students to answer as a “Do Now” activity first thing when they entered the classroom, teachers could get a sense of students’ thoughts going into the day. And, it allowed teachers to set the tone of the classroom by giving a moment for reflection.**

THE IMPACT

Knowing each student has long-term effects

By using Along in these ways, teachers were able to build community, prompt

critical thinking, and activate prior knowledge on academic topics.

And, Catalyst Maria teachers reported that consistently checking in with students through Along opened up new insights. As one social studies teacher noted, “[Along] allows me to get some insight as to if there’s anything going on [at home]. Like, I just found out that one of my students is moving and they were kind of upset.”

That same teacher also asked the Along question, “Do you feel you are included as a part of the classroom community?” The teacher shared, “One of the kids said he wants to read [in class] but he feels shy about it, so he won’t offer to read. So I said I could let him know when [I’m going to ask him] to read so that way we can preempt [anxiety over reading out loud].”

Lenz said that there are multiple benefits for using a tool like Along. **“If you start by focusing on student well-being, and making kids feel seen, you’re going to see academics and a positive classroom culture thrive,”** he said. **“There is a correlation to these connections at school. Relationships are the foundation for making school a place where all students can be successful. Along is a good place to start.”**