

GET TO KNOW

Murray Middle School



Kristina Robertson
Educator

TYPE OF SCHOOL

Urban

LOCATION

St. Paul, Minnesota

TOTAL STUDENTS

500–600 students
in grades 6–8

THE VISION

Build community for ELL students

Middle school educator Kristina Robertson, a multilingual language teacher at [Murray Middle School](#) in St. Paul, Minnesota, understands firsthand the extra challenges that English language learner (ELL) students face at school.

While trying to adapt to a new language and culture, ELL students may feel reluctant to speak in front of others and may struggle to connect with their teacher and the rest of the class. As part of the Saint Paul Public Schools district, the most diverse school district in Minnesota with students who speak more than 114 languages, Robertson is consistently looking for ways to create community in her classroom that encourages strong, ongoing teacher-student relationships.

“I have set up structures and practices that focus on social-emotional skill building, creating community, and helping students have more agency and voice in the learning space,” said Robertson.

THE STRATEGY

A three-pronged approach that gives students agency

Robertson has focused her strategy on three main classroom practices: 1) a zone of regulation framework, 2) asking her students questions in Along; and 3) weekly circle time that focuses on a specific activity.

When students enter her classroom, they identify the state of their feelings based on a four-color quadrant. “A student may say, ‘Today I’m in the blue zone because I stayed up late.’ I use that to configure the activities that will work best that day,” said Robertson.

Asking these questions around feelings are also part of a deeper practice using Along, the teacher-student connection builder. She started by asking students “getting to know you” questions on the platform with multiple choice responses. Gradually, she moved toward asking more in-depth questions.

“I asked them, ‘What things could we do in class to reduce stress?’ Many of them suggested having plants in the classroom, so I brought in a couple of plants,” said Robertson. **“It’s important to close the loop and bring it back to the students.”**

Robertson allows her students to respond in Along in either their native language, or they can copy and paste answers using Google Translate. Every week, Robertson also has students come together as a group for circle time. They have opportunities to

share what’s on their mind and participate in larger class discussions.

THE IMPACT

Helping students master needed skills for their future

For Robertson, success for her ELL students is all about giving them a space where they can grow both emotionally and mentally, and to develop the skills they need to be ready for high school.

During circle time, students pass around a Beanie baby, and they can speak or pass when they have it in their hands.

Robertson keeps track of students who aren’t participating regularly so she can follow up one-on-one. **She uses Along to help facilitate ongoing, direct conversations with each student and to encourage harder-to-reach students to participate.**

She added, “I know some of the kids better than teachers who have been working with them all year. I was recently asked by a teacher how I knew all about a student and her interests. ‘Well,’ I responded, ‘I just asked her and she started talking.’”