



Create Connection:

From Vision to Implementation

While so many hoped for a return to normalcy during the 2021-22 school year, impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic remained. Students at [Thompson Intermediate School](#), like so many schools across the nation, were still feeling the relational and academic deficits caused by pandemic-related disruptions. With a vision for relationship building, school leader Tanis Griffin adopted [Along](#), a first-of-its-kind teacher-student connection builder, to emphasize connection among her entire school community.

Educator Voices

About Along

Along allows educators and students to exchange quick, one-on-one reflections with one another. However, even with an intuitive and user-friendly tool, the addition of something new can be challenging in the context of busy, post-pandemic school days. At Thompson, this wasn't the case. Because of an intentional push across the whole school aligned to a vision for strong relationships, both new and veteran educators widely adopted Along.

Over the course of the school year, educators sent 1,268 reflection questions leading to over 9,000 response reflections and a 95% response rate by students.

According to English teacher Kayla Matlock, "I was in their shoes not too long ago and I wish I would have had something like [Along] to communicate with my teacher. I was the kid in class who didn't want to raise their hand. I would keep to myself. I have [students] that don't want to communicate, but having [Along] helps them express themselves to me."

Tech-hesitant history educator Robert Boyes was skeptical of Along at first. Self-described as "an old school teacher", Boyes kept a close eye on how students responded to the tool. According to Boyes, "I really don't use video a lot. But, when I started using video [with Along], the kids really liked it. You start hearing things that you would never normally hear. You're starting a relationship that would not normally be there in an everyday setting. And now they send back videos to me and I think that's awesome."

Special educator Heather Nielson found that Along expanded her view of students' capabilities. According to Nielson, "Being able to communicate with this tool is exciting for my kids. [Along] is a huge game changer. For me,

it gives me an opportunity to say, 'Wow, I can do so much more than what I'm doing already.'" Nielsen also spoke to the power of Along with non-verbal students in the blog, "[Non-verbal students find new ways to communicate with Along](#)".

Make it Happen

Get a Pulse.

There was an intentional approach to support students where they were at emotionally, so all students at Thompson began the year by taking a survey of their well-being. The survey revealed that many students were experiencing stress and difficulty relating to teachers, peers, and family. School leader Tanis Griffin knew she needed to take action to support her entire school community. Griffin introduced Along as a way to prioritize relationships consistently within her school community. Griffin shared,

66 The way that we rolled it out is we did our back-to-school professional development and one of our focuses was on emotional well-being. So I modeled it with my leadership team, we practiced, and we rolled it out to the staff. We talked about meeting the kids where they are."

By understanding the power of utilizing student and educator voice and key highlights derived from the beginning-of-year survey, Griffin created a strong value proposition for relationship building and connection. Utilizing strong change management strategies, Griffin carved out intentional time to have important and often challenging conversations with her staff about student perceptions of adults in the school community.

Model Vulnerability & Support A Strong Start.

During professional learning at the start of the school year, Griffin created buy-in by introducing Along and its robust library of reflection questions to her educators. She asked them questions as if they were students, and they responded – simulating the experience of exchanging Along reflections, and enabling real-time experiential learning of the tool. Following this, all educators rostered their advisory students on Along and started building developmental relationships with their students.

Griffin and her educators were equipped with a variety of resources to support a strong start with Along. Educator Resources included “[5 Tips to Welcome Students to Along](#)” and “School Onboarding Checklist” ([for educators](#) and [for school leaders](#)), among others. Resources were also available to illuminate [why relationships matter](#) as well as Along’s [research-to-practice foundation](#). Additional resources can be found on the [Along Resources page](#).

Equipped with strong tools, connection and vulnerability also played a role in Boyes’ adoption with his students. Boyes shared that, “I created a video on Along and my first one was not very good. I did five takes and they saw all the takes. Three of [my students] came up to my desk to show me how to do it. These kids are in tune with what’s going on. For me, it was hilarious. They spent time with me to learn how to do it and now they send videos back to me.”

Create Space & Leverage Data to Motivate Educators.

Griffin worked in partnership with the Along Implementation Success Team to utilize highly-leverageable data. According to Jared Chandler, Along School & District Success Manager, “Ms. Griffin showed her team early on just how important relationship building would be for their work that year. She checked data weekly to see which teachers had started

reflecting with students, and which ones might need additional support in getting started.” As the school year progressed, activation data turned into engagement data, allowing Griffin to pivot and support her educators to maintain strong motivation towards building relationships with their students. Chandler further stated, “The number one priority for Ms. Griffin and her team was that staff helped students to feel seen and heard. They used engagement data to understand when and how that was happening, and to help them identify opportunities to improve.”

Knowing the many tasks educators balance, Griffin set a school-wide, advisory expectation that educators send an Along reflection question each Tuesday. By setting this bar, Griffin and her educators created a weekly relationship building routine. Educators and students fell into a cadence of connection. Boyes shared that “Once they realize that it’s a relationship between you and them, they’ll tell you more things and you can actually get to the heart of the matter if a child is struggling. The bond needs to be there, and that’s what Along provides.” Given Along’s flexibility and the [guidance provided](#), small moments of connection accumulated into a culture focused on people as people.

Thompson is full of small and large successes from their school-wide adoption of Along. The words of student Da’Marcus H. capture it well—

66 [Along] makes coming to school feel a little different. It feels like your community here at school is more supportive because you have that relationship... I feel like I have way more people to talk to and if I need something they’re going to have my back.”

