

**FRANCIS W. PARKER CHARTER ESSENTIAL SCHOOL**  
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**Thoughts on Connection**

When I started working at Parker in 2008, one of the first things that struck me was that morning advisories and other group meetings opened with something called “connections.” Parker connections happen at the start of each day and are a time for everyone to check in. This routine is one of the hallmarks of our school day. Once a group is settled in and its facilitator states, “connections are now open,” this brings forth updates, jokes, stories and always, authenticity. Connections at our school are a way of life, and during connections, students share about themselves, their interests, or just about anything on their minds. There are no responses or asking of questions – people listen to what another person has said without comment or judgement. Parker connections help friendships to form, people to know one another and a deeper level of communication, empathy and understanding to grow.

“Connections are now open” in new and creative ways as we continue to hunker down in our homes, stay put and observe social distancing guidelines. Connection with each other provides support and can even heal us – maybe not from a terrifying virus – but from despair, depression, anxiety, hopelessness or loneliness. Connecting with others in a simple email or text indicates that we’re in this together and that we acknowledge each other. A phone call that reaches out to let someone know we’re thinking of them can make all the difference. We’re bonded by this strange time of staying home. We’re bonded by the differences in daily lives largely free of errands, rides to and from activities, and all the places we’ve come to think we must be.

Physical connection is not possible in the same way right now, and I am hearing from many students that this is challenging for them. Being in a lively classroom, walking the halls and taking laps in groups, giving a friend a hug, sitting side by side at lunch – some of our students are yearning for the physical space of the school and the physical presence of peers and teachers. It’s sad to be away from each other. We miss each other. Mandatory social distancing, while vital for our safety, is challenging for those who value face-to-face interaction.

At the start of this week, I attended an advisory meeting. As usual, it began with connections. For this group of students, it turned out that the entire advisory meeting consisted *only* of connections for thirty minutes. The advisor organized a speaker’s list in alphabetical order and each student listened as group members took a turn, some connecting more than once. A couple of students had clearly been awake for hours and were sitting at desks looking chipper and cheerful. Some students were still sleepy, with tousled hair or were lying down, head on a pillow. One student kept the camera off but still spoke, an icon lighting up when this person shared about the previous week.

During the advisory meeting, there was huge variation in mood and activity: some students were energetic, some were quiet, some were glad to talk and joke, some were sad and said so. One student typed in the co-occurring chat instead of speaking out loud. Everyone did what was comfortable. Everyone accepted the others exactly where they were. They shared who they are and what's important to them. They said what was true and real and heartfelt in those moments. They nodded, listened, smiled or just sat quietly, taking it all in. They were there for each other whether the topic was last night's dinner, their pet's latest adventures or a recent disappointment. There was respect, empathy and great care in this virtual space. When "connections are open," we find each other there in that space. We see each other fully in that space. And when we see each other's humanity, we also find a part of ourselves.

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