Safe Spaces, Strong Minds: Cultivating Psychological Safety for Educators and Students

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Ask Chat A.I.

Choose a category. **A question** will be revealed. Share a response with Chat A.I. to dig deeper, or return to this menu by selecting “done.”

Ask me a question about _____.

Travel	Sports	Hobbies
Myself	Friends	Stress

Click here for more options.

Felisha Santiago
Director of School Supports

“Every Voice Matters”

BRIGHTER TOMORROW

- Define Psychological Safety and Its Impact
- Learn and Apply Practical Strategies to Build Trust and Open Dialogue
- Recognize and Address Barriers to Psychological Safety

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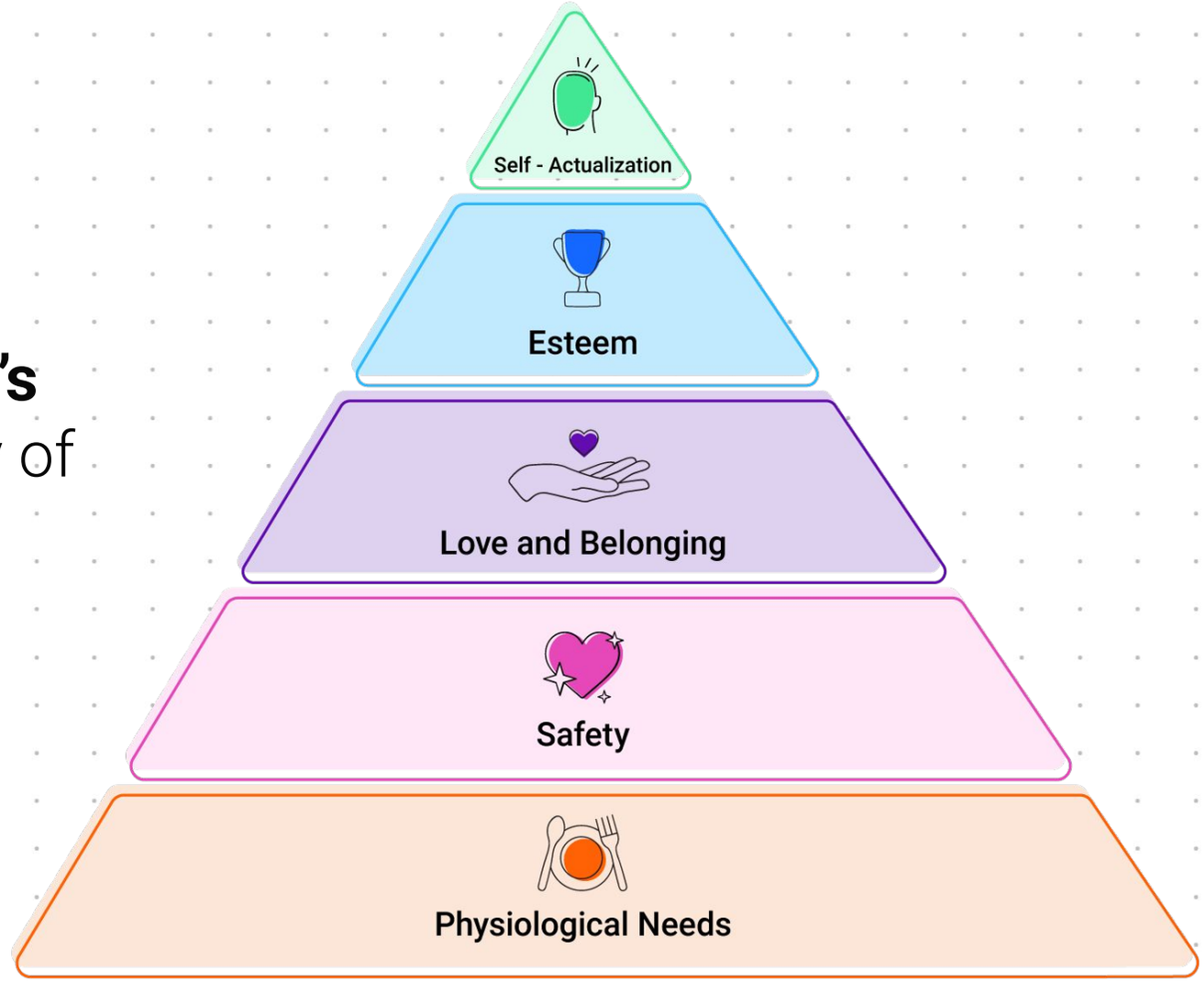
Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs



Why Psychological Safety Matters

Turn & Talk:
What is an experience that you have had similar to this?

If There's Time:
What was the biggest hurdle after this experience?

1:00

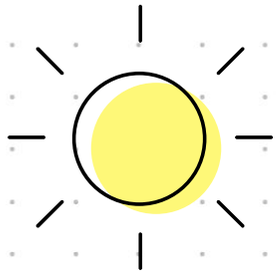
Define Psychological Safety

Define Psychological Safety

Psychological safety means feeling safe to speak up, ask questions, make mistakes, and share ideas without fear of being embarrassed, ignored, or punished.

In a psychologically safe classroom or workplace, people trust that they'll be respected and supported—even when they take risks, admit they don't know something, or offer a different opinion.

Psychological Safety – A Garden Where People Can Grow



Sunlight
Encouragement and warmth

Water
Trust and consistent care

Soil
A foundation of respect and belonging

Psychological Safety in Schools

- Students feel safe to say, “I don’t get it,” without feeling dumb.
  They know asking questions is welcomed, not judged.
- Teachers admit mistakes or say, “I’m still learning this,” and model growth.
  They don’t have to pretend to know everything.
- Staff meetings include honest conversations—not just what’s “safe” to say.
  People can raise concerns or new ideas without fear of being dismissed or labeled.
- Students take risks—reading aloud, trying a hard problem, leading a group—because they know their effort is respected.
  Even if they get it wrong, they won’t be teased or punished.
- Educators support one another, celebrate wins, and check in when someone’s struggling.
  There’s a culture of care, not competition.

Why it matters for Students:

Confidence to Participate: When students feel safe, they're more likely to raise their hands, ask questions, and try new things—even when they're unsure.

Deeper Learning: Mistakes become learning opportunities, not something to hide or fear.

Belonging: A safe environment helps every student—especially those from marginalized groups—feel seen, heard, and respected.

Emotional Wellness: Psychological safety lowers anxiety, supports mental health, and builds resilience.

Why it matters for Staff…

Open Communication: Teams that feel safe talk honestly about what's working and what's not—which leads to better solutions.

Stronger Collaboration: Trust enables creativity, teamwork, and shared leadership.

Reduced Burnout: In psychologically safe environments, educators feel supported, not judged—especially when they make mistakes or ask for help.

Modeling for Students: Staff who feel safe are better able to create that same safety for students.

Turn & Talk

When have you felt psychologically safe as an educator or student?

1:00

Apply Practical Strategies

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~~Unsafe~~
~~Unpredictable~~
~~Reactive~~
~~Exclusionary~~

Safe
Predictable
Proactive
Inclusive

Building Trust

- Consistent Norms and Routines
- Vulnerability from Leaders
- Feedback on Culture and Student Voice

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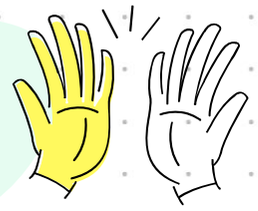
4 at the Door + 1 More

1 Eye to Eye

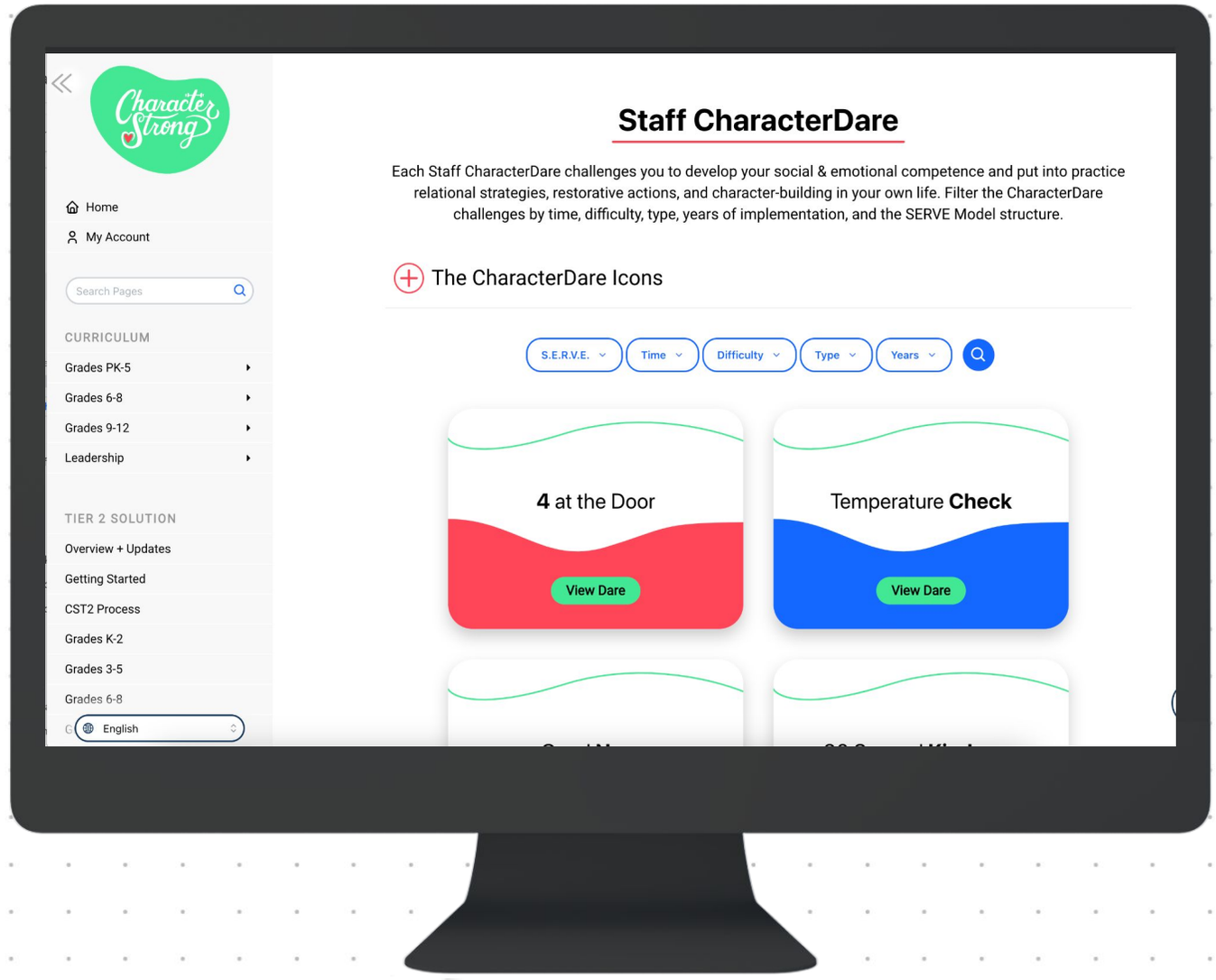
3 Hand to Hand*



2 Name to Name

4 Heart to Heart

+1 Entry Task


Home
My Account
Search Pages
CURRICULUM
Grades PK-5
Grades 6-8
Grades 9-12
Leadership
TIER 2 SOLUTION
Overview + Updates
Getting Started
CST2 Process
Grades K-2
Grades 3-5
Grades 6-8
English
Staff CharacterDare
Each Staff CharacterDare challenges you to develop your social & emotional competence and put into practice relational strategies, restorative actions, and character-building in your own life. Filter the CharacterDare challenges by time, difficulty, type, years of implementation, and the SERVE Model structure.
The CharacterDare Icons
S.E.R.V.E.
Time
Difficulty
Type
Years
4 at the Door
View Dare
Temperature Check
View Dare

Staff

The Student Becomes the Teacher

Hand each student a notecard and ask them to write down their name and one thing that they could teach you.

Use your new-found knowledge intentionally by asking students about what they put on the card, especially with students whom it has been harder to connect with in a positive way. Keep the notecards all year to refer to as needed! A virtual option could be asking students to share this via email or as a message through your digital classroom.

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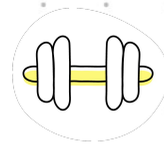
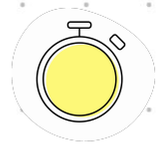
Family





A Piece Of Me

Choose an item (or think of an item from the past) that is an important physical possession of yours. Invite other members of the family to do the same and have a night of show and tell where you share the story of that item and why it's important to you.

We all hold onto things for different reasons and this is a fun opportunity to connect over the objects that have significance in our life!

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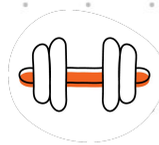
Administrators



Second Hand Compliment

Go into 5 staff member's classrooms over the next month compliment them in front of their class.

Don't talk to them directly, just talk to their students, and let the students know why they have such an amazing teacher.

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IMPLEMENTATION ROADMAP

27 Ways to Appreciate School Staff & Boost Morale

CAMPUS LEADERS: HOW MANY OF THESE CAN YOU TRY THIS YEAR?

- Cover their duty for a day
- Group lunch orders opportunity(even if they pay for their own)
- Favorite drink delivered
- Make a point to stop by classrooms just to greet teachers
- Greet staff at the door in the mornings
- Breakfast treats in the lounge
- Popcorn bar
- Invite staff to leave 15-min early on Fridays (after students are gone, of course)
- Flip-flop day
- Sweatshirt/jeans day
- Social media shout-outs
- Games with prizes at staff meetings and PLCs
- Plan a staff field-trip
- Bring in a masseuse for mini-massages
- Instead of a thank-you note, make a thank-you video!
- Ask intentional questions:
  - what was the best part of your day?
  - tell me about a student you are proud of.
  - is there a student you are struggling to connect with? How can I help?
  - if there anything I can do to be a better leader for you?
- Encourage and model self-care and mental health days
- Ask a teacher's opinion/input on a decision
- Set up a fantastic coffee bar in the lounge...regularly
- Coordinate with local business to sponsor monthly luncheons or breakfasts
- Give teachers opportunities to lead
- Ask teachers to choose a favorite lesson or classroom tip to share at meetings
- Make kindness normal at your school by leading with kindness

Consistent Norms and Routines

Routines are regular patterns of classroom activities that create predictability to a learning environment.

Outcome:

- Students are crystal clear about the expectations and what it looks like to be behaviorally successful in class

How to:

- Establish behavioral expectations (examples/non-examples)
- Teach, model, cue/prompt, practice, and feedback
- Ongoing teaching

Relational Practices:

Banking Time

Relational practices that involves identifying a window of time to connect with a student to deposit into the relationship through skillful relational practices by getting to know them as a person and increase their sense of belonging

Banking Time Relational Practices

- Developmentally appropriate open-ended questions
- Active listening to:
- Express interest
- Make empathy statements
- Appropriately self-disclose to share information about one's self or make connections

Relational Practices:

Indirect Compliments Through Others

Paying close attention to a student/staff member to *identify positive qualities or actions based on what they said, did, or achieved and relaying this through compliment through another meaningful adult* (aka - positive notes; positive office referrals)

Other Adults:

- Parents/caregiver
- Administrator
- Counselor
- Coach
- Other teacher

Some tidbits:

- More powerful than direct compliments
- Evidence-based strategy

Relational Practices:

Positive Peer Reporting

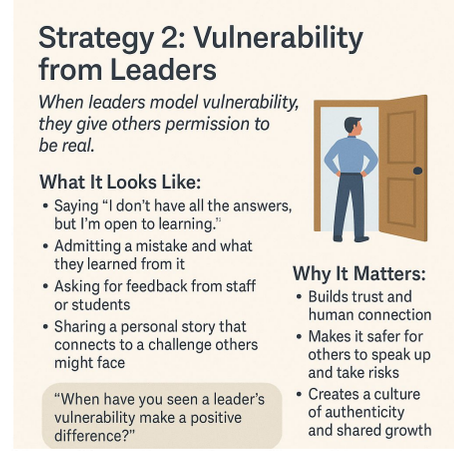
Classwide relational practice designed to increase prosocial interactions in class by protecting time for students to make positive recognition statements about one another. Students earn access to a preferred activity or experience.

Steps:

- Teach how to pay attention to positive things other students say, do or achieve and how to make a genuine and specific positive recognition statement
- Identify class MVPs who are the focal students for a few days or the week (i.e., recipient of recognition)
- Work with the class to identify an activity or experience to earn and set a goal
- Protect time for positive peer reporting and track towards achieve goal

Vulnerability from Leaders

- Saying “I don’t have all the answers, but I’m open to learning.”
- Admitting a mistake and what they learned from it
- Asking for feedback from staff or students
- Sharing a personal story that connects to a challenge others might face
- Acknowledging uncertainty in times of change—but leading with honesty and empathy



Turn & Talk

Which strategy stands out to you and how can you apply it?

1:00

Recognize & Address Barriers

Common Barriers

Top-Down Leadership

Decisions are made without input.
Staff don't feel their voices matter.

Fear of Judgement

"If I speak up, I'll sound stupid."
Students or staff stay silent to protect themselves.

Mistake Punishment Culture

Mistakes are criticized instead of seen as growth opportunities.
Leads to fear and disengagement.

Lack of Listening or Follow-Through

Feedback is asked for but never acted on.
Builds distrust and apathy.

Bias and Exclusion

People from marginalized backgrounds don't feel safe being themselves.
Microaggressions go unaddressed.

Scenario

Ms. James is a first-year teacher at Ridgeview Middle School. She's passionate, creative, and eager to contribute. During her first few months, she notices that the English department meetings are very formal and tightly controlled by the department chair, Mr. Hensley.

Whenever Ms. James tries to share new ideas—like project-based assessments or co-teaching models—she gets polite nods, but no discussion. One time, a colleague later warns her, "Just keep your head down for now. Mr. Hensley doesn't really like when new people shake things up."

At the next meeting, Mr. Hensley presents a new curriculum change without asking for input. Several teachers clearly disagree, but no one speaks up. Ms. James stays silent, even though she has valid concerns and ideas. Afterward, she starts holding back in team meetings and sticks to what's "safe."

Meanwhile, in her classroom, she notices some of her quieter students hesitating to participate—even when they have good ideas. She wonders if she's unintentionally creating the same kind of environment she's experiencing.

Turn & Talk:

What barriers to psychological safety are present in this case?

If There's Time:

How might this environment affect both staff morale and student learning?

1:00

Strategies to Overcome Barriers

- Model Vulnerability at All Levels
- Invite Input—Then Act on It
- Normalize Learning from Mistakes
- Practice Active Listening
- Address Bias and Microaggressions Head-On
- Co-Create Norms for Collaboration

Turn & Talk

What barriers exist in your school or classroom?

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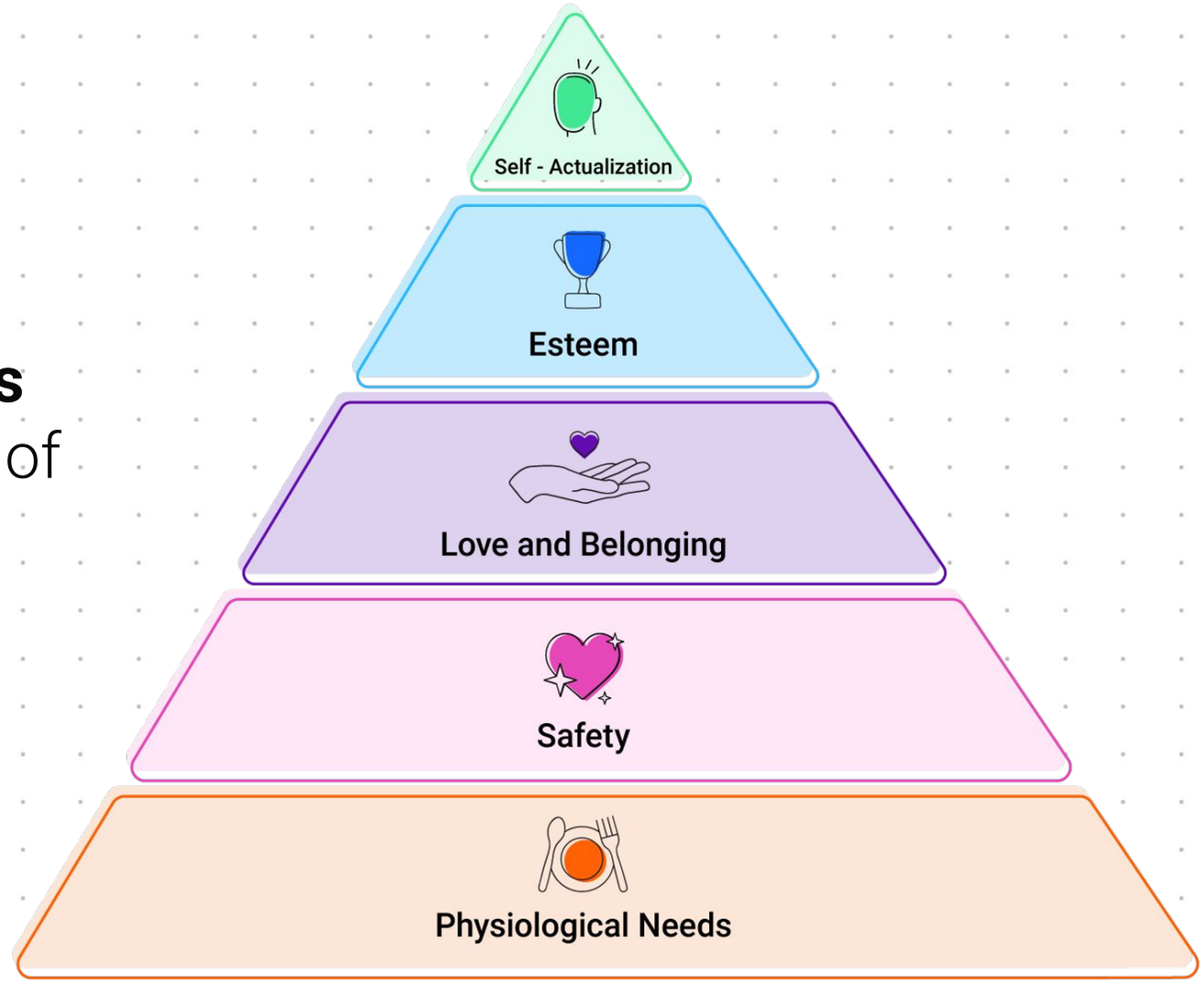
Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs



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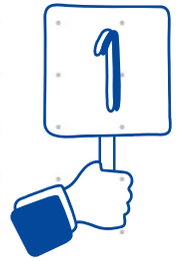
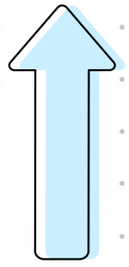
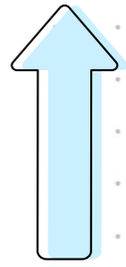


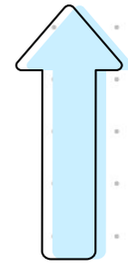
Thing You Learned



Thing You Want To Learn More About



Commitment



“**Look at a stonecutter** hammering away at his rock, perhaps a hundred times without as much as a crack showing in it. Yet at the hundred-and-first blow it will *split in two*, and I know it was not the last blow that did it, but *all that had gone before.*”

–Jacob A. Riis

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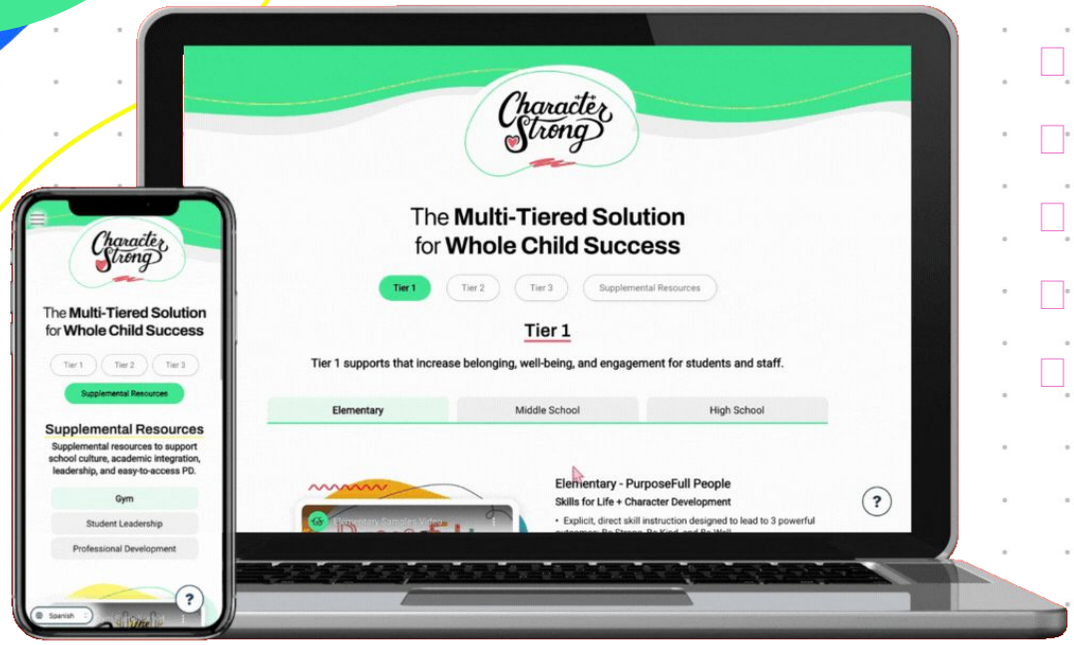
60 Second Feedback

Tier 1 Curriculum



- PreK - 12th Grade Vertically Aligned Curriculum
- Designed by Educators for Educators
- Every lesson is unique and does not repeat
- Research-Based Lessons
- Plug and Play Resources

Scan to Learn More

LoHi Toolkit

- 100+ videos & activities
- 5 student sessions
- 8 virtual assemblies
- 8 downloadable posters
- 100+ CharacterDares

Scan to Learn More:

The CS Weekly

- A quick 2-3 minute strategy
- Delivered every Monday

THE Character Strong WEEKLY

Scan to Sign Up:

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Brain and Behavior Training

When and Where?

Creating a Culture of Academic Engagement and Effective Classroom Management

A 1-day training on our research-backed instructional framework to equip educators with easy-to-use tools that impact student behavior and school culture.