44 MELS Community Practices

Section A. RITUALS, SONGS, AND CHANTS

Rituals, songs, and chants are all about creating a shared culture. Most are shared across all grades in the school. Many represent a unique take on a practical need (e.g. the hailstorm activity is a way to get everyone silent and to start of the meeting). Some are just plain silly but create a shared insider-ness.

Hailstorm [Rituals, Songs, Chants]	The community creates the sound of a thunderstorm through rubbing palms, snaps, claps, stomping, and various other sounds devised by the leader(s). The storm usually fades into the start of the meeting. Always led by groups of students, Hailstorm is used to start meetings at MELS. The practice is tied to an (apocryphal) story about a storm the week the school opened.
Greeting [Rituals, Songs, Chants]	*Leader: "MELS on your feet!"* *[Community stands]* *Leader: "MELS, how are you doing today?"* *Response: "Fantastic! Terrific! Great! All Day Long!" + [Community howls]* Used to start or end meetings at MELS. The howling is in reference to our school mascot, the wolf. We adapted this call-response from the American Youth Foundation's youth leadership conferences, though it's widely used and we're unclear who actually created it.
"Crews Not Passengers!" [Rituals, Songs, Chants]	*Leader: "MELS Crews!"* *Response: "CREWS NOT PASSENGERS!"* This call-response is used to redirect attention towards the leader, and is followed by silence (we periodically have to re-norm this). It is a reference to the Kurt Hahn's quote "We are crew, not passengers."
Principal's List! [Rituals, Songs, Chants]
[Stomp] [Stomp] [Clap] [Stomp] [Stomp] [Clap] This chant is used to create hype before the Honor Roll/Principal's List is read out at the end of a marking period. The community is typically divided into three sections.
Repurposed Pop Songs [Rituals, Songs, Chants]	In grades 6-8, we sing a variety of songs of pop songs with rewritten lyrics (i.e. "Get Lucky" becomes "Get Nerdy"; "Empire State of Mind" becomes "MELS State of Mind.") This is also an opportunity for student musicians and members of the school's rap club to feature.
Class Trophy [Rituals, Songs, Chants] [Competitions]	A trophy is passed from Crew to Crew any time there is a competition. The more absurd the object the better (the Class of 2019 has been fighting over a toy WWE wrestling belt for 3 years).
Pot of Names [Rituals, Songs, Chants] [Conversations]	In grades 9-12, the community has an characteristic receptacle (pot, jack-o-lantern bucket, etc.) with all student names inside. Activities that involve community members sharing their opinion, may include names being drawn. This is always framed in a lighthearted manner, so a name being read is often followed by applause and a chanting of that student's name until she or he speaks.

Section B. WHOLE-COMMUNITY INITIATIVES OR ACTIVITIES

Whole-community initiatives or activities are partially about creating "epic" shared experiences that students will talk about as a time they felt a part of something big. In the case of initiatives (problem-solving challenges), they also provide an opportunity for the community to practice taking collective action. Such initiatives are always accompanied by a community discussion/debrief.

Hoop the Group [Whole-Community Initiative]	The entire community forms a linked circle, holding hands or wrists. A number of hula hoops are dispersed within the links (one per Crew, or one every 10 students). The hoops must be passed around the entire community without anyone "breaking" the chain, so students must climb through the hoops with the help of their neighbors. This is an example of a classic outdoor education group initiative adapted for a large group (many more can be found online or in Karl Rohnke's books). We use this particular one to kick off our first sixth grade Community Meeting of the year.
Zombie Apocalypse [Whole-Community Initiative]	This is an example of a *The-Space-Is-Yours* initiative in which the entire community is given a challenge, and the space/mic is turned over to them to organize themselves and solve it. The community must pass ten members of the community (they choose whom) across the length of the meeting space, including over tables or chairs (the story involves a zombie attack and the need to pass scientists over the barricade). Everyone must participate, and for safety reasons no walk-and-carry moves are permitted: students must form a "zipper" with their arms to pass their peers (who lay arms-crossed, on their backs). This activity kicks off our first ninth grade Community Meeting of the year, and requires staff training ahead of time and student direction during the meeting on safety and spotting techniques. No freshmen class has yet to complete this activity successfully or fail entirely in the time allotted (30 minutes), which makes it a perfect set-up for a series of Community Meetings focused on what the community needs to work on. [See "After the Apocalpyse" Theme in Section G.]
Word Formation [Whole-Community Initiative]	Another *The-Space-Is-Yours* initiative. The community are asked to form words, numbers, or shapes. At the start of the year, our 12th grade students must organize form their graduation year "2019" on the field for a photograph. A variation on this theme is the **Blind Polygon** initiative where students must, without talking or blindfolded, form certain shapes (the five-pointed star is particularly difficult).
The Wave [Whole-Community Initiative]	Another *The-Space-Is-Yours* initiative, used with our younger students. The student community must organize themselves into a series of human waves (i.e. the baseball stadium kind): side-to-side, front-to-back, continuous, both-ends-crossing, etc. Cheering is a must.
Movie Trailer [Whole-Community Initiative]	The entire grade community was challenged to put together a movie trailer for a certain genre. In advance, each Crew was assigned several generic 10-second scenes to film ("superheroes battling villains," "love at first sight"), which were later dropped into into the appropriate iMovie trailer template by a student committee. At MELS, in preparation for School Spirit Week last year each grade was assigned a genre and asked submit a trailer to be screened at the All-MS/All-HS meeting.
#NotesFromShawn [Whole-Community Activity]	This challenge was prompted by a Shawn Mendes-obsessed student (and takes its name from a Mendes campaign in 2016). High school students were challenged to leave encouraging notes or personal inspirational stories on all middle school student lockers. Note that this activity requires a bit of norming, example-giving, and quality control so that notes like "You're beautiful" (without any additional context or an accompanying story) don't get posted!
Passages Tunnel [Whole-Community Activity]	As a metaphor for their eighth grade Passage (our equivalent of eighth grade graduation), students open the year by creating a tunnel through which they take turns passing through: the back of the tunnel goes through and forms the front, etc. Students are instructed to do their own dance or walk through the tunnel, representing their own unique selves, while the rest of the community cheers them on.

Mannequin Challenge [Whole-Community Activity]	Like #NotesFromShawn and many of our activities (e.g. Harlem Shake, Baby Shark dance), the Mannequin Challenge was in response to a pop culture challenge/viral video. In this case, Crews in grades 6-8 were given pre-determined locations to set up frozen tableaux over our school, and two teachers traversed the locations to create an epic film. Our version, which took place the week of Thanksgiving, also included Crew members holding up signs about what they were thankful for. Check ours out here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4urgOmZiXFg
Spring Cleaning [Whole-Community Activity] [Crew Competition]	Sometimes it's fun to meet as a community without being together physically (also see Google Docs conversation, below). In this case, each Crew is assigned to make another Crew's space "feel fresh" again. Crews are given a checklist (with points) of possible things to do, like cleaning writing off desks, organizing libraries, updating posters, and write-in room-specific items. Additional points are awarded for leaving an inspiring message or decoration. While nominally a competition for that little extra incentive, in execution we emphasize that this is about caring for all our community spaces together.

Section C. CREW COMPETITIONS

Crew competitions pit crews against crews in the community setting. At MELS, they are most purposeful when they tie in to a shared part of the school culture, present something so unique that it becomes a shared experience, or provide a structure for building relationships and understandings across the grade. At MELS, we try to minimize competitions that are simply fun games, or competitions that do not require some kind of participation from all students (e.g. an activity where each Crew nominates one representative and the community watches a group of students compete).

Dance Competition [Crew Competition]	Before the meeting, each Crew prepares a short dance routine for a song. For our sixth graders, this competition is tied to a series of meetings based on our school Habits of Work and Learning—with this competition exemplifying Courage (also the criteria upon which Crews are judged). We have also had Crews **Lip Synch** or prepare **Skits** to connect to a variety of aims.
Community Trivia [Crew Competition]	Crews compete to answer multiple-choice trivia questions about members in the community correctly (e.g. "Which member of our community went to Virginia last summer?" "Whose favorite food is chicken?"). The answers are based on a survey given out to students ahead of time. For multiple-choice trivia activities, we often use the online Kahoot! or Plickers platform.
Caption the Picture! [Crew Competition]	We do a number of activities with photographs, particularly following a day on fieldwork, as a way of sharing and celebrating our experiences. (Let's also not underestimate the power of a nice **Slideshow**.) In this particular activity, we ask Crews to caption several entertaining candids, and to enter their captions online using the Kahoot! or Plickers platform. In the second half of the activity, the community proceeds to vote for the best captions (with Crews earning points for any they wrote). Hilarity ensues.
Class Rap [Crew Competition]	Each Crew must come up with a rap or chant to deliver about their grade. For example, our Junior class was instructed to perform raps in response to "The Junior class is really really _____" with the primary purpose being to draw attention to the shared experiences or character of the grade.
Spring Into Action [Crew Competition]	Kicking off a larger theme of taking initiative in celebration of spring, each Crew gets a checklist of tasks to complete outdoors, including (1) *spring cleaning* – everyone picks up one piece of trash, (2) *spring training* – everyone does 5 burpies, (3) *spring messages* – chalk a motivational message on the sidewalk outside the school, and (4) *spring chicken* – do the chicken dance. This is an example of a "checklist" competition, where Crews race to complete items on a checklist. (Another favorite is a **Halloween checklist**, wherein Crews must wrap members in toilet paper, let out loud howls, and eventually marching around the space as zombies/mummies/bats in a rock-paper-scissors tournament . . . the resulting pandemonium essentially functions as a whole-community shared experience).
Hoop Hop Rock-Paper-Scissors [Whole-community Activity] [Crew Competition]	Following a viral YouTube video of this crazy variation on rock-paper-scissors (see http://www.ssww.com/blog/hoop-hop-showdown-rock-paper-scissors-hula-hoop-activity/), we did a similar activity with 130 8th graders divided into 8 crews and accompanied by dance music. It was 15 minutes of absolute glorious mayhem, we never added up points or declared a winner, and the students talked about it for days.

Food Drive Relay [Whole-community Activity] [Grade Competition]	Relays are great for large groups! We used this one with our entire middle school, with each grade competing against the others. In this case, we take the hundreds of cans donated in our annual canned food drive and create a relay to get them sorted, packed into boxes, and transported to the school loading dock. This involves huge chains of students that pass the food hand-to-hand (gatherers and transporters), a group that sorts into boxes (packagers), and a group that moves full boxes to our loading dock (deliverers). The grade that packaged the most food won.

Section D. CONVERSATIONS

As a space for students to participate and exercise voice, conversations as an entire grade are some of the most important pieces of Community Meeting. They can often be challenging to structure with so many students, and always require strong set-up and compelling prompts. Below are several examples that illustrate a variety of strategies and structures (also see the "Pot of Names" in Section A). An important question to ask is "Why does this conversation have to happen as a grade, and not as a Crew?"

A3: Announcements, Appreciations, Apologies [Conversations]	While this is not a conversation per se, this is an important structure in the school for student voice adapted from the James Baldwin Expeditionary Learning School. In grades 9-12, the mic is open to all members of the community to share an announcement, appreciation, or apology. In grades 6-8, students do **Shout Outs** instead where the mic is passed around for students to share appreciations.
Debriefs [Conversations]	The most common form of conversations at MELS are debriefs following an activity or initiative. A structure common to experiential education, debriefs usually involve a series of questions about the activity to prompt reflection, ranging from general questions such as "Were we successful?" or "What would have enabled us to do better on this initiative?" to more targeted ones like "Did you feel like your voice was heard?" or "Why did some community members sit out?" Debrief questions should generally respond specifically to what happened during the activity, and connect to things a community is working on.
Sexual Harassment Discussion [Conversations]	This is an example of a conversation based on community data. As part of a larger Crew exploration, tenth grade students completed anonymous surveys regarding their experiences with gender-based harassment. The aggregated responses were presented to the community, with the questions: (1) what are you noticing, (2) what did you learn about our class, and (3) what is your responsibility to your community? It goes without saying that this kind of conversation requires considerable norming.
Community Mapping Discussion [Conversations]	This is an example of a conversation based on our school characteristics. Framed around noticing differences and identifying our community resources, students circulate and add categories and tallies to dozens of statistical "community maps": languages they speak, family background, gender, home neighborhood, right handed vs. left handed, transportation to school, pets, favorite subject, parent occupations, etc. Following the mapping, the conversation focuses around what students notice, and what kinds of strengths and resources are in the community.
Deep Question [Conversations]	A "Deep Question" is presented to the community in response to a reading, a meeting theme, or something that happened in the past week (basically, it's a name for a conversation at MELS that doesn't explicitly follow an activity). Some questions may ask for share outs ("How do we take care of our bathrooms?" or "What is the relationship between the 8th grade and this Harry Potter clip?") and others may call for discussion ("What is the impact we should have on the high school this year?").
Mingle Structures [Conversations]	Instead of or a full-group conversation, students mingle in pairs or small groups to discuss a specific question. At MELS, this usually requires a structure to minimize the possibility that students will simply chat with friends. One way is to be specific about who students are talking to at a given moment ("Find someone who has the same first letter of their first name"). With younger students it can be useful to form concentric circles, with students on the inside facing students on the outside (and then you can direct students to "move two to the right," etc. for new partners). With older students, we have handed out "dance cards" that requires students to find a series of people that fit different categories ("Friend" "Acquaintance I talk to only in Crew or class" "Person I used to talk to but haven't spoken to in a while" "Person I don't know well at all") whom they will meet for their conversations.
Google Doc Structure [Conversations]	For a brainstorm, sometimes a shared Google Doc lets more students participate. At MELS, usually each Crew has a laptop and the live doc is projected onto a screen. After brainstorming a gazillion ideas, students can also use the Google Doc to (1) highlight certain ideas using asterisks and emojis, and (2) embed comments and questions. Sometimes a conversation by Google Doc are followed by an out-loud community conversation.

Section E. STUDENT PRESENTATIONS & PERFORMANCES

Student presentations and performances provide a more formal space for student participation and voice. At MELS, these range from individual students presenting their work from classes or extracurriculars to groups of students or Crews speaking on topics relevant to communities inside or outside of school. Some examples of different kinds of presentations and performances are below.

MELS Reporters [Presentation]	A team of students is recruited to report on the community regularly by producing a short video. The team will create a question either relevant to what is currently happening in the grade (e.g. "What's your favorite part of this Expedition?") or one which highlights information about members of the community (e.g. "If you could be a superhero, who would you be?"). After filming classmates answering the question at lunch or before/after school, they combine them into a video.
I Recommend [Presentation]	This structure provides individual students a forum for recommending something (usually a book, a song, a movie, a cause, or an experience) to the entire grade. Students sign up for a slot ahead of time.
Student Work Presentation: Pi Day [Presentation]	Our Pi Day meeting (on 3/14) is one example of Community Meeting used to culminate academic work or recognize student achievement. These presentations often have a spectacle component, and in this case finalists from each class recite the digits of pi (π) in front of the community, with the full number projected behind them. The winner then gets to throw a pie at Mr. Hanlon's face.
Topical Presentations: Puppy Mills & Drivers Ed [Presentation]	Individuals and crews may volunteer (or in some cases, are assigned a date) to present on a topic of interest. When a Crew presents, usually it is related to a student-led exploration in that Crew; oftentimes, individual students will request to speak on current events relevant to communities outside of the school. At MELS, it is almost a guarantee that every year one middle school Crew will present passionately on the plight of puppies and some high school individuals will talk about learning to drive.
Arts Performances [Presentation & Performance]	Community Meetings occasionally serve as a forum for the visual and performing arts classes at MELS. Additionally, several times a year we showcase the work of after school clubs.

Section F. STUDENT-LED COLLECTIVE ACTION AND PLANNING

In many EL schools, Community Meetings are led entirely by a group of students who meet regularly as a club (Codman Academy is the network's quintessential example). At MELS, this happens only in our eleventh and twelfth grades, which is something we are still working on. Nonetheless, there are a variety of ways we ensure that students feel they own the space, which for us was illustrated powerfully when students in each grade took over their respective Community Meetings to organize in response to the Stoneman Douglas High School Shooting last spring.

Political Response: Parkland Shootings [Student-Led]	Less a strategy and more a provocation: how do we ensure that Community Meeting serves as a space where students are comfortable to speak about and make decisions that matter to them as a community? After the shootings at Stoneman Douglas High School, our eleventh grade, a group of students effectively used the Announcements, Appreciations, Apology section of the meeting (see Section D) to call the community to action. In our eighth grade, a single student created a presentation and contacted the grade's Community Meeting leaders to get on the agenda. Across all grades, multiple meetings became spaces for students to organize, in a way that felt commensurate to the ethos of the space.
Student Community Meeting Committees [Student-Led]	At many EL schools, Community Meetings across all grades are led by a handful of students as part of an extracurricular activity. Currently at MELS, eleventh and twelfth-grade Community Meeting Committees (CMC) comprised of elected students from each Crew meet weekly at lunch to plan Community Meetings. The CMCs are supported by teacher sponsors who help with planning and resources, community surveys regarding what their peers wish to see at meetings, and their Crews.
Grade Event Organizing: Car Wash [Student-Led]	In grades where students elect Class Officers, Community Meetings are sometimes used to organize the class for an event. For example, in preparation for a weekend car wash fundraiser, Class Officers divided the community into groups to (1) spread the word on social media, (2) train for car washing duty, (3) create signs and flyers for surrounding neighborhoods, and (4) plan the next fundraiser.

Open Space [Student-Led]	With our high school students, we occasionally use the open space protocol (see http://www.openspaceworld.org/files/tmnfiles/2pageos.htm for the full protocol) to highlight interests and leverage leadership in the community. Usually we have 15-20 students (out of 120) name groups they would like to convene to explore a topic relevant to our community, and the community splits into groups to discuss and explore. Each teacher will sponsor 1-2 groups and many groups will eventually plan a presentation or lead a meeting related to their topic.
Student Campaign: **Pay It Forward** [Student-Led]	Community Meeting is also a space for individuals and groups of students to initiate and run a campaign. In addition to classic campaigns like **Penny Harvest** or a **Food Drive**, students have led a campaign to Pay It Forward. With any campaign, time is given in multiple Community Meetings to keep the community updated. In this case, the students leading it shared kind actions that had been performed by members of the community, and led the community in mapping out a widening circle of influence.

Section G. THEMES AND ARCS

A group of Community Meetings may be joined together by a common theme, forming an "arc" that includes a range of activities and engagements, including a kickoff and culmination. Sometimes they are held in conjunction with a Crew Case Study; other times they are contained only in Community Meeting. The examples below have been used multiple times, to strong effect.

MELS Habits Of **Work & Learning** **(HOWLs)** [Themes]	At the start of sixth grade, a series of five Community Meetings introduce students to our five HOWLs. Each meeting includes a reading, some sort of activity, and a debrief. All meetings are connected by an ongoing competition to see which Crews have the most students each week recognized for a particular HOWL (via teacher notes). Some highlights: the Preparedness meeting includes a **Backpack Search** where Crews must find certain supplies ("5 rulers!" "Your Science homework!") in their backpacks and race them to the front, the Respect meeting involves a community relay with eggs on spoons in which students are asked to show active respect to both their eggs *and* each other, and Courage ends with a Crew Dance Competition.
Humans of MELS [Themes]	This series of meetings is linked to a Crew Case study entitled "Humans of MELS" and takes inspiration from the Humans of New York blog (http://www.humansofnewyork.com/). In Crews, seventh grade students tell stories to each other and eventually create a poster featuring a photograph and story about themselves. In Community Meetings, students participate in a number of activities and conversations around their diversity and capacity to connect. Highlights include a Student Talents Showcase, Deep Question conversation around "Why is it important to share our stories?" and a **How Connected Are We** activity in which students find partners or groups in response to prompts ranging from "Find a quad who is wearing the same color shirt as you" to "Find a partner who speaks the same languages as you."

Nerd Month
[Themes]
	In seventh grade, a series of Community Meetings focus on recognizing that we all have different things we go above-and-beyond for and what this looks like. Nerd Month kicks off with a day in which everyone writes something they are a nerd about on a label and affixes it to their shirt for the day. Additional highlights: student presentations of above-and-beyond work from classes and extracurriculars, speakers from older grades about their passions, and a sing-along of Daft Punk's "Get Lucky," rewritten as "Get Nerdy":
	    We work all day to be great
	    We work all day to get paid
	    We work all day to make change
	    We work all day to get nerdy . . .

After the Apocalypse [Themes]	Freshman year opens with the Zombie Apocalypse Initiative (see Section B), whose debrief leads to a community consensus on what we need to work on to be successful (e.g. generating ideas, everyone participating, managing time, recognizing strengths, etc.). Each Crew is then charged with planning an initiative or activity to help the community build on one or more of these capacities, and leads that initiative at a subsequent meeting.