

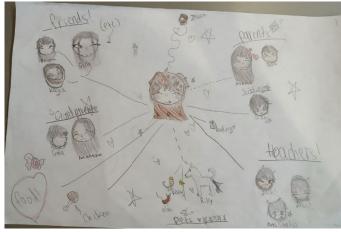
Community Maps

Sunrise Elementary School, Cherry Creek School District

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At Sunrise Elementary School in Cherry Creek School District, a commitment to honoring the diverse experiences of students and families is central to school culture. Recognizing that many students are supported by a network beyond the traditional definition of family, the school implemented a Community Mapping activity as an alternative to the family tree project. This practice aimed to validate the lived experiences of students and foster a sense of belonging.

Planning and implementation were led by the school's Community Liaison and Instructional Coach. Inspired by Nawal Qarooni's *Nourishing Caregiver*



Collaborations, this activity encouraged students to think about the individuals who shaped their lives (biological or not) and gave them an opportunity to showcase their personal community. Qarooni notes that for students without strong connections to biological parents or past generations, the family tree project can feel frustrating and isolating. Community Mapping offered a validating and empowering space for students to represent their lived experiences.

Teachers introduced the activity by reading a book that explores themes of family or community, followed by a class discussion using a circle map to help students define what "community" means to them. In class students began creating visual representations of their networks by drawing, labeling and connecting key figures in their lives using lines, symbols or photos. Students took the maps home to complete with a caregiver. Some families added printed photos, while others created digital versions. Some students created expansive maps featuring parents, siblings, cousins, teachers, neighbors, pastors and friends. Others had simpler maps with just a few key connections like a beloved pet and a close friend. Every map was a powerful window into a student's world. The finished Community Maps were displayed proudly at the annual Sunrise Food Festival, a celebration of culture, community, and connection.

Evaluation of the practice included teacher reflections, student feedback, and observations during the Food Festival. One notable challenge was ensuring that all families understood the purpose of the activity and felt confident participating, especially those unfamiliar with such school projects. Supportive communication and translation helped overcome this challenge.

When replicating this practice, it's helpful to intentionally create space for students to explore and share their unique support systems. Begin with literature that highlights diverse family and community structures to build understanding and spark discussion. Providing clear instructions, sample maps, and guiding questions, along with translated materials, encourages meaningful participation from all families. Showcasing the completed maps in a community event helps affirm students' identities and reinforces connections between home and school.