



Building Confidence and Conversation Culture:

A collaboration between R.E.A.L.[®] Discussion and Girls Preparatory School, Chattanooga TN

R.E.A.L.[®] Discussion

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About the School

Empowering girls to use their voices has always been mission-critical for Girls Preparatory School (GPS), an independent day school for girls in grades 6-12 based in Chattanooga, TN. The School's mission statement commits to inspiring each student to a life of integrity and purpose by "engaging her mind, cultivating her strengths, and nurturing her self-confidence and respect for others."

Today's polarized, tech-centric adolescent environment prompted GPS faculty to seek a proactive approach to discussion instruction. "A partnership with R.E.A.L.® Discussion has become the clear path forward for our school community as we continue to create an environment where all voices are heard and all perspectives are valued," says Lynne Macziewski, Associate Head of School.



“In a world where discussion about controversial (or non-controversial!) topics has been difficult for many students, we at GPS sought a way to provide our girls with tools and resources for thoughtful discourse.”

–Lynne Macziewski, Associate Head of School


The Vision

That partnership was the brainchild of visionary Head of School Megan Cover, who sagely anticipates that in today's tech-driven, AI-powered world, uniquely human skills – like the ability to communicate effectively and respectfully in-person, to advocate for oneself and demonstrate empathy for others – will become increasingly valuable.

Megan recognized the power of GPS' longstanding commitment to the activation of student voices, but she wanted to develop a common language to codify, measure, and celebrate it. What's more, Megan wanted to create a program that would weave these necessary skills into the very fabric of the school – to create **Conversation Culture**, not simply improve discussion within a handful of humanities classrooms.

Megan and her team wondered:

- >> *What does it look like to teach discussion skills and inspire interpersonal confidence at each stage in the GPS journey?*
- >> *What does it look like to create a community where all voices are valued?*
- >> *How can we bring multiple stakeholders – i.e., faculty, students, and parents – along with us?*



Megan Cover, Head of School

“R.E.A.L.® gives GPS a common language for teaching and celebrating the communication skills students need to live into our long-held values: advocacy, agency, belonging, acceptance, empathy. These skills are the foundation of a human-focused culture – they’ll position GPS girls to lead over their lifetimes.”

The Strategy

GPS partnered with R.E.A.L.[®] to build *Conversation Culture* across students, faculty, and parents in three ways:

- >> **Humanities faculty adopted the R.E.A.L.[®] Conversation Lab Model in Grades 6-9 classrooms.** This included certifying humanities faculty in R.E.A.L.[®]: the first research-backed method for explicitly teaching and equitably assessing live conversation skills.
- >> **The full GPS faculty and staff trained in R.E.A.L.[®] Skills for Life,** ensuring the skills developed within Conversation Labs would transfer across subjects and grade levels.
- >> **Third, the school hosted a R.E.A.L.[®] for Parents Evening.** In this special session, parents directly learned about R.E.A.L.[®]'s programmatic impact and gained helpful tips for helping to build *Conversation Culture* at home.

What is a R.E.A.L.[®] Conversation Lab?

Remember learning to type in Computer Lab? Today's students don't need "Computer Lab" ... but they do need "Conversation Lab": designated time in the school day to learn face-to-face communication skills. **R.E.A.L.[®] Discussion** is the "software" for Conversation Lab: a research-backed program teachers can use to teach and assess discussion skills in the context of their existing course content.



What are R.E.A.L.[®] Skills for Life?

R.E.A.L.[®] skills matter in life beyond Humanities Class! **R.E.A.L.[®] Skills for Life Trainings** introduce a school's full faculty to the basics of the R.E.A.L.[®] program. Through this course, faculty review current research around Gen-Z's communication crisis and learn to incorporate R.E.A.L.[®] skills and routines into their classes, advisories, and teams. This is the secret to building *Conversation Culture* across a school community.



The Results

Since implementing R.E.A.L.[®] across campus, the GPS community has already seen increased confidence, purpose, and skill development in students.

Growth in Confidence

Helping today's adolescents gain confidence in their in-person discussion skills is a challenging task for any faculty – and it's an even more pressing objective for teachers who work with young women. Deploying R.E.A.L.[®] has helped GPS girls become more confident students, peers, leaders, and friends – and it has helped them learn not just how to agree with one another, but how to disagree in a way that feels both safe and respectful.

“It has made me feel more confident in my social skills... I have social anxiety, but now I can feel safe when I have something to say to my class.”

–6th Grader

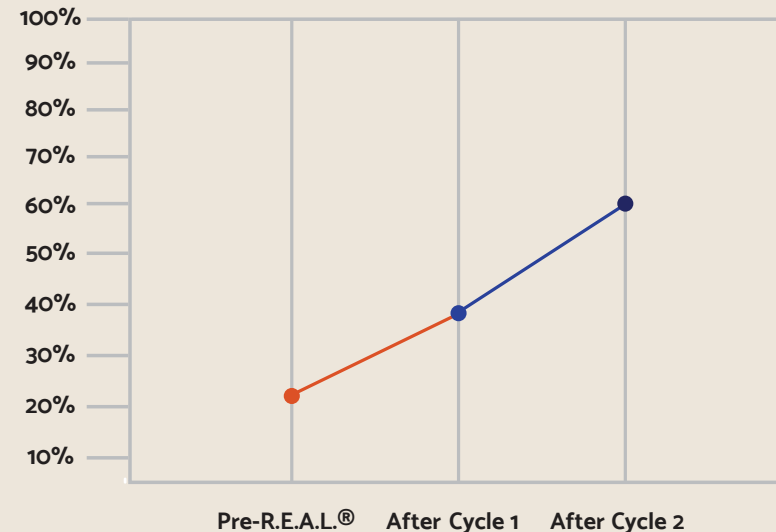
“In the beginning of the year, I was scared to talk and thought I would be wrong...now I know that my peers won't judge me for what I say.”

–7th Grader

Teachers notice this growth in confidence. Ninth grade English teacher Andy Arick says:

“The girls are more confident in speaking in class, sharing in class, and they're also more confident that they're going to be heard and listened to. The R.E.A.L.[®] nonverbal cues create an invitation to actively respond to each other, for the girls to make their listening visible. This builds trust and engagement. The tools for teaching disagreement are critical, too. Now girls know that even if someone disagrees with a point they make, their classmate will show them that they've heard them before explaining why they disagree with their idea - it's not that they disagree with them as a person!”

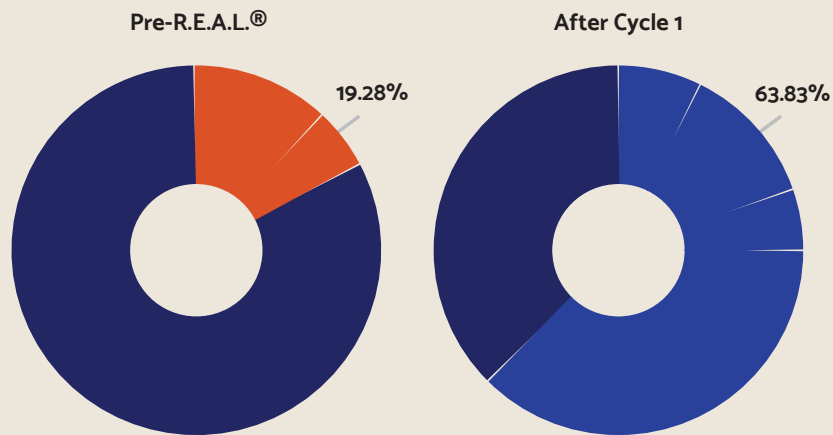
Over the course of six discussions, we saw a **37 point increase** in the number of 9th grade students who report that it is not scary to disagree in a graded class discussion.



Growth in Purpose

The skills students develop through R.E.A.L.® are skills for life – relationships, citizenship, workplaces. In a tech-centric world, these deeply human skills matter more than ever! Students appreciate how the discussion skills they learn in class apply to their lives.

9th grade students increasingly report that they feel their voice is heard in class. **“I know I’m going to be able to get my voice in if I have something say.”**



“Having a mature discussion is an important thing to be able to do...in college and in many jobs, you will need to know how to conduct one. It is also important to know how to speak up and when you’ve talked too much. That self-awareness makes you good at interviews, which helps with jobs and probably even college itself.”

–9th Grader

“R.E.A.L.® makes it so I can talk to people in the real world instead of just standing there with my head down when somebody is talking to me.”

–6th Grader

“If I go into politics I might be the first politician to listen to others and ask questions and value other opinions.”

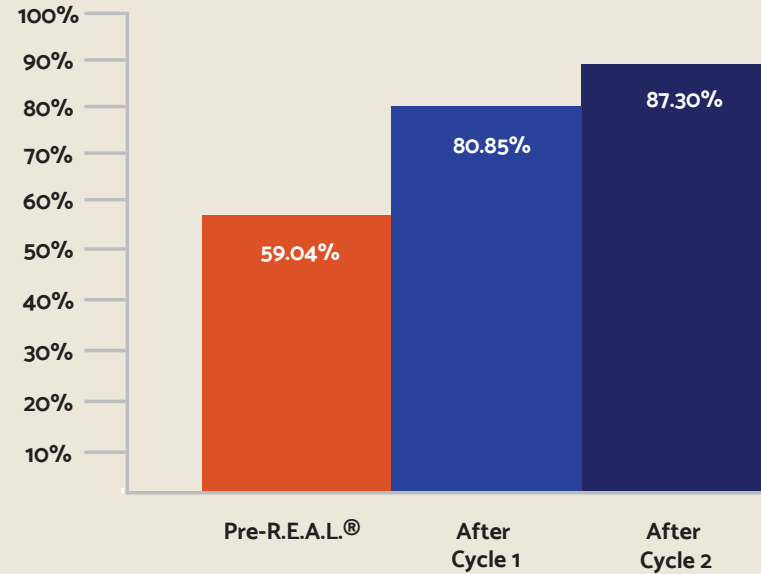
–8th grader

Growth in Skills

Students not only see the broader purpose of having advanced communication skills – they have also grown leaps and bounds in developing those skills themselves. The class discussions that result are more purposeful, more respectful, and more varied than they were before GPS implemented R.E.A.L.®

GPS' school-wide approach to deploying R.E.A.L.® has led to the development of a true *Conversation Culture* across campus. "This partnership and curriculum have allowed our students, faculty, and staff to engage in conversations in a healthy and helpful way by encouraging all involved to listen to others, acknowledge their thoughts and ideas, ask clarifying questions, and share their perspectives in a positive manner," says Lynne. "It does not teach all students that they must agree, nor does it put one person or voice above the others. In fact, it's the complete opposite. R.E.A.L.® encourages civil discourse and teaches our students how to use their voice in a way that helps us grow in our understanding of the lived experience of others and the world around us."

After 3 discussions, the number of 9th graders reporting that they find themselves connecting topics from class discussion to life outside of school jumps up almost 45 points. "I find myself connecting topics from class discussion to life outside of school."



"My class has grown because at first, everyone was ONLY calling on their friends, but now two people that AREN'T friends will call on each other based off of how many times they've spoken when they put their fingers up."

-6th Grader

"I think I have gotten better at connecting evidence to arguments and being specific...I think I have also become a more attentive listener. It feels that way."

-9th Grader



Preparing Girls for Real Life

Preparing girls for success as *humans*, not just students, is integral to the mission and vision of GPS. As such, preparing girls to have difficult conversations, to trust themselves, to find their voices, to listen to others, and to speak boldly and with conviction is an important goal for the entire GPS faculty.

“The R.E.A.L.® program was brilliant. We don’t expect children to know how to do math or read without teaching them how – why would we expect them to know how to have productive conversations without doing the same? I’m so grateful to GPS for including this in the curriculum and can’t wait to see it help our girls grow, listen, respond, and lead.”

–Heather DeGaetano, GPS Parent

By working with R.E.A.L.®, GPS is empowering faculty, staff, parents, and students alike to develop and execute upon the discussion skills they need for life.

When we expect our children to be proficient in something, we provide them with the tools/training they need to get there. Why haven’t we done that with communication? R.E.A.L.® offers simple yet solid techniques to become a more engaged participant and active listener in conversation. A vital skill for any age, in school and beyond.

–Courtney Reynolds, GPS Parent



R.E.A.L.® partners with schools to teach and celebrate the live conversation skills today’s students need for learning—and real life. Interested in learning more? Reach out today!

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