

## CASE STUDY: STUDENT LED CONNECTION AT LA CAÑADA HIGH SCHOOL



### Overview

At La Cañada High School Library in California, District Librarian Danielle Murr Pinsker was thinking deeply about what students actually need in order to feel connected at school. Working in a campus environment, she saw an empathy gap emerging alongside stress and disconnection. For Danielle, the question was not how to impose more structure, but how to create space where students could lead and feel ownership.

“We don’t need more rules. We don’t need more consequences,” she said. “We need connected kids.

Because connected kids are invested.”

When Danielle joined the One Small Step Libraries Initiative, she saw tools that aligned with what she already believed about teen engagement. Rather than importing a fixed program, she focused on adapting OSS activities in ways that put students in charge and honored their comfort levels.

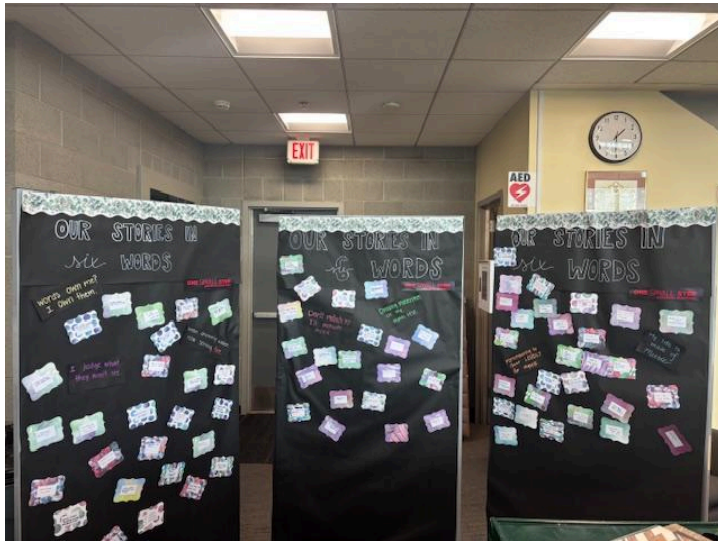


### Approach

Danielle worked with student groups on campus, including Connection Council and Peer Support, to decide which OSS activities would resonate most. Instead of selecting programs herself, she presented options from the Resource Hub and asked students to weigh in. Two activities rose to the top: a Six Word Wall, called “Our Stories in Six Words,” and Conversation Toss.

“I think the key on high school campuses is it really has to be driven by your students,” Danielle explained. “Library programming for teens is them being in charge of things that happen in the library.”

The Six Word Wall launched first in September 2025 and quickly drew participation. What began as a pilot evolved into active and then passive programming as demand grew. Over the course of the fall, seventy four students contributed initial responses, with twenty two additional entries added as the wall remained up. Although the activity was largely quiet and self guided, Danielle viewed it as deeply connective.



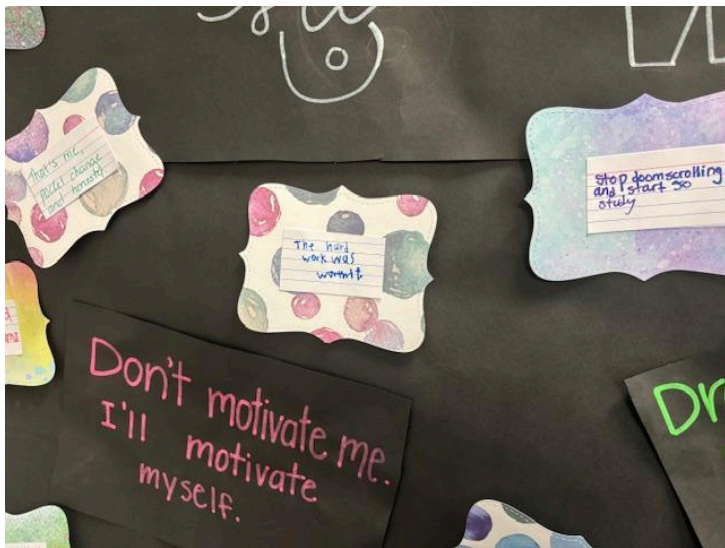
Conversation Toss followed as a more active, facilitated experience. Peer Support students piloted the activity with small groups before helping to run campus wide sessions. Twenty four students participated in the pilot phase, using OSS high school Great Questions and conversation dice to practice dialogue in a low pressure setting. Candy and snacks helped lower the barrier to entry, but autonomy mattered most.

“It’s really great to be aware of that with teenagers,” Danielle said. “It ties back to autonomy and letting them take things in as they’re comfortable with.”

### **What Students Shared**

The six word stories revealed depth, humor, vulnerability, and self awareness. Some were quiet and introspective, like “Lassoing the tornado of my mind,” and “Music is how I decorate time.” Others captured tension and resilience: “Always sorry, why can’t I change?” and “Two steps forward, six steps back.” Joy and playfulness appeared alongside heaviness, as in “Can’t wait to do it again,” and “BOUNCING WITH MY BESTIES, PLAYING BOBLOX.”





Several reflected a sense of time and growth. “A minute’s longer than a year.” “Curious of future, remembering the past.” Others named identity and agency. “Don’t motivate me, I’ll motivate myself.” “That’s me: pocket change and honesty.”

For Danielle, the value was not only in writing the words, but in seeing them together. “The value is not just the act of creation, but then getting to see other people’s stories,” she said.

“Sometimes those things are happening invisibly and silently, but they’re happening.”

## What Emerged

As the wall filled, students began offering feedback on how the activity should evolve. Their priorities were clear. Many emphasized safety and anonymity. “No names,” one student wrote. Another added, “People will freak out and hold back.” Several noted that handwriting mattered. “It’s better to hand write it than to type it.” “On paper is best.”

Students also spoke candidly about what’s *really* important, at the end of the day. “Halloween candy. One Twix bar will get you a lifetime of self reflection.” “Give out candy in exchange for filling one out.” “Advertise that you have candy. Gets people to walk over.”

They also imagined the wall as something lasting. “People can add throughout the year.” “Would be a good display in the library to encourage empathy.” The feedback reinforced Danielle’s instinct to



let the program grow in response to student voice rather than locking it into a fixed format.

## Key Insights & Lessons Learned



Danielle was intentional about not recording conversations, compared to traditional StoryCorps interviews. “Recording would scare a bunch of kids away,” she said. “For them, it’s more in the moment. It’s like right now.”

She also reframed how she thought about conflict in educational spaces. “Avoiding conflict avoids connection,” she said. “Sometimes the conflict, it’s not always going to go out of control.

And sometimes we can learn how we can still connect.”

For Danielle, connection changed behavior more effectively than control. “Connected kids are invested,” she said. “They would listen and go by my rules. Not because I was scary, but because we were connected.”

## Key Takeaways and Looking Ahead

Students experienced the library on their campus as a place where their voices mattered and where they could facilitate connection with one another. Other teachers, the wellness center, and administrators took notice, sharing the work through newsletters and informal networks.

Looking forward, Danielle plans to pilot pop up conversation cafes where students choose a drink and a die from a menu and sit together to talk. She sees this as a natural extension of what students already asked for: autonomy, low pressure entry points, and spaces that feel welcoming rather than performative.

“There’s so much pressure in education right now around achievement,” she said. “But nobody can learn when they’re feeling disconnected.”



**Project Links:**

- [Under the Surface - Empathy Film](#)

**This case study highlights programs adapted from One Small Step toolkits. Visit [diy.takeonesmallstep.org](http://diy.takeonesmallstep.org) to explore the tools.**