INCLUSION · SCHOOLWIDE · LUNCHTIME

THE EMPTY CHAIR

A campus-wide campaign that asks every table, club, and group to keep one seat open and to fill it on purpose. The open chair becomes the sign that anyone can sit down.

PRIMARY CATEGORY
Inclusion

ALSO FITS
School Connections · SEL

DIRECTION SIGNAL
Students report eating alone or feeling shut out of groups; low belonging on Direction or the Critical Issues Board

PILLAR
1 · Belonging and Pro-Social Connection

GRADE BAND
MS and HS

SETTING
The cafeteria, quad, and club rooms across a month

REACH
The whole campus; every lunch table and club

TIME TO PREPARE
One to two weeks

TIME TO RUN
Three to four weeks of daily attention

TEAM ROLES
Zone leads, a sign maker, a pledge tracker, a lunch sweep pair

MATERIALS
Table signs or chair tags, a pledge sheet for clubs, a campus map

COST
About $30 for printed signs and tags

WHY THIS ANSWERS THE DATA

When Direction shows students eating alone or feeling shut out of groups, or the Forum's Critical Issues Board puts exclusion in the Top 4, the barrier is often a closed circle: full tables, tight friend groups, and no obvious way in. The Empty Chair answers that signal by turning one open seat into a standing invitation. Instead of asking lonely students to walk up to a closed group, the campaign asks the groups to leave the door open and to notice who is standing near it. It costs almost nothing, it reaches every table at once, and it makes the welcome the group's job, not the outsider's.

WHAT STUDENTS DO

The Team asks every lunch table, club, and group to keep one chair open and to fill it with someone new on purpose. Tables get a small sign or a chair tag that reads that the seat is open. Clubs sign a short pledge to save a seat and greet whoever takes it. Team members run a daily lunch sweep, spot students standing at the edges, and walk them to a table with an open chair, making the introduction so the student is not walking up cold. The message the whole campus learns is simple: an open chair means sit down, and the people at the table are glad you did.

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SET UP

+ Map the campus zones where students eat and gather. Assign a Team zone lead to each.
+ Make the signs and chair tags. Keep the wording warm and plain: this seat is open, come sit.
+ Write a one line club pledge: we keep a seat open and we greet whoever takes it. Sign up clubs during the launch week.
+ Train the lunch sweep pairs. Practice spotting a student on the edge, walking them over, and making the introduction so no one arrives cold.
+ Set the rules. The open chair is an invitation, never a spotlight; the Team never announces or points out a student who sits down.
+ Brief staff on lunch duty so they know the signs and can point a wandering student to an open chair.
+ State duty to inform to the Team: if a student shares being bullied, isolated, or unsafe, the Team member brings it to the Advisor and counselor that day.

RUN IT

1. **Launch (one lunch).** The Team sets signs on tables, tags chairs, and signs up clubs. Explain the open chair in one line at each zone.
2. **Daily sweep (15 min each day).** Sweep pairs walk their zones, spot students at the edges, and walk them to a table with an open chair.
3. **Introduce (2 min each).** The pair makes the introduction by name so the student is welcomed, not dropped, then steps back.
4. **Track pledges (5 min).** The pledge tracker logs which clubs signed and checks that the open chairs are actually being filled.
5. **Reset signs (5 min).** Zone leads replace missing tags and keep the signs up all month.
6. **Debrief weekly (10 min).** The Team reads how many students it walked to a table, names anyone still on the edge, and adjusts zones.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

+ A table that treats the open chair as a trophy instead of a welcome. Reset the message: the chair is for a person, not for show.
+ A student walked to a table and then ignored. The sweep pair stays a moment to get the conversation going before stepping back.
+ The same student on the edge day after day. That is a follow up for the Advisor and the counselor, not only the sweep.
+ A student who discloses being pushed out or hurt. The Team member listens, stays calm, and brings it to the Advisor that day. Duty to inform applies.

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THE APPLICATION

The Team counts open chairs filled, clubs pledged, and students walked to a table. Then it asks the Forum's question: is anyone still eating alone on this campus, and who? The counts go into the Cycle Journal, and the belonging measure goes onto the Running Scoreboard beside the Critical Issue it answers.

MEASURE IT

+ Count: students walked to an open chair, and clubs that signed the pledge, from the daily logs.
+ Binary, re-asked on the next Direction Survey: In the past month, did you eat lunch alone most days?
+ Likert, re-asked on the next Direction Survey: There is a place for me at this school.
+ Compare the re-ask to the cycle that surfaced the signal. Three cycles make a trend.

BY GRADE LEVEL

+ **High school.** As written. Signs on tables, a club pledge, and a daily lunch sweep across zones.
+ **Middle school.** Run one grade level at a time and pair each sweep member with a staff member for the first week. Keep the open chair to the cafeteria, where an adult is always present.

VARIATIONS

+ Large campus: focus on two zones a week and rotate across the month so every eating area gets attention.
+ Small campus: extend the open chair to advisory and club meetings, not only lunch.

TAKE-HOME THOUGHT

An open chair says sit down, and it means it.

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