



# FEELING FRIENDZY

**FOR PRAIRIE STUDENTS IN KINDERGARTEN THROUGH 8TH GRADE, SUBJECTS LIKE ENGLISH, MATH, AND SCIENCE AREN'T THE ONLY FOUNDATIONAL CONCEPTS WORTHY OF STUDY.**

— By BRENDAN O'BRIEN

At the beginning of any given semester, Middle School students new to the world of percussion file into Jamie Breiwick's band room, assume their positions behind black metal stands, and fearlessly attempt to make music on the horn or flute or drum of their choosing.

"Making music" in this case is somewhat of an operative term.

This is Introduction to Band and if the notes sound a bit peculiar the first few weeks, well, that's the point. The expectation is not that the next Charlie Parker is here getting their start – although he or she certainly could be – nor that all of these new musicians will continue with band in Upper School – although some certainly will. One of the main goals of Introduction to Band is simply encouraging students to try something new – and get better.

Pick a lesson, and you'll see this pattern repeat itself every semester all over campus. Learning how to calculate an angle or conjugate Spanish verbs. Studying buoyancy or understanding the finer points of what makes an outstanding longform essay.

Or when it comes to Prairie's Friendzy curriculum, how to manage your emotions and how to be a good friend.

Friendzy was started in 2012 by a pair of moms and teachers, Joy Roberts and Julie Widman, who saw a need for a curriculum that helped students understand and work through what they were feeling.

"In the process of raising our own children we saw a crisis unfolding," they say on Friendzy's website. "In 2012, 50% of us began packing around smartphones which has created the most technologically connected and most socially disconnected generation that has ever existed. We got curious on how we could equip a generation of kids to be really good friends. As we began to explore *how*, we realized this social deficiency is well researched

with a plethora of data pointing to the necessity of our education system incorporating social and emotional character development into classrooms." Middle School Head Kathy Boero first met with Joy and Julie in 2019 via Zoom. On the hunt for a more intentional and expansive curriculum to replace the Second Step programming Prairie had been using, Boero – joined on that initial call by Primary School Head Susan Holum and 1st Grade teacher Marcia Wilks – came away from that meeting knowing she had found what she was looking for.

"Middle School needed something to assist the kids in developing life and leadership skills that would be taught intentionally. We looked at quite a few programs and there really isn't one better aligned with our mission here at Prairie," says Boero. "Susan and Marcia sat in on that first Zoom simply because they were interested in learning more, and they left intent on bringing the program to Primary School."

## FROM SEEDS TO BLOSSOMS

- Help kids discover personal strengths
- Help kids manage emotions
- Teach kids how to cultivate empathy
- Provide kids with relationship building skills
- Support a positive well-being

Friendzy's curriculum is rooted in these five overarching goals. While it's impossible to argue the importance of putting in the work required to become a better human, that effort is amplified even further when it happens alongside your people, the friends you sit with at lunch and the grown-ups tasked with your instruction.

"Middle School teachers are responsible for this," says Boero. "Every F Day we dedicate time to Friendzy. In a lot of schools this is something taught by a counselor who goes class to class. Here, our teachers teach it. Many of them have told me how this curriculum helps them in their adult lives as well."

A consumable journal filled with prompts and concepts is the foundation of the work. Think of it as a diary with directions. However, if the journal is Friendzy's heart, an impressive collection of ever-changing resources are its senses: the ways students and educators can put these lessons into practice.

"Friendzy remains fresh and current. If one resource doesn't fit with an advisory a teacher can access an online portal and see hundreds of videos or topics that, if they have a class that might benefit from these things, provides access to hundreds of resources."

## WITH THE STRENGTH OF A SOUND FOUNDATION

Gene Johnson was never shy about why she wanted to start this school: she wanted Prairie to be atypical in its approach to community, wanted a school that welcomed any and every family hungry for an education that not only stressed the importance of exploring, questioning, and creating, but that also taught children the importance of caring, collaborating, and compassion.

"All of this is so connected with the mission that Mrs. Johnson established when she created this school," says Boero. "We're not looking for anyone to fit into any kind of mold. It's developing friendships, but more importantly it's developing strategies for being respectful to people who aren't your friends. How do we treat others? How do you value people who are different? How do you treat yourself? How do you forgive yourself when you make a mistake?"

## IN CONCERT WITH ONE ANOTHER

It's amazing the progress that is made when we put in the work. Every semester, those disparate sounds exploding from Mr. Breiwick's band room in August become smoother, softer, more in tune sometime around Thanksgiving. The group learns the importance of playing together, and while they might not achieve perfect harmony, their progress is both pleasant and undeniable.

It's hard work to play the trumpet – and being a good friend, doing the right thing, asking the difficult question can be hard sometimes, too. But if you're prepared, if you've put in the work, those difficult situations become just a little bit easier.

"Middle School is interesting because they're developing their social awareness," says Boero. "So being around people who are like you feels good. But Friendzy pushes kids to think outside of that and to value being together in community – it's safe for you to be you, and it's safe for me to be me."



## GROWING BETTER, TOGETHER

*Ubuntu*. It's an ancient African word that translates to *humanity to others*. It was also one of the Primary School's slogans of the month earlier this fall. Every month, at every community meeting, a catchphrase rooted in Friendzy-themed concepts is unveiled to the students. Then the students have conversations and participate in projects designed to bring everyone together around the chosen idea. After all, as the Ubuntu translation goes – *I am because we are*.

# PRAIRIE