

A GUIDE TO TALK ABOUT EDUCATION AFTER COVID

About this Guide

The return to in-person education invites many different, often difficult conversations. Each conversation has its own purpose, intended to meet the needs of specific circumstances.

In this guide, you'll find resources to support three of these conversations, which invite people to talk about the stakes of in-person learning, the experience of the pandemic, and what will be needed to heal after this traumatizing period.

You'll find brief descriptions of when and why you might convene each of these dialogues as well as a set of three questions for each, designed to facilitate conversations that lead to more trust, mutual understanding, and stronger relationships.

This resource is based on real conversations among educators, caregivers, and school leaders, led by Essential Partners in collaboration with Mount Holyoke College.

Founded in 1989, Essential Partners equips people to live and work better together in community by building trust and understanding across differences. We envision a world of thriving communities strengthened by difference, connected by trust.

For information about training or consultation, or to find more resources like this, visit the EP website, whatisessential.org





Using Communication Agreements

A hope for this guide is that it will help you disrupt any unproductive, harmful, or dysfunctional patterns of communication that have emerged organically in your community. One way we do that is to invite everyone in the conversation to commit themselves to communication agreements.

Communication agreements are guidelines and intentions that provide some common guardrails for a hard conversation. They can be used in large and small groups, at public meetings or in private. Below are five agreements we use frequently in community conversations:

- I will respect time limits and share air time
- I will speak only for myself and avoid speaking in generalizations
- I will not interrupt others while they're speaking
- I will respect requests for confidentiality
- I have the option to pass on my turn, or to pass for now

Structures to Support Speaking and Listening

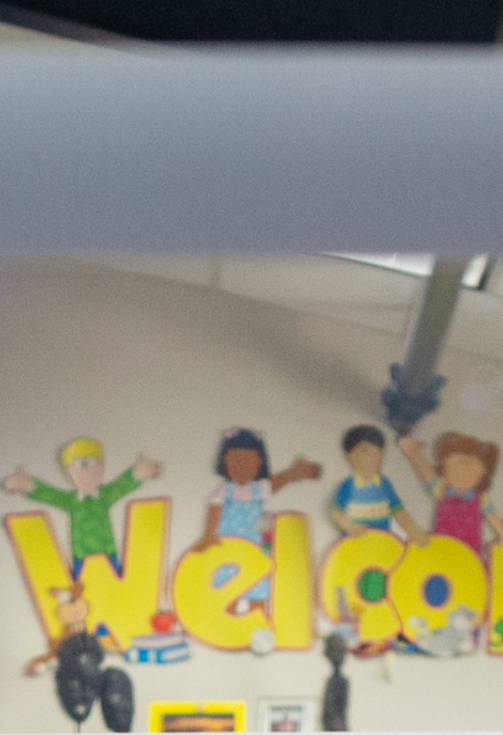
Using simple structures can have a big effect on the quality of public discourse. Structures help people find the right words, helps them listen to one another more closely, and lets them build connections across differences.

Below are three conversation structures that we use frequently in community conversations:

- Read each question aloud twice. Pause for two breaths before reading it the second time. Share the question in writing too.
- Give your participants a moment to reflect on the question and encourage them to take notes about what they want to share when it's their turn.
- Provide each person the same amount of time to respond to the question and be clear about the speaking order.

We sometimes call this model Think, Write, Speak. It helps people let go of worrying about what they're going to say and focus on listening deeply to one another.





QUESTION SET 1

What should in-person learning look like?

This dialogue would be convened as a school or organization is deciding how to return to in-person learning. This could help navigate the shift from fully remote learning to a hybrid model or to a full return, or from any place along the reopening continuum.

QUESTION ONE

As you think about starting a new school year of in-person learning, what are you most hopeful for and what positive changes would occur for you and your family?

QUESTION TWO

As you think about starting the school year, what are you most concerned about and what impacts on you and your family do you worry about?

QUESTION THREE

What would you need the people planning the transition back to school to consider for you to feel more comfortable and safe going into the upcoming school year? What do you want people to remember about you and your family as they make this decision?



QUESTION SET 2

What did we do well and what do we need for our community to heal?

The purpose of this dialogue is to help community members—teachers, caregivers, students, school officials—heal from the difficult decision-making processes about school reopening. This is an opportunity for stakeholders to talk about the impact of that process on them and their families, and to identify their hopes for the future of these conversations.

QUESTION ONE

Please share a story or experience from the past year that might help others understand how the process of school reopening impacted your ability to be the kind of educator, administrator, community leader, and/or parent you want to be. What has that experience, and this process, revealed about what is most valuable or important to you as you consider school reopening?

QUESTION TWO

As you think about your perspectives and experiences related to school reopening, where are the places you feel pulled in different directions? For example, you may feel tension between competing values or perspectives, or tension between places of innovation and thriving with what has been lost.

QUESTION THREE

What is a hope you have for the conversations in your community about the return to in person schooling or about the way we decide these questions in the future? What do you want to keep at the center of that conversation?





QUESTION SET 3

What did we lose, what did we learn, where will it lead? A dialogue about disruption and opportunity.

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the normal patterns of life at every level of society. With any disruption, however difficult, comes an opportunity for reflection—about what has been lost, what we learned, and where the changes will lead. This conversation is an opportunity to take stock, to make conscious choices where choices are possible, and to rethink our default positions.

QUESTION ONE

Share an experience that would help others understand something about what was lost for you and your family in this past year's closings?

QUESTION TWO

As you think about the past year and the closings due to the pandemic, what have you learned about yourself and your family? What do you want to remember about yourselves moving forward?

QUESTION THREE

As you consider going back to school fully and reopening, what changes or discoveries would you choose to keep? What of the old ways of doing things would you prefer not to return to?





We are always here to help.

Essential Partners is a 501c3 nonprofit. It is our mission to support all those who do the hard work of tending to their community. Around the globe, we have helped schools, neighborhoods, churches, and nonprofits transform the way they hold differences of identities and perspectives.

Visit our website to find more free resources, register for one of our workshops, or sign up for a free half-hour consultation.

whatisessential.org



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