

Community Conversation Planning Guide

About this Planning Guide

Community Conversations provide school systems a chance to go deeper with their stakeholders to understand their experiences, perceptions, and preferences. Although surveys are a critical start in this process, Community Conversations represent a tool for 360-degree feedback, wherein stakeholders are not simply asked their opinion, but they are also given the opportunity to share ideas for next steps and improvement.

TNTP developed this guide to support implementation of Community Conversations during a time of remote learning and social distancing. Although conversations with stakeholders are always essential, we believe they are especially so now. As such, this guide is tailored for use by school system leaders looking to gain more insight into their students' and family members' experiences during school closures and preferences for the reopening of school. Further, the guide focuses on engaging with families and students whose voices may not typically be captured through typical survey tools.

Steps and Considerations

These are the central steps and reflection questions you will need to answer to launch a Community Conversation. Although these steps may not be exhaustive, they should provide a basic outline of the decision points associated with the "who," "how," and "what" of these conversations. Remember as you move through the steps to always keep in mind how conversations can be used to both deepen relationships and broaden conversations with stakeholders in your community.

Step 1. Decide on community conversation objectives and participant groups

What are the essential questions where you need stakeholder input?

Consider your greatest challenges and opportunities and plan a Community Conversation around those. For example, you could assess stakeholder experience with remote learning during school closure, priorities for the coming school year, risk/safety measures, schedule preferences in the case of hybrid or continued remote learning, etc.

Community Conversations should elevate voices of groups and individuals who are not already represented through existing district groups, so choose topics that warrant further stakeholder input beyond what was gathered through surveys.

Who are the right stakeholders to engage through Community Conversations on these topics?

Community Conversations provide an opportunity to elevate voices of stakeholder groups who may be less likely to respond to surveys or whose survey responses warrant a deeper discussion. For the current scenario, we recommend engaging with 1-2 groups each of students and family members to start.

Step 2. Decide who will facilitate and the breadth of their role

For each stakeholder group, will the Community Conversation be managed internally (by the district) or externally (by a community-based organization (CBO) or other group)?

External groups such as faith-based organizations, non-profits, and service providers may have greater access to diverse stakeholder groups who are less likely to respond to district surveys or calls for feedback.

If the Community Conversation will be managed externally, what are the responsibilities of that CBO managing it?

The CBO will invite and confirm participants, manage the technology (e.g., zoom), and implement all aspects of Community Conversation. The CBO will be responsible for providing a recording and transcript of the groups to the district. Ownership of the community conversations by an external organization can vary according to the capacity of that organization. In some cases, the CBO may be responsible only for inviting and confirming attendees; in other

cases, the CBO would be provided only the protocol and be responsible for coordinating and implementing all other elements.

How will the managing group and participants be compensated?

Participants should be provided with a stipend or gift card in recognition of the time they took to engage. Stakeholder engagement is often expected but the investment of time on the part of the stakeholder is not always explicitly acknowledged. We believe that people's time is valuable, and they deserve to be compensated for their participation.

Who, specifically, will facilitate each Community Conversation?

Facilitators should either be members of the community, reflective of the community, and/or have demonstrated a strong ability to build trust in a short period of time. Possible facilitation models include: a community leader and their pre-existing stakeholder group (e.g., a Minister and their congregants), a parent facilitating the conversation with other parents, and a teacher in conversation with students. Community Conversations deeply benefit when a community leader—rather than a district staff member—facilitates, and this often leads to both better attendance and more authentic responses.

Step 3. Coordinate logistics and invite attendees

When, where, and on which platform will the Community Conversation(s) take place?

Conversations will take place virtually over a platform and groups should be offered at different times of day. Zoom has emerged as the leading virtual meeting platform, but it's not the only option. GoToMeeting, Skype for Business, and Google Hangouts are just a handful of other options you might consider, with most of them offering the same functionality: video conferences, instant messaging, call-in options for those without internet access, and mobile accessibility.

Instead of splitting hairs over the technical differences of these platforms, TNTP recommends conducting due diligence to identify which platform your stakeholders are already familiar with, then letting that feedback guide your next steps. You may consider asking your district IT department for input, reaching out to students and families directly for their feedback, and even asking community partners that you have relationships with to see how they've recently been engaging groups. And if your district is already using a virtual learning platform with communication options, then by all means let that dictate your path. We recommend choosing a platform with minimal setup and simple connectivity via computer, tablet, or phone.

Be sure to provide alternative options to join for participants who do not have connectivity (e.g., public but socially distant computers at the CBO or district office). Organizers should plan to open the meeting early and be on hand to troubleshoot technology for individuals.

How should we invite participants?

Invitees can be reached either through an open invitation (e.g., via the district website, social media, newsletters) or through targeted messages to individuals or stakeholder groups. If the "all call" option is chosen, we recommend maintaining a set number of "seats" for specifically invited individuals or members of traditionally under-represented groups.

What are the min/max number of participants?

Between 6-12 participants per group. We have found that virtual groups benefit from a slightly smaller number of participants.

How and how often should we communicate with participants prior to and after the groups?

Participants should receive an initial confirmation with meeting information, a reminder the day prior, and a reminder 30 minutes before the group begins. After groups are completed, participants will receive a thank you and a summary of trends from all groups.

Should we record the Community Conversation?

It is recommended that you record the focus groups and take scripted notes from the conversation. Scripted notes or a transcription are critical for future use in trend analysis and quotations.

Step 4. Confirm community conversation protocol and questions

How will we frame the community conversation for participants?

Consider the purpose of the groups, the participants' relationship with the district, and the participants' relationship with the facilitator. You can also add context about the goal of the Community Conversation and preview what will happen as a result of the group.

Step 5. Implement community conversation(s)

Before the virtual Community Conversation

Above all, keep front and center the idea that these events are not just about gathering information from your community stakeholders, but building and/or strengthening a relationship between the district and the students and families it serves. To that end, you may consider the following actions to make sure all attendees feel equally welcomed and appreciated:

- Shortly before the event—perhaps the day prior—send an individual, personalized message to all attendees thanking them in advance for their participation and checking in to see if they have any last-minute questions or technical needs.
 - At this point, it may also be useful to suggest participants quickly log in to the platform to ensure it's working.
 - Keep in mind that not all participants will have high speed internet access. In fact, many participants may have to dial in to the meeting and therefore will not have video access. For these reasons, we also recommend including instructions for the various ways to join the Community Conversation, without ranking one above another.
- Identify 1-2 people before the call who can serve as impromptu “tech support staff” in case any participant has trouble connecting. This way, the facilitator of the conversation will not have to resolve technical issues, but can direct participants to this staff member. Ensure that the support staff's contact number or email is known to all participants.
- If using video, determine a location for the facilitator of the conversation that is welcoming to all participants.
 - Given the disruption in our lives due to the pandemic, this may be a time to embrace informality and hold them from a home office, a dining room table, or a kitchen. Doing so may make participants more comfortable with seeing this event as an open conversation and therefore more at-ease to speak freely and openly.

During the virtual Community Conversations

While it's important to have a conversation protocol to keep the meeting on track, it might be useful to think of this protocol as simply a loose guide, or even as a document to return to in case the conversation stalls. The most important data you gather from these conversations may not be the answer to any particular question, but simply how people feel and engage. To foster active and lively communication, the facilitator of each conversation may want to consider the following:

- Introduce yourself. Explain your role and why you chose this profession, how you relate to the community (born and raised, lived here for three years, etc.), and your hopes and dreams for your community. Be sure to ask participants to introduce themselves and to share something similar about their lives, too, be it their hopes and dreams for their or their child's future, or simply something they love about living in their community.
- Inform participants that notes/recording will be taken, however quotes will not be ascribed to any individual.
- Do your best to ensure everyone is heard from. Not everyone will want to share their voice equally, but sometimes the people who say the least have the most insightful things to say. Also ensure that no one

person or small group of people is dominating the conversation. And be sure to ask people not on video to share their thoughts, too.

- It's fine and even encouraged for participants to directly address one another, provided the conversation is cordial. The facilitator does not always have to lead the conversation, they're simply there to facilitate.

At the end of the Community Conversation

- Close the conversation by making a commitment to regularly communicate with stakeholders. In particular, tell participants when and how they will see the results of this conversation shared outwardly with the community. And be sure to let stakeholders know about other ways to contribute to the direction of the district, both big and small.
- Consider sharing a link to a short survey or form where participants can share any last thoughts or questions for the district as well as give their feedback on the experience. End of conversation surveys provide attendees a chance to share details and more individualized responses than they may be willing or able to share with a large group. This survey can also give you straightforward access to participants' demographic information. Share the link in the chat at the end of the Community Conversation and via email after close along with a thank you. We recommend including two basic questions in the survey:
 - What is your demographic information? (Break up into more specific, multiple-choice questions as needed)
 - Is there anything additional you would like to share?

Step 6. Summarize findings and report back to stakeholders

Create internal and external summaries of Community Conversation themes and illustrative quotations

Share the trend analysis and quotes from focus groups with the community via multiple channels. Community Conversation outcomes and next steps can be shared as part of a larger campaign to engage stakeholders in providing feedback or on their own.

Share themes with attendees and external stakeholder groups along with actions to be taken as a result

Share themes with participants and with the broader district community via website and social media. Include themes and quotes in future documents describing plans for the upcoming school year.