



ENGAGING YOUNG PEOPLE IN  
**HOW**  
**LEARNING**  
**HAPPENS**

## Discussing Crucial Issues with Youth

A supplemental guide for engaging young people  
around top-of-mind issues in 2021



Photo by Allison Shelley for American Education: Images of Teachers and Students in Action

## ABOUT THIS GUIDE

Students across the country are feeling the effects of a rapidly changing world—from the COVID-19 pandemic and its effect on their lives and learning environments, to widespread uprisings in response to ongoing systemic racism. This discussion guide offers topical discussion questions focused on the issues that young people have identified as priorities at this moment in time. The questions featured in this document are based on dozens of focus group interviews with young people across the country, along with insights from both a [Youth Town Hall](#) in August 2020 and [follow-up letter-writing campaign](#), co-hosted by America’s Promise Alliance and The 74.

This guide is designed for school, district, out-of-school time, and other community leaders or youth-supporting adults who wish to partner with young people in their communities to better understand their experiences with issues that matter to them. While every community has unique needs and engages with young people in a variety of ways to meet those needs, any youth-supporting adult can take steps toward understanding young people’s insights about the pressing issues they face during this unprecedented moment in history, even if they are at different stages of engaging youth perspectives.

In the summer of 2020, we published a Youth Engagement Guide, which offers step-by-step suggestions for how adults might prepare for, organize, and reflect on conversations with young people about their learning and wellbeing.<sup>1</sup> That original guide is focused primarily on questions surrounding young people’s social, emotional, and academic development. **This document expands on that guide by taking a deeper dive into additional issues young people have mentioned as top-of-mind in this pivotal moment in our nation’s history, including navigating a pandemic and their role in fighting for racial justice.**

<sup>1</sup> The original discussion guide was developed in connection with the release of *All of Who I Am*, a research report from the Center for Promise, the applied research institute of America’s Promise Alliance. That report, along with other resources in the How Learning Happens Research Series, can be found at [americaspromise.org/allofwhoiam](https://americaspromise.org/allofwhoiam).

# PRE-CONVERSATION REFLECTION

Below are questions teachers and youth-supporting adults can consider prior to engaging young people in conversation about these topics:

**PURPOSE:** What is your purpose for the conversation? What goals do you have? Where did those goals come from? Do you know what students' goals are for the conversation? Are they the same as yours?

**SAFETY:** How will you set up the physical and emotional space for your conversation? Do students have opportunities to give input into those decisions? Have you made a plan to set norms around psychological and physical safety? How will you ensure that youth feel cared for if they ask something or reveal something that is vulnerable?

**RELATIONSHIPS:** What are your relationships like with the young people that you will be talking to? Do they feel similarly? How do you know? What are their relationships like with each other? What interactions or relational histories may be important to be aware of as you start your conversation?

**PREPARATION:** Have you respected young people by preparing your materials and self for the conversation? Have you done as much as you can to educate yourself about the topics that you will be discussing or those that students may bring up as important to their lives? Have you identified supports and avenues for your own learning so that you do not unfairly burden students with your own learning process?

**SUCCESS AND FOLLOW UP:** How will you know if the conversation went well? How will you follow up with students, and have you shared that information with them?

**FOR ALL OF THESE CONSIDERATIONS, MAKE IT A CONTINUOUS PRACTICE TO ASK:** Where is there space for youth to lead? What more can I do to authentically co-create spaces where power and voice are shared?

## HOW TO BEGIN

It is often helpful to begin these conversations with some sort of opening. These openings can serve many purposes: they can set an intentional tone, invite everyone to participate, create a sense of predictability and safety, and allow the facilitator and participants to get a sense for the emotional tenor of the group. While there are many ways that facilitators can open up space for conversation, below we offer a couple of example practices.

### AN OPENING RITUAL, CHECK-IN ACTIVITY, OR PROMPT

- Say hello in a different language/way and see how many ways your group knows to communicate
- Share a weather pattern/color that you are identifying with today and why...
- Rose/Thorn/Bud/Gardener (Rose: share a highlight; Thorn: something not so good that is going on; Bud: something that you are looking forward to; and Gardener: someone or something who is supporting you)

### [AND/OR] AN OPENING OR INVITING QUESTION

- What are you feeling thankful for?
- What are the most exciting things that you are learning about this year?
- What would you like to be learning about that you are not?
- What activities outside of school are you enjoying or finding meaningful?

## GUIDING QUESTIONS

The following are examples of prompting questions that can be asked in conversations with young people. Depending on each community's needs, these questions can be used to facilitate discussion, in student surveys, and/or as reflections for adult professional development.

Each of the topics below has emerged as a priority issue for young people in the 2020-21 school year, given the challenging and continually changing nature of this time. The questions are not necessarily intended to be asked verbatim. These questions are offered as possibilities to be adapted based on the specific needs, contexts, and readiness of each young person, adult, and community. Given the complexities of these priority issues, it is important to ensure youth feel supported, encouraged, and safe to engage in discussions about their needs and perspectives.

**The four topics presented here are: 1) Navigating the COVID-19 Pandemic; 2) Race and Racism; 3) Virtual and Blended Learning; 4) Communicating across Ideological Differences.**

### NAVIGATING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

**Young people across the country have shared that the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly affected their overall wellbeing. How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected you, your school, and your community?**

- What are some of the biggest challenges of the pandemic facing you and your community? How have you seen your school and community deal with those challenges?
- How have things changed in your community since the pandemic hit?
- What do you think the effect of the pandemic is on you and your peers' health, mental health, and wellbeing?
- In what ways has your school taken student voices into consideration when planning or implementing its learning approaches this year? What additional ways do you think your school could take student voices into consideration?
- What ideas do you have for ways that teachers and school staff can check in on and build relationships with students this year, even if they are teaching remotely?
- How have your relationships with your classmates changed? Have you been able to stay connected to your peers? If so, how?
- Are there ways that your community can support young people's health and wellbeing? If so, what are they?
- Have you been able to participate in organized out-of-school activities this year? Do you think that those activities are still important during this time?
- Do you think that it is important for young people to be engaging in community service activities at this moment? What ideas do you have for ways that young people can support their communities this year?



#### SUGGESTED RESOURCES

American Youth Policy Forum: [The Importance of Healing-Centered Afterschool Programs in the COVID-19 Era](#)

How Right Now: [How Are You Feeling?](#)

League of United Latin American Citizens: [Coronavirus Resources](#)

MENTOR: [Connection in a Time of Social Distancing](#)

## RACE AND RACISM

In the wake of numerous high-profile instances of police violence against Black Americans without accountability, thousands across the country have called for leaders to directly address systemic racism. How has the issue of racism affected you, your school, or your community?

### DISCUSSING RACE AND RACISM

- Has your school provided opportunities in the past for you to discuss race and racism? Can you describe what those opportunities were like?
- What opportunities to discuss race or racism have occurred this year? What do you hope will happen for the remainder of the school year for you to discuss race and racism? Do these conversations usually happen once, or are they ongoing?
- Do you think it is important for you to be able to discuss these issues in school?
  - Do you want to?
  - Would you feel comfortable?
  - What about the environment or the teacher or staff would make you more or less comfortable discussing these issues?
- Has your school or anyone at your school directly addressed the Black Lives Matter and Say Her Name movements? What do you think would be good ways for schools and teachers to address these movements with students?
- What do you think is important for teachers to know if they want to, or if they are already, discussing race and racism with students?
- (For students of color) How do you feel when topics of race and/or racism are discussed? What can school adults do to prioritize your wellbeing during these conversations?

### TEACHING AND LEARNING ABOUT RACE AND RACISM

- How much opportunity do you have to explore or discuss the issue of race and/or racism in the curriculum offered at your school?
- Does the curriculum (what you are learning about) at your school include issues of race and racism?
  - If so, do you think these issues are depicted fairly and accurately?
  - If not, how do you think issues of race and racism should be incorporated into the curriculum at your school?
- Does your school teach or celebrate Black, Latinx, Indigenous, Asian-American history throughout the year, or just during a specified month?
- What were you taught about systems of oppression at school? For example...
  - Slavery, Jim Crow laws, redlining, restrictive covenants?
  - Japanese internment camps?
  - Indigenous extermination and forced assimilation?
  - The holocaust?
  - Others?
- Does your school spend time teaching and learning about the history, culture, and current realities of race? Of systemic racism?
- What do you wish you knew or were taught about the history and/or current reality of systemic racism?

### YOUTH PERSPECTIVES ON RACE IN SCHOOLS

- Do you think that racism exists at your school?
  - What has been done or what could your school do to address or respond to that? How can school staff learn more from youth about issues of race in schools?
- Are there people at school that you feel comfortable going to discuss racism at your school?
  - Do you feel safe and empowered to call out racism when it occurs in your school?
  - What has your school done to create spaces for you to share your opinion and experiences regarding race and/or racism?
- Some schools are creating groups like a student equity committee to look at the curriculum and school policies. What would you think about something like that?
  - Does your school have a Black Student Union/Alliance? Are there other groups for students of color? If so, what is their role? How are they perceived in the school?



#### SUGGESTED RESOURCES

[ASCD: How to Be an Antiracist Educator](#)

[BLM at School: Resources](#)

[Center for Supportive Schools: Antiracism Resources](#)

[Center for Racial Justice in Education: A Racial Justice Guide to the Winter Holiday Season for Educators and Families](#)

[Facing History: Race in US History](#)

[Teaching Tolerance: Race & Ethnicity](#)

## VIRTUAL, HYBRID, AND IN-PERSON LEARNING

Many schools have shifted to online or hybrid learning environments in the midst of COVID-19, while others are in-person. How do you feel about your current learning environment?

### DISCUSSING EXPERIENCES WITH LEARNING DURING THE 2020-21 SCHOOL YEAR

- How are you attending school right now (in person, hybrid, remote, blended, etc.)?
  - What parts of that do you like? Which are not working for you?
- Are there things that make it more difficult for you to participate in your learning communities? Are there things that have helped you become more engaged in learning?
- Has anyone at school asked you about some of these logistics and what would be best for students?
- In what ways has your school taken student voices into consideration when planning or implementing its learning approaches this year? In what additional ways do you think your school could take student voices into consideration?
- What advice would you give to teachers who are not sure what their students need and know that they want to have these conversations but aren't quite sure where to start?
- (If learning fully or partially in person):
  - How safe do you feel about going into buildings? Why do you feel that way?
  - Does in-person school feel different than before and, if so, how has that affected your learning?
- (If learning online):
  - What aspects of online learning are helpful or aspects of it that you look forward to or like?
  - What are things that people should know about the more positive aspects of online learning for you or other students?

### CREATING MEANINGFUL AND EXCITING LEARNING EXPERIENCES

- What ideas do you have to make academics exciting and engaging?
- What are the things that teachers have done, or things you have done in some of your classes, that you found exciting?
- What are the projects or class activities that you have enjoyed most or felt most proud of? Can you describe what made them enjoyable?
- In what ways, if any, has your learning changed based on current events going on in our country?
- What is the best moment you have had so far this school year?
- What advice would you give to teachers who want to make their classes more exciting and engaging?



#### SUGGESTED RESOURCES

Edutopia: [Building Community Virtually With Friendly Fridays](#)

EL Education: [Leaders of Their Own Learning](#)

Facing History: [Back to School 2020: Building Community for Connection and Learning](#)

Learning Policy Institute: [Beyond the Bell: The Power of Authentic Learning](#)

Teaching Tolerance: [Classroom Resources](#)

## COMMUNICATING ACROSS IDEOLOGICAL DIFFERENCES

The contentious elections of 2020 and ongoing political and ideological polarization have illustrated vast differences in beliefs and perspectives among people in this country. What do you think is important in understanding people who may have different views than you?

- Do you think it is important to have conversations and try to understand people who have different opinions or political beliefs than you? Why or why not?
- Do you think there are ever times when it is ok not to understand someone else's viewpoint or perspective? What are some examples?
- Can you describe a time when you had to have a hard conversation with someone who had or has different views than you?
- What can be gained from having conversations with people who have different views or perspectives than you? What are some of the risks?
- What are some strategies that you use to talk to people who might have different views or backgrounds?
- At your school (or program) do you think that everyone feels invited to share their views? Why or why not?
  - Do you think that it is important that everyone be able to share their views or perspectives? Are there ever exceptions?
- Have you ever learned something from someone who had a different opinion that made you understand something differently? What did you and they do to help understand one another better?



### SUGGESTED RESOURCES

Edutopia: [Taking the Heat Out of Politically Charged Classroom Discussions](#)

Greater Good Science Center: [Bridging Differences Playbook](#)

Harvard Graduate School of Education: [Conversations Across Differences](#)

Morningside Center for Teaching Social Responsibility: [Respecting Differences for K-2](#)

Teaching Tolerance: [Let's Talk: Facilitating Critical Conversations with Students](#)

## HOW CAN I USE THIS INFORMATION?

There are numerous ways that adults can use the information that they receive during these conversations. For instance, these conversations can create the context for students to be more involved in school-level decision making such as with discipline or curricular choices. They can also provide insight into young people's social, emotional, and academic strengths and needs, providing actionable pathways for adults to celebrate and build upon their strengths and support their needs.

No two communities will be the same, and no two conversations or perspectives from young people will be the same. Entering into these conversations confers a responsibility on the part of adults to follow up with young people, provide avenues for ongoing and continuing feedback and conversation, and work to improve the systems and conditions for learning that exist in your setting and community. These questions are by no means exhaustive, but are meant to be useful examples of the types of questions that young people identified as most important to their lives at this point in time.

We would love to hear from you! If you use this guide and would like to share your experiences, please follow [this link](#) to let us know!



### About America's Promise Alliance

America's Promise Alliance is the driving force behind a nationwide movement to improve the lives and futures of America's children and youth. Bringing together national nonprofits, businesses, community and civic leaders, educators, citizens, and young people with a shared vision, America's Promise leads campaigns and initiatives that spark collective action to overcome the barriers that stand in the way of young people's success. Through these collective leadership efforts, the Alliance does what no single organization alone can do: catalyze change on a scale that reaches millions of young people.



### About the Center for Promise

The Center for Promise is the applied research institute for America's Promise Alliance. The Center's work is grounded in positive youth development, and its team is committed to adding young people's voices to national conversations on topics that affect their wellbeing.



### About How Learning Happens

Science confirms what educators, parents, and caregivers have long known: learning is social, emotional, and cognitive. The most powerful learning happens when we pay attention to all of these aspects—not separately, but woven together, just like how our brains work. Through How Learning Happens, America's Promise Alliance is advancing this understanding about learning and helping to fuel the growing movement to educate children as whole people by developing a shared and inclusive message about how learning happens; sharing this message with a broader audience of stakeholders; and amplifying young people's own perspectives about learning.