

Questions: What should we ask?



In this section you'll draft 6 to 8 questions for a conversation of about 20 to 40 minutes.



Connect Considering the activities from earlier in this session, what are some ideas we should consider when developing questions?

Build Create questions in this general format. See the following pages for ideas.

	Question	Type	Follow-up
Simple start	1		
	2		
Go deeper	3		
	4		
	5		
End open	6		
	7		
	8		

Which students will review or rewrite these before they're used, and when?

Revise Try your first two questions for real: answer them out loud as a group for a few minutes, or in writing if you're on your own. Where did you start "getting deep"? Where did answers stall at "yes," "no," or "I don't know..."? Then check each question:

- Is it easy to understand what the question is asking?
- Would you answer it out loud, on a recording, in front of your peers?
- Does any question lead participants to answer a specific way? (As in, is it a leading question?)
- Do these questions relate back to your focus?
- Is the question set too much? We recommend about 6 to 8 questions for a 20 to 40 minute conversation.

How to construct a question set

We recommend this flow: open with an easy question to get folks talking. Then dive into stories and specific experiences. Close by giving participants an opportunity to share more on whatever they'd like. Groups may not get through every question, and that's fine: a deep, meaningful conversation about three questions beats rushing through eight.

Simple start

About 5 minutes

An image, a one-word answer, or a scale, each extended by asking "why?" Low stakes, and everyone answers.

Go deeper

20 to 30 minutes

Sharing stories and examples.

End open

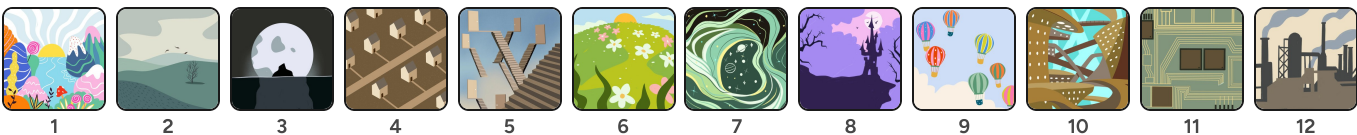
About 5 minutes

Asking participants for one thing they want people to know from this conversation, or about topics that didn't come up.

Question types

Most of your questions will be open-ended, but you can mix it up:

Type	What it sounds like	How to run it
Open-ended	"Tell me about a time when..." "Walk me through a day when..." "What do you wish adults knew about...?"	Ask the question, and participants respond.
Image choice	"Which of these pictures feels most like a normal week here? Why?"	Two minutes to look silently, then everyone shares or passes. If you're recording, number each image so people can say it aloud ("I picked 4 because..."). Image questions early on help quieter people open up.
Scale, then why	"How much say do students have in how our school runs?" 1 is "Students have no say in how our school runs." 5 is "Students actively shape how our school runs."	Everyone settles on a number before anyone talks, then each person shares their number and why.
Short video	"Does this look or sound like your usual day at school? Would you want it to?"	A clip of a minute or two, followed by conversation.
Write, then share	"In one or two sentences or bullet points, what would a perfect school day look and sound like? Have you ever had one here?"	Give time to write first. This helps everyone think through their answer.
Design	"If you were planning the first week of ninth grade for next year's students, what would happen?"	A list or a sketch on paper, then explain it.
Survey extension	"According to our last school survey, only 50% of students describe themselves as 'engaged' at school. Why do you think this is?"	Share a figure your school already watches and ask people to explain it.



An example image set. We'll often ask, "Which of these images best describes a typical day at school? Why?"

How to improve your questions

Instead of	Try	Reasoning
"Do you like school?"	"What's one word you'd use to describe school? Why?"	Closed questions make participants answer "yes" or "no" and move on. Adding "why" is an easy way to encourage participants to elaborate.
"How well do your teachers explain things, grade fairly, and respond to students?"	"Tell me about a time a teacher's feedback actually helped you."	Questions with multiple parts are confusing. Try to simplify and encourage storytelling.
"What do you love about our new schedule?"	"Walk me through a normal day on the new schedule."	Be careful of leading questions that assume positive or negative feedback.
"Why don't you ask for help?"	"Tell me about a time you got stuck. What did you do?"	Make sure questions don't assume participants act or behave a certain way.
"Do you feel a sense of belonging here?"	"Tell me about a time you felt like you really belonged here. What was happening around you?"	"Belonging" is an abstract word. A specific moment is easier to talk about than an idea.
"Is the workload rigorous?"	"How long did homework take you last night? Is that too much, too little, or about right?"	"Rigor," "success," and "engagement" mean different things to different people, so break them down into specifics.
"Which teacher is the strictest?"	"Think of a class that is challenging but you enjoy. Without naming names, what does the teacher do to help you?"	Naming names puts one person on trial and isn't productive. Asking proactive (rather than reactive) questions also leads to better conversations.
"Do you agree lunch is too short?"	"How do you feel about lunch, from 1 to 5? Why do you say that?"	Agree-or-disagree questions can be very binary. A scale with "why" helps us understand at a deeper level.

Writing questions with students

We recommend coming up with some ideas, but also directly asking students what questions they would ask:

- ① In small groups, students talk through what the school needs to learn about.
- ② Each group writes three questions.
- ③ Share them all, combine matches, and give everyone three votes.
- ④ Keep the top eight or so, and adjust the wording if needed.
- ⑤ Last check: does every topic the group cared about have a question?

Example question sets (used by real schools)

Climate and culture, grades 3 to 5

About 25 minutes

- 1 Open If you had to pick one word to describe school, what would it be? Why?
- 2 Scale How do you feel when you walk in the door in the morning?
1 means "I wish I could stay home," 5 means "Super happy to be here."
- 3 Image Which picture feels the most like school to you? Why?
- 4 Open What's your favorite part of the school day? What part do you wish was different?
- 5 Open If you could recommend one thing to make school better for everyone, what would it be?

Families of children with disabilities, adults

About 40 to 60 minutes

- 1 Open What's the best thing about raising or supporting a child with a disability in this community, something another city or county might envy?
- 2 Image If the state could focus on one thing for families next year, which picture would you pick? Why?
- 3 Scale How well do you think state education leaders understand what families in your community need?
1 is "Not at all," 5 is "They completely understand."
- 4 Open What should every teacher, not only special education teachers, know about kids with disabilities?
- 5 Open Where has a rule or requirement actually protected your child? Where has one gotten in the way?
- 6 Open About 6 in 10 Michigan students with disabilities finish high school on time. For other students it's more than 8 in 10. Why do you think that is?
- 7 Open If your school or the state could wave a magic wand, what one change would make the biggest difference for the most families in this room?

Inclusion and belonging, grades 7 to 12

About 40 minutes

- 1 Image Look at the following images. Which image do you feel best represents your feelings about school? Why?
- 2 Open Let's think about the times when you're most excited to be at school. Tell me what those days look like.
Has there been a great day like that? What happened?
- 3 Open Now think about the opposite: the times when you really don't want to be at school. What do those days look like?
Have any of those days stood out? What happened?
- 4 Open Tell me about a time when you felt really connected to your school. This could be during class, at lunch, before or after school, or any other time.
What made that moment special? How did the adults and other students make you feel?
- 5 Open We hope that school is helping you grow as a person, not just learn facts. What parts of who you are do you wish your school knew about and supported better?
- 6 Open Do you think students at your school are treated fairly by adults when they get in trouble? Why or why not?
- 7 Open What would you want adults at school, like teachers and principals, to know about what students like you actually need to feel supported?
- 8 Open If you could change one thing about how decisions are made at your school (rules, activities, how classes work, or anything else), what would that be? Why?

