Helping All Students Succeed in Today’s World
Four Session Version

Community-School Discussion Guide

Introduction
Across New England, schools are moving towards more personalized learning experiences that engage students in their own success and incorporate their interests and skills into the learning process. The hope is that this approach will enable all learners, especially underserved learners, to have the skills, knowledge and supports they need for their success. School districts refer to these approaches in a variety of ways, calling them Student Centered Learning, Mastery Based Learning, or Proficiency Based Learning (the name we use for this discussion guide).

For these school improvement efforts to be successful, students, educators and community members will need to work together. This dialogue guide provides an opportunity for people to have meaningful conversations about our schools; to share their perspectives about what works well and what’s not working; to explore efforts to move towards a more personalized, proficiency based learning environment; and to share their ideas for ways to make learning more accessible and relevant for all students.

This guide is intended to help community members work with schools to build relationships, trust, and a shared understanding of how to improve education. Everyday Democracy has worked with communities for more than 25 years, studying and improving this process. It has built in principles that can lead to lasting success, such as engaging diverse people, sharing power and authentic engagement. For more information visit www.everyday-democracy.com.

A few notes on this guide: This guide provides an overview of the four dialogue sessions. Text in italics represents language you could use verbatim. Many sessions begin with notes to you on how to conduct each session. Review the entire document carefully to orient yourself and if possible review also with your co-facilitator.
Purpose of the Conversation
The goal of this dialogue is to begin to change the conversation and the culture regarding education in New England, so that people in our communities:

- Look at the big picture (the purpose of education) and don’t get stuck debating the details of individual initiatives.
  - Reflect on our changing world and how we need to remodel our education system to adapt to these changes.
- Consider what it will take to create equitable opportunities for all students
  - Reflect on current challenges we face in trying to meet the needs of all students.
- Move from an individualistic framework (i.e. “what’s best for my child”) to a collective understanding about what’s best for all the community’s children.
- Identify opportunities for educators, parents, community members and students to participate in shaping and implementing a remodeled education system.

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SESSION 1:
SHARING OUR STORIES & BELIEFS ABOUT EDUCATION IN OUR
CHANGING WORLD

Purposes
- Begin to build relationships
- Share stories and education experiences
- Identify the community’s education values

Session Introduction
Part 1. Welcome & Overview (20 min)

Facilitator Note:
Write the title of each of the four sessions on a piece of chart paper or PowerPoint slide so people can see this during your overview. Save this paper and refer to it at the beginning of each of the four sessions.

Introduce yourself and describe the role of the facilitators.
- Our role is to help the group have an honest and productive conversation.
- We will help keep the discussion on track and make sure that everyone has a chance to participate.
- We will not offer our personal opinions.

Provide the context for the conversations:
- These conversations are an opportunity to better understand the community’s hopes and concerns about education; to build shared understanding about our school’s efforts to make sure all our students are successful; and to ensure that school change efforts are informed by the voices of community members.
- Describe who is organizing this and why:
- Say where this will lead:
  - Describe how the themes from these conversations will influence decision-making and action.
  - Let participants know who will receive the results of these conversations (for example school leadership teams, student government, parent advisory group, school board, etc.)

Provide an Overview of the four sessions:
• Our group will meet for four two-hour sessions. Each session is designed to build on the one before it.
• During this first session, we will get to know each other, share our own school stories and experiences, and identify what we believe are the key purposes of education
• During the second session, we will learn more about current school improvement efforts.
• Session three will provide a chance for us to review data about how our students are doing, and discuss ways to ensure that all our students succeed.
• During the final session, we will revisit our earlier work and identify actions we can take to support our students and our schools.

Invite people to introduce themselves
• Please say your name, what town you live in, and your connection with the schools or the community.
• Also say a few brief words about why you wanted to participate in this conversation

Help the group establish ground rules to guide the conversation
• For us have a productive and honest dialogue, we need to establish some ground rules.
• Ground rules are something that everyone in the group agrees on.
• What ground rules do you suggest to help the group have a productive and honest dialogue?
• As participants suggest ground rules, make sure everyone agrees to them (ask for a thumbs up from the group for each ground rule)
• Once everyone agrees, write the ground rules on chart paper.

Facilitator Note: If the group is having trouble thinking of ground rules, here are a few you can suggest.
• All ideas get a fair hearing.
• Each person gets a chance to talk.
• Speak for yourself. Don’t try to speak for “your group”.
• If you feel offended by what someone says, say so, and say why.
• It’s okay to disagree, but don’t make it personal.
• Personal stories won’t be shared outside the group unless we all say it is OK.
Part 2: Sharing Our Stories about Education (30 min)

Facilitator Note: If ALL of the stories are positive, ask if someone has a challenging story to share. If ALL of the stories are about challenges, ask if someone has a positive story to share.

Invite participants to briefly share a story about their education experiences

- Please share a story about a memorable school or education experience from your own life (if there are more than ten people in the circle, do this as a paired discussion, and invite several people to share highlights with the full group)

Identify key themes from the discussion

- What themes do we notice from this discussion?

Part 3: Education in Our Changing World (25 min)

Facilitator Note: Before the session begins, queue up the video and test the picture and sound. Begin this part of the discussion by showing the first 1 minute 23 seconds of the trailer for the movie Most Likely to Succeed. https://vimeo.com/122502930

- After participants watch the video, pause for a moment of silent reflection. Then invite the group to discuss what they saw
  - What stood out for you when you watched the trailer?
  - In what ways does our changing world affect how we work, how we socialize, how we participate in our community?
  - What are the implications of these changes for our education system?
- Invite participants to keep this discussion in mind during the next part of this session.

Part 4: What do we believe about the purpose of education? (35 min)

Invite participants to take a moment to reflect (5 min)

- Given your own experiences as well as this discussion about our changing world, take a few minutes and write, draw, or simply reflect on what you think the purpose of education should be.

Ask people to divide into small groups of two or three for the next part of the discussion. (1 min)

- Spend a few minutes in your group sharing your ideas about the key purposes of education.
Once you’ve heard from everyone in your group, work together to come up with three to five words or phrases that describe what your group believes are the key purposes of education.

Record each of these words or phrases on sticky notes (one idea per note).

Bring the small groups back together for an activity to identify key themes (15 min)

- Let’s start by having one group share one of their sticky notes. Who would like to go first? (Once the group shares their word or phrase, take the sticky note and place it on a wall or chart paper)
- Did anyone from the other groups have a similar idea? (If other groups have similar ideas, take their sticky notes and place them close to the first note)

Repeat this process until all the sticky notes are shared. Group similar words or ideas close together. Begin a new grouping of sticky notes for each distinct idea.

**Facilitator Note:** At the end of the session, record the key themes from the sticky note activity on chart paper and save this for the upcoming sessions. You may also want to take a picture of the sticky notes to share with participants.

- Once all the sticky notes have been posted, review the key themes
  - Do you think these notes are grouped together in a way that makes sense?
  - Does anyone want to suggest changes to the groupings?
  - What themes are we noticing?
  - Is there anything important missing?
  - We will revisit these themes throughout the rest of the sessions.

**Part 5: Closing (10 min)**

Invite several people to share what it was like to participate in this conversation.

- Before we close, let’s hear from a few people about what it was like to take part in this conversation.

Let people know what to expect for next time

- The next session will provide an opportunity for us to learn more about some of the concepts at the heart of many school improvement efforts here and throughout New England.

Remind people of the next meeting time/date/place and thank them for participating.
SESSION 2:
WHAT IS PROFICIENCY BASED LEARNING AND WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Purpose

- Share views about our schools and establish a shared understanding about Proficiency Based Learning.

Session Introduction

Part 1: Welcome & Overview (15 min)

Introduce yourself and remind people of your role as the facilitator.

Talking points to help provide context for the conversations:

- Welcome back to session two of our conversation.
- As you know, these conversations are an opportunity to better understand the community’s hopes and concerns about education; to build shared understand about our school’s efforts to make sure all our students are successful; and to ensure that school improvement efforts are informed by the voices of community members.
- Throughout New England, many schools are remodeling themselves to better prepare students for life after school.
- In many New England states, laws have been passed that encourage schools to update how students learn and how student learning is evaluated.
- Schools also want to do a better job at making sure all students succeed. This means making sure that school systems work well for students with different learning styles, and from all socioeconomic, ethnic, racial, linguistic, and family backgrounds.
- “Proficiency Based Learning” is a phrase that many schools use to describe these changes. Some schools refer to their school improvement efforts as “Student Centered Learning,” “Student Directed Learning,” or “Mastery Based Learning.”
- No matter what these efforts are called, it will take time for them to be put into place.
- During this session, you will have a chance to learn more about these changes and share your opinions about them.
Provide an overview of the purpose of this session

- *This session will give us the opportunity to learn more about key concepts that inform our school district’s efforts to meet the needs of today’s students. We will also have a chance to share our hopes and concerns about these efforts.*

Re-introductions

- *Let’s go around and say our names.*

Review highlights from previous session.

- Briefly review the ground rules:
  
  o *Would someone volunteer to read through our ground rules so we can keep these in mind during tonight’s discussion?*

**Part 2: How Are Our Schools Doing? (20 min)**

Invite people to spend a few minutes talking about how things are going now.

- *Before we talk about school improvement efforts, let’s talk about our current experiences in our school district*

- *Let’s go around the circle and have each person say one thing you think is going well in our school district, and one thing you wish could be different.*

- *What themes do we notice?*

**Part 3: Understanding Proficiency Based Learning (70 min)**

**Facilitator Note:** Write the four key questions featured in the video on chart paper or PowerPoint slide ahead of time and display where everyone can see them (see proficiency worksheet for details). Test the video and sound ahead of time to make sure everything works.

**Instructions & Video (30 min)**

- Let the group know that the next part of the discussion will feature a video that was made by some students and educators in Vermont.

  o *This video shares some of the big ideas that are at the heart of school improvement efforts.*

  o *Some of the details may look different in our district.*

- Before showing the video, divide participants into four groups and give each group one page of the proficiency worksheet.

- Invite participants to spend a few minutes reviewing the worksheet before watching the video. Ask them to take notes on their topic during the video.
• Play the *What's up with proficiencies?* Video.
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5UKrio4xKHc&list=PLwxrBggWvLkd1xLPGISV0g8xjTT5JuE47&index=2

**Facilitator Note:** Prepare chart paper or an electronic document ahead of time and record the key ideas from each group as they report out. You can also ask for a volunteer from each of the groups to do the recording.

Ask people to divide into small groups of two or three for the next part of the discussion.

(15)

• Invite the small groups to discuss and answer the questions on their worksheet. When they are done, they will share what they learned with the rest of the group.

**Report Outs (25 min)**

• Invite each group to share their key ideas with the rest of the group and record their ideas on chart paper or electronically.

• Invite several people to reflect on what stands out after hearing from each of the groups.

• Invite people to discuss whether they notice areas of alignment between Proficiency Based Learning and the themes from their discussions in Session 1 and at the beginning of this session.

**Part 4: Closing - 15 min**

(Optional: Invite everyone to get out his or her phones or computers and play *PBE Cahoot*. This game is a fun way to test participants’ understanding of Proficiency Based Learning.)

• Once people are done playing, ask for participants to give a thumbs up, thumbs down, or thumbs sideways, based on what they think their level of “proficiency” is at understanding the main ideas about Proficiency Based Learning.

 Invite several people to reflect on the discussion.

• *What is one thing you are taking away from tonight’s session?*

Let people know what to expect for next time.

• *The next session will provide an opportunity for us talk about challenges we face when working to ensure that all students are successful in our schools.*

• Remind people of the next meeting time/date/place.

• Thank everyone for coming.
SESSION 3:
ADDRESSING INEQUITIES AMONG STUDENTS

Purposes:

- Reflect on key challenges facing the district.
- Explore reasons why our schools may work better for some students than for others.

Part 1. Welcome & Overview (10 min)

Provide the context for the conversations:

- Welcome back to session three of our conversation.
- These conversations are an opportunity to better understand the community’s hopes and concerns about education; to build shared understanding about our school’s efforts to make sure all of our students are successful; and to ensure that school change efforts are informed by the voices of community members.

Provide an overview of the purpose of this session.

- While there are students who do well in our schools, other students are not successful in the current system.
- Current brain research tells us that all students can grow their intelligence, just as we can all strengthen our muscles.
- Research also tells us that students often have different levels of opportunity based on factors like learning style, race and ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status or family background.
- This session will give us a chance to understand how the students in our district are doing.
- We will also consider ways to ensure that our school’s improvement efforts will work well for all.

Re-introductions:

- Let’s go around and say our names.

Review highlights from previous sessions.
Briefly review the ground rules

- Would someone volunteer to read through our ground rules so we can keep these in mind during tonight's discussion?

Part 2: Discuss Key Challenges Facing Our Schools (30 min)

Distribute handout with data (i.e. achievement, graduation, discipline data aggregated by race, gender, socioeconomic status; trends in student population; trends in free and reduced lunch) and give people a few minutes to review the data and jot down some thoughts about it.

Invite participants to comment on the data.

- Let's go around the circle and have each person make one observation about the data. It's okay to pass if you want to. All observations are OK. Begin the observation by saying, “I notice that…”
- Let's have a second go around with each person sharing a question that the data raises for you.
- For our last go around, let us know what you think is important about this data.

Large-group brainstorm

Facilitator Note: Prepare chart paper ahead of time with two columns. Label the LEFT-HAND column “Costs” and the RIGHT-HAND column “Benefits.” During the brainstorm, record participant’s ideas in the appropriate columns.

- What is the cost to our community when some of our students are not doing well in school?
- What are the benefits to our community if we are able to remodel our schools so all students are successful?

Part 3: Discuss Why These Disparities Exist (60 min)

Facilitator Note: Talking about inequities can bring up strong feelings. We encourage you to acknowledge this directly when introducing the activity. Before the session, spend some time thinking about strategies you can use to guide the group if people become upset or angry. Print and review the disparity statements ahead of time.

Introduce the next activity.

- This next activity is going to help us talk about why we think our schools don’t work well for all students.
Let’s all stand up. I’m going to read some statements and invite you to stand along an imaginary line depending on how strongly you agree or disagree with each statement. After each statement, we will pause to talk about why people chose to stand where they did.

Before we start, it’s important to remember that people have different ideas about why there are disparities among students. We may agree on some things, and disagree on others. That is OK. The point is for us to be able to talk honestly about what we think is happening.

Discussing these issues can be difficult and may bring up some strong feelings in the group. Let’s remember the ground rules we established and be supportive of each other during this discussion.

Invite participants to stand and provide the following instructions

- I am going to read a series of statements and invite you to stand in different places along an imaginary line, depending on how you feel about the statement.
- As I read each statement, take a few minutes to think about how important you think the statement might be, in holding students back from being successful.
- If you strongly agree that the statement represents a very important reason that inequities exist in our schools, stand on the left side of the line. If you somewhat agree, stand towards the middle. If you somewhat disagree that this statement represents a very important reason that inequities exist in our schools, stand towards the right side of the line. If you strongly disagree, stand all the way to the right end of the line.
- Begin the activity by reading one statement, then inviting people to stand along the imaginary line depending on how strongly they agree (left hand side) or disagree (right hand side) with the statement (see statements on next page)

After the first statement invite a brief discussion.

- What do you notice about where people are standing?
- Why did you choose to stand where you are?
- What do you notice about what people are saying?

Repeat this process for each statement.

Debrief after the activity
- When you think about inequities in our education system, are there important factors that we haven’t considered?
- Do you think there are voices missing from our group that might offer a different perspective? What might someone with a different perspective say?
- Given this discussion, what challenges seem particularly relevant for our community?

Introduce the next part of the discussion.
- Now that we have had a chance to discuss some of the challenges facing our schools, let’s revisit some of the ideas behind Proficiency Based Learning

Provide a brief review of the key concepts that the group explored during Session 2. You can provide this review or invite someone from the group to do it.

Invite people to turn and talk to someone sitting next to them.

Facilitator Tip: Post the questions for the small group discussions where everyone can see them.

In your pair, discuss the following questions:
- In what ways might Proficiency Based Learning lead to better outcomes for all students?
- In what ways might Proficiency Based Learning perpetuate inequities among students?

Invite the full group to come back together and ask several of the pairs to share highlights from their discussion with the full group.

Part 4: Closing (5 min)
- Let people know what to expect for next time
  - Next time is our final session, and this will be an opportunity for us to reflect on all we’ve talked about so far and identify actions we can take to support our students and our schools.
  - Remind people of the next meeting time/date/place.
  - Thank participants for coming
SESSION 4:
HOW CAN WE WORK TOGETHER TO SUPPORT OUR STUDENTS AND OUR SCHOOLS?

Purpose:
- Identify actions we can take to support our students and our schools.

Part 1: Welcome & Overview (5 min)
Provide the context for the conversations
- The public education system is complex. It has many players – students, teachers, families, principals, community and business partners, and others. Everyone must work well together to help students succeed in today’s world.
- During this last session, we will have the opportunity to take stock of our previous discussions. We will build on our work together to identify actions we can all take to help improve education for our students.

Re-introductions
- Let’s go around and say our names.
- Please add a word or phrase to describe your feeling about being at the last session.

Briefly review the ground rules.

Part 2: How Can We Help All Students Succeed? (30 min)
Facilitator Tip: Make copies of the equity handout ahead of time and distribute to participants for this part of the discussion. Write the equity statements on chart paper or a power point slide so people can refer to them during the discussion.

This part of the discussion will help participants think about what is needed for all students to succeed. Here are some talking points to help set the stage.

- As you may remember from previous sessions, one of the reasons schools are moving towards Proficiency Based Learning is to make sure that all students have a fair chance to succeed.
- Last time we explored different views about why inequities exist. During this session, we are going to explore ways to help all students succeed.
Invite participants to take a few minutes to read through the equity handout. Then, invite a few volunteers to take turns reading each of the equity views and statements out loud. If someone doesn't want to read, they can say “pass.”

Invite participants to discuss the views using the questions below.

- Which of these views stands out for you?
- Which ones seem most important if we want to make sure all students are successful?
- Is there a view that you disagree with or one that seems less important than the others?
- Is there an important idea that’s missing that should be added?

As the discussion comes to a close, invite the group to identify key themes from this part of the discussion that they want to keep in mind as they begin to consider action steps, and record their key ideas on chart paper.

**Part 3: Reflection (10 min)**

Facilitator Tip: Before the session begins, hang up chart paper and/or copies of themes from previous sessions and put them in stations around the room. Include the themes from the discussion that just took place during part 2 of this session. Copy and cut TAG worksheets ahead of time and distribute to participants during the Reflection part of the session.

Let participants know that this is the time for them to reflect on all that they have talked about over the past several weeks, and to share their ideas for actions to address the issues they’ve been discussing.

Give each participant a pen and TAG worksheet. Invite them to take a few minutes to walk around the room in silence and review the work from the previous sessions. As they review the work, encourage them to jot down their thoughts on the worksheet.

- Tell something positive about the discussions. It could be an activity that you liked or something you learned.
- Ask a question you may have, based on the discussions.
- Give feedback about what problems need to be solved to successfully implement Proficiency Based Learning or other school improvement efforts.
Part 4: Brainstorming Ideas for Action  (60 min)

Facilitator Tip: For the paired brainstorm, write the brainstorm instructions on chart paper or on PowerPoint and post them where everyone can see them during this activity. For the full group brainstorm, prepare chart paper ahead of time with three columns.

Paired Brainstorm (10 min)

Invite people to pair up and share some of the key ideas from their TAG sheets with their partner.

Then, invite each pair to spend a few minutes jotting down specific actions to share with the rest of the group.

- Given all that you have talked about during the sessions, work with your partner to identify some actions you think would help make your school or district the best it can be for all students.
- When you are thinking of action ideas, please keep in mind these instructions:
  - Make your ideas as specific as possible.
  - Think of actions that can build on the good things that are already happening in our schools.
  - Try to think of a range of ideas, including actions you could take on your own, actions you could take working with others, and actions you could recommend to school leaders.

Full Group Brainstorm (20 min)

Invite each pair to share their ideas and record them on chart paper in the following columns:

- Actions we can take individually.
- Actions we can work on together.
- Actions for school leaders.

Give each participant six dots and invite them to go up to the chart paper and put the dots next to their favorite action ideas. As they are deciding what to vote on, invite them to keep these questions in mind

- Which ideas are most practical?
- Which ideas could have the biggest impact?
• Which could be helpful for all kinds of students?
• Which would be fun to work on?

Once everyone has posted their dots, invite participants to help count up the dots by each action idea. Then circle the ideas that have the most dots in each of the columns.

If there are more than three top ideas, ask participants to talk about which ones they would be most interested in working on and most excited to share with other students, teachers, parents or school leaders. Then, invite the group to choose their three top ideas.

**Part 4: Closing - 15 min**

Let people know what will happen with their work and invite them to stay involved

• Who will see their action ideas?
• How will the group’s input be used to inform decision-making?
• How can they work together to move some of their ideas forward?
• What opportunities are coming up for people who want to stay involved?

Go around the circle of participants, and invite everyone to say a sentence or two about something they will take with them as the result of these conversations.

Thank everyone for coming.