

United Way Campaign for the Common Good

Annotated Community Conversation Guide

Annotated Community Conversation Guide - Education

Give people plenty of time here. You don't have to hear from everyone, but don't let one or two people dominate.

Steer people away from talking only about complaints or problems. Keep focused on the kind of community they want.

1. What kind of a community do you want?

- Why is that important?
- How is that different from the way things are now?

This is where people will start to name their aspirations. They'll also tell you why it matters, and the words they use to describe the community.

When people draw connections between concerns they'll tend to broaden, not narrow the discussion. Let them. Note the connections between different concerns. These webs of concern are critical to know.

2. Given what we just said, what are the 2-3 most important issues or concerns when it comes to the community?

(Let people talk about all their concerns even if education comes up. If education does not come up, after people talk about their concerns, pivot to question 3)

Give people room to tell their story.

Keep the conversation focused on education, don't slip into talking only about "schools."

3. Given our aspirations for the community, what do we want education to be like in our community?

- Why is that important?
- What difference will that make?

You can learn a lot here about how people talk about education. What words are they using? Do they connect education with concerns beyond just schools? Web of concerns.

4. How will what we just said about education help us to get the kind of community we want?

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Listen here for the emotions embedded in people's comments. You'll want to draw these out later

Listen for how people relate to education. Sometimes people will gain context by asking "What's in it for me?" But they also become attached through broader context/ beyond their own self-interest. This happens through 1st hand experiences, the experiences of others, what they can imagine.

Throughout the session keep track of "turning points," those words, questions, or ideas that unlock the issues for people and cause them to rethink or engage more deeply.

Keep an eye out for disconnections or gaps in people's stories: important parts that are missing, whether it's a historical perspective, key fact or frame of reference. DO NOT try to fix these "gaps."

People feel a range of emotions on education, but may be hesitant to express these in public. Bringing out emotions makes the discussion more dynamic helping people discover why they care and what they're looking for.

Listen here for indications of ambivalence - people struggling to reconcile competing values or beliefs. Try to engage these voices, don't let more certain people cut them off.

5. Overall, how do you think things are going when it comes to education in our community?

- What makes you say that?
- What's going well?

Don't let anyone dominate here. Make room for different opinions. Ask, is that how everyone sees it?

6. How do the issues (on education) we're talking about affect you personally?

- What personal experiences have you had?
- How about people around you family, friends, coworkers, neighbors, others, what do you see them experiencing?
- Are some people affected more than others? Who? In what ways? Why?

For the first 2/3rds of the conversation you want to keep opening things up rather than closing them down. Give people room to tell their story. Don't ask questions that box them in, or push them to offer solutions before they're able to explore each other's concerns and points of view.

As people start to tell stories you'll begin to see the context that they use to understand their concerns - it might be personal experiences, or not.

People want to feel a sense of possibility for action on their concerns. Throughout the conversation listen for when people see action is possible, or when they tell hopeful stories. You may also hear the lack of possibility that people feel on some concerns.

7. When you think about these issues, how do you feel about what's going on?

- Why do you feel this way?
- How do you think other people (in other parts of the community) feel about this?

You may start to hear how people can connect their private concerns to the concerns of others moving from private to public sphere

Describing how others feels helps people to consider other points of view and opens up the possibility for finding common ground.

8. What kinds of things are keeping us from having the education we want for kids?

- Why do you say that?
- How do you think things got to be this way?

Notice if emotion freezes anyone. Does fear or insecurity prompt people to shut down?

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Listen here for both ideas and conditions people are expressing and the extent to which they believe change is possible. Sense of possibility.

9. When you think about what we've talked about, what are the kinds of things that could be done that would make a difference?

It may take some people a while to respond. Give them time. Some may say they don't know because they're not experts. Remind them you only want to know what they think, that they don't have to be expert.

Pay close attention to whether people see themselves as potential actors. Listen for their sense of possibility. Also pay attention to whom they trust to engage them and act.

- What do you think these things might accomplish?
- How about in terms of individuals: What are the kinds of things that individuals can do to make a difference?
- What do you make of what other people say should be done?
- What's important for us to keep in mind when we think about moving ahead?

10. Thinking back over the conversation who do you trust to take action on the issues you've been talking about?

- Why them and not others?

11. Now that we've talked about this issue a bit, what questions do you have about it?

- What do you feel you'd like to know more about that would help you make better sense of what's going on and what should be done?
- What kind of follow-up would you like out of this discussion