

School Leaders Guide to Create Healing Dialogue Space



As students return to classes, it's important to address the historical and collective trauma everyone has experienced due to both the COVID-19 pandemic and our civil rights movement. Schools are made up of people who now are going through something. No matter their age, the people in your school community may be grieving or suffering under enormous stress and need compassion and support.

Intentional design and development of healing school communities and school cultures are essential to show students, school staff members, and families that they are loved and cared for. Here are some ways to create and hold authentic, healing dialogue space for those in your school community.

Be Purposeful

Be clear on what you want to discuss and establish a purpose for the space.

EXAMPLES:

- Right now, all educators, students, and parents are on “pandemic summer break,” with many unknowns about what school will look like in the fall. We are also in the midst of a civil rights movement. This space will be to discuss a concern and a hope.
- We were not able to finish the school year or begin a school year like we normally do. This space is to discuss our feelings and thoughts about this and better understand each other.
- Many of us have been directly impacted by COVID-19. How might we accept and support each other right where we are?
- We have witnessed and/or participated in our current civil rights movement. How might we discuss what we saw/see and what might be some changes we need?



Resources: [Willing to be Disturbed by Margaret Wheatley, Addressing Racialized Violence with Students](#)

Establish Dialogue Norms

Many organizations have norms or basic principles that can help define what kind of group you will be or how you want to be as a community. Consider revisiting those, and/or add to them with these from [Margaret Wheatley's article All Social Change Begins with a Conversation:](#)

- We acknowledge one another as equals.
- We try to stay curious about each other.
- We recognize that we need each others' help to become better listeners.
- We slow down so we have time to think and reflect.
- We remember that conversation is the natural way humans think together.
- We expect it to be messy at times.



Leave an open invitation for personalized requests, such as this one from the National Equity Project: “My experience is not up for debate.” It’s helpful to also add, “We also request grace: permission to not be fully formed. We are all learning.”

Have a Plan for Listening

A large part of holding space for dialogue is listening, so it's important to review strategies for listening that break down old habits that may hinder or even hurt the speaker.

How will we stay present and stand witness to our experience?

- **Constructivist Listening** includes equal time, no interruption, confidentiality, no criticism, and undivided attention.
- Scharmers **4 Levels of Listening** focuses on holding an open mind, open heart, and open will.

Use Reflective Questions

Ask open-ended questions that are pertinent to your topic. This creates space for people to make decisions about how deep they want to go.

EXAMPLES:

- What have you been carrying?
- How has it felt to be you lately? (Connect to purpose above)
- What is one barrier to us building a welcoming and healing community for all?
- What gives you hope that we can build a welcoming and healing community for all?

Close the Conversation

A single dialogue or even a series of conversations should be part of ongoing work to build trust, respect, and a positive school culture. Take time to close the conversation with an acknowledgement that more work may need to be done to accomplish goals, a highlight of the progress that has been made, or an action that provides a sense of closure (adapted from the *Hanover Research Anti-Racism Discussion Guide*).

EXAMPLES:

- Extend gratitude to everyone for their courage and willingness to participate in a difficult, but necessary conversation.
- Offer space for participants to share how the conversation impacted them.
- Encourage participants to share an appreciation for the group process.
- Invite participants to share what they learned about themselves or what they took from the conversation.
- Request a one-word closure from each participant (variations: phrase, sentence).
- Create a Found Poem (welcome your participants to the next session with this poem).



Watch [SDCOE facilitate a dialogue with Black students](#).



Download a presentation on [creating healing dialogue space](#).



Explore [five ways to boost authentic youth voice](#).



Learn from the California Association of School Counselors on [Addressing Staff and Student Mental Health for School Reentry](#).



Review [social and emotional considerations for welcoming back students this year](#).

