

Iowa Department of Education



Preparation for

Community Conversation:

Recommendations for

Iowa High Schools

Prepared by

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WHY HOLD “FOCUSED” CONVERSATIONS?

The task of a focused conversation and its facilitator is to release the genius, wisdom and experience of the group on a topic and guide it towards a considered conclusion.

Various purposes for holding a focused conversation on high schools and the recommendations of the Iowa Learns Council are:

1. Highlight the attention the community is paying to the local high school program;
2. Clarify the perception of the participants as to the strengths, concerns, and possibilities they may have regarding the current high school experience;
3. Identify directions for the local community to consider as its leadership continues to pursue this topic;
4. Identify possible priorities that participants may have for graduates of the local school district;
5. Set the stage for more in-depth conversations;
6. Provide the local school board and the Iowa State Board of Education with input on current thinking at the local level regarding high school programs and students.

This particular process of conducting a group conversation at the community level may be used as part of an ongoing needs assessment at the district level that is required at least once every five years. It can be useful in helping a community to consider and identify options related to the improvement of high school.

However, group conversations are not simple affairs – they are often more like navigating rapids than paddling down a calm river. At each turn, rocky outcrops threaten to tip the conversation canoe. Some always want to dominate the conversation leaving others little chance to express themselves. If the conversation lags or get repetitious, people get bored and even walk out. Or, just when the conversation is going somewhere, someone will drop a rock into the bottom of the canoe with a statement like, “We tried that two years ago, and it was a flop.” Or, the group may arrive at a conclusion that is so simplistic it makes people smile, or sneer.

In spite of these dangers, group discussions are eminently worthwhile, and are better for many purposes than one-on-one conversations. They can collect data quickly from many people, and the massed brain power present can often work out problems then and there, or at least make enough of a breakthrough that the work can be passed on to a taskforce for completion.

You may be asking, “Why do these focused conversations have to be led? Aren’t conversations meant to be spontaneous? Doesn’t the attempt to “lead” or “facilitate” a conversation destroy spontaneity and take the fun out of it?” If we had all reached the seventh level of human perfection, yes, it probably would. But as just about all of us are still on the journey of learning, some guidance, artfully executed, is often helpful. If everyone strove to push the conversation to its deepest implications, if we never attempted to grandstand, argue, play dumb, or speak infallibly, maybe we would not need leadership. But experience has shown that if someone takes time to think through the conversation, to brood on the group, and stage-manage the conversation to a conclusion, things generally flow better. Conversation facilitators can marshal a group through the shallows of trivia, the rapids of argumentation or the clouds of abstraction. When these common pitfalls are avoided, the conversation goes better. Individuals participate more freely, and data builds on data in an orderly fashion.

Facilitator Instructions and Procedures

Designed for

Community members, parents, students, and educators.

Rational Aim

The group will understand the recommendations, identify effects of the recommendations and provide input to the district and the Iowa Department of Education on future directions.

Experiential Aim

The group will develop a sense of the possible impact of the recommendations, feel they have contributed to state and local planning, and increase own commitment to the issue, and possibly continuing the conversation.

Opening and Presentation of the Recommendations (15 minutes)

We're here to review information about recommendations for Iowa high schools and provide input. The purposes of this conversation are to:

1. Look closely at the Iowa Learns Council's recommendations;
2. Determine how the district and community respond;
3. Consider and identify possibilities in how to approach the preparation of high school graduates from this district.

Let's go around the group with each person giving their name and briefly relating their role in the community or school (e.g., parent, teacher, business person, etc.).

Show the PowerPoint presentation with script, presented by someone other than the facilitator or recorder. After each option, described on the PowerPoint and in the pamphlet, allow the participants to talk with one another for 1-2 minutes about what they understand and possible reactions. Do not take time to share out loud at this time. If they have questions about its meaning, answer those questions and move on. Provide the participants the pamphlet concerning the Learns Council recommendation and the various options included.

Personal Stake: In order to help members make the transition into the conversation, ask each of them to identify, in their own mind, why the issue of high school and the quality of high school graduates is important to them, their family, their work, or community. After 15-20 seconds of quiet time, ask each participant to turn to their neighbor and share with that person what they were thinking.

Discussion for Clarity and Understanding (20 minutes)

Objective Questions

The purpose here is to make certain that the participants understand what is being recommended and to clarify it in their minds. If they intend to share their reaction, please ask them to wait until the conversation continues.

- Just to make sure we all understand the recommendations, what is being recommended?
- How would you state the recommendations?
- Are any parts of the recommendations unclear or confusing? Which ones?

Reflective Questions

The purpose here is to find out how they feel about the recommendations and how much it prompts their enthusiasm and what things they worry about. Do not ask for a vote, show of hands, or do anything to divide the participants into *pro* or *con*.

- What excites you about these recommendations?
- What is worrisome about these recommendations?

Decisional Questions

The purpose is to get any final need for clarification so that any remaining questions can be answered regarding the recommendations. The facilitator may not be the expert and therefore unable to answer all possible questions. If there are questions or clarifications that you cannot answer, and no one else is there to be explicit, simply record the questions and indicate that you will contact someone for more information. If someone in the group can clarify or help with what has been asked, the facilitator will need to make a judgment as to how credible that will be for the participants.

- Before we move on, is there anything that needs to be clarified?
- Are there any words or phrases that don't make sense? (The facilitator may not be the expert and may use the group in responding to the question.)

Capturing the Interpretations and Recommendations (45 minutes)

Interpretive Questions

This is the transition into the part of the conversation where the participants will provide specific feedback regarding the recommendation, in response to each of the four questions listed below. It helps to have a separate person record these responses while the facilitator continues to keep the conversation focused and on task.

There should be one page of a chart pad used to record the response to each question. Set up the chart pad with "bullets" for five items and room for two more. In order to limit the time, when a maximum of seven items have been listed, move to the next question. One thing the facilitator can do is look for similarities in what is said and make certain there are no duplicate responses in the seven items listed. If the list ends at less than seven and there are no other items to list, move on.

Post the responses for each question where everyone can see what they have said and be able to scan and compare all the sheets when finished.

Now, as we think about the recommendations for the students in our community:

- What are the benefits for students in these recommendations?
- What are the possible detriments for students?
- If we decide to move in this direction, what will help us?
- If we decide to move in this direction, what will work against us?

The transition here is to ask the participants to review each of the charts and all of what has been listed. If the conversation is slow to start, at this time, the facilitator can ask each participant to have a 30-second conversation with someone next to them and then ask them to share out loud some of their thoughts. The purpose is to ask them to begin to find patterns in what is being said. Ask them to take a look at what has been said. The facilitator should read each list aloud but not take time to record the responses to the following two questions:

- What themes did you notice?
- What does this mean for our community?

Reflective Questions

The purpose here is to get the participants to reflect on what they have said and recorded on the chart pads and to prepare for the last two questions:

- Looking at our responses to the recorded questions, what is worrisome?
- What do you find exciting?

Decisional Questions

The purpose of this part is to provide feedback to the district regarding the recommendations and options that have been discussed during the course of the evening. It is intended to help the district know how to proceed with any interest it has in working with a redesign or reform of high school education at the local level.

The facilitator works to help the group identify any common agreements among the participants in regard to the recommendations and the direction they think the district should take, as well as the concerns and considerations that the department should know about.

The facilitator asks the participants, "Let's look for any agreement there is regarding each of these two questions." The facilitator does not conduct a vote or use strict procedures for consensus building. Instead, if participants give informal verbal and nonverbal signals to the question, the response can be recorded. If there is obvious disagreement the facilitator can search for where there is agreement on the item being discussed; if there is none, indicate that the response will be put on hold and saved for any future local conversations the district may hold.

- What feedback about the recommendations do we wish to give to the organizers of this community forum?

Closing (10 minutes)

If time is available, the purpose of this section is to help the participants see, in a quick way, the steps they took and what was accomplished during this conversation.

The facilitator may say: "The district will use this work as it continues to work with the initiative of high school redesign or reform. The results will also be presented to the Iowa State Board of Education for their consideration." The questions below provide a chance for feedback as to the importance of this conversation and how they would adjust the process if it were held with other groups of people.

- Let's do a quick review, what did we do?
- What words or phrases do you recall?
- In what ways was this session meaningful for you?
- What was not meaningful?
- How well have we listened to each other?
- How has your appreciation of the issue grown?
- What would you tell someone who was not here when asked, "What did you do?"

Survey

The facilitator may say, “As one final step, you are asked to complete a survey based on this conversation. Please fill it out and leave it here before you leave. The results will be shared with the district as well as the Iowa State Board of Education.”

Thanks for your hard work!

FACILITATOR'S ROLE

1. Keep the process focused and moving
2. Provide “space” for all voices and perspectives.
3. Use your observation of the group to help determine when to move the pace quicker, when to slow it down, or maybe when to “retreat” a bit.
4. When soliciting responses to interpretative questions, after getting a response, acknowledge it and then ask for a **different** interpretation. Once the posted sheet is full, move on to the next question.
5. **The goal** is not to brainstorm “possible responses,” but **to capture the thinking of the group members**. Since there are several groups meeting on this issues, we realize that other groups are likely to note some items that this group does not note.
6. Seek agreement on the decisional questions. You might wish to tell the participants that you see agreement when you observe several head are nodding in agreement and no one is shaking their head or orally disagreeing.

RECORDER'S ROLE

1. Prepare ahead of time six easel sheets to capture the responses to the implication questions and the decisional question regarding recommendations or considerations to the Board of Directors.
2. The titles for these sheets are:
 - a. Benefits for Students
 - b. Detriments for Students
 - c. What will Help?
 - d. What will Work Against?
 - e. Feedback to the Local District
 - f. Feedback to the Iowa State Board of Education
3. For sheets “a” through “d,” make room for seven responses by pre-marking the sheet with five bullets and leaving space at the bottom for two more if needed.

| Benefits for Students |
|-----------------------|
| • |
| • |
| • |
| • |
| • |
| • |
| • |

4. Place sheets “a” through “d” side-by-side and then leave a space for “e” and “f” to be side-by-side.
5. On “e” and “f” make room for five responses and pre-mark with three bullets.

PROCESS FOR LEADING

1. *Select a Suitable Setting*

Preferably chairs in a circle, semi-circle, or U-shaped so it is relatively easy for participants to see and hear each other.

2. *Invitation*

Invite the group to take their places.

3. *Opening*

Someone like the superintendent or school board president should serve as host to welcome all and give the PowerPoint presentation. It could also be the chairperson of any district committee focused on the high school. The host does not need to be the facilitator or recorder.

4. *The First Questions*

Usually, it helps to have each participant answer the first question as it acts as an icebreaker for everyone in the room. In this case, each person has introduced him/herself and we are starting into the content. You might ask people to turn to their neighbor and respond to, “What is being recommended?” You could ask members of the group to share responses with the entire group or move to the next question. The goal here is to help insure mutual understanding of the facts.

Use a soft and inviting voice in asking the question “What parts of the recommendation are unclear or confusing?” Also, feel free to restate the question, i.e., “What concepts in this plan seem a bit fuzzy to you?” The goal here is to make sure all have the same basic understanding of the situation.

It is important that the facilitator stays neutral during the conversation and does or says nothing that indicates his or her preference for specific responses or directions the conversation could go. The entire purpose of this session is to provide the participants with a chance to provide their input to the recommendations and information that has been shared.

5. *Subsequent Questions*

Address subsequent questions to the whole group. On the second question, indicate that anyone can answer by saying, “Now, anybody...”

When you, as the facilitator, sense someone is veering away from the topic, affirm what he or she is saying as an insightful, important concern. Recap briefly what the group has said so far in response to the question. You may want to repeat the question, or the digression may signal it is time to move on to the next question.

If someone launches in a long or abstract answer, ask for a specific example: e.g., “Ben, I wonder if you could say that another way,” or, “Ben, please, will you give us a particular example of that?”

If an argument starts between different participants, remind the group that all perspectives need to be honored, that everyone has wisdom, and everyone has a piece of the puzzle. Then, ask if there are other viewpoints. The facilitator lets the contrasting views stand side-by-side as equal answers to the question.

If such interruptions come, try something like this, “I understand your response, but I’m not clear how it answers the question. I see you do not agree with Jim’s answer. So tell us how you would answer the question.”

6. *Closing*

Bring the discussion to a close with a few words summing up the group’s conclusions and thanking the participants.

SOME THINGS TO KEEP IN MIND

1. *The Facilitator Has Nothing to Teach*

The primary quality of the facilitator asking questions according to John Kloepfer, is his openness. Any facilitator who “knows the answers already” cannot lead an open conversation. Where presenting and reflecting are combined, it is important to separate the roles of conversation facilitator on one hand, and the role of presenter on the other. It will be helpful to have a person other than the facilitator be the one to present information.

This is important enough of a consideration that it may be in everyone’s best interest to have someone from outside the district serve as the facilitator. The fact and perception must be that the facilitator is a neutral person and willing to make certain that what the participant’s have to say will become part of the record.

2. *The Wisdom of the Group*

An effective facilitator trusts the wisdom of the group and will work to help them find their points of agreement to the areas where they are asked to respond.

3. *Abstract Questions, Abstract Answers*

Asking specific questions can partially or wholly offset abstract answers. Specific questions have a better chance of getting specific answers. The facilitator may need to be ready to ask the speaker to clarify and/or provide an example of what they are saying if their response is too general or unclear.

4. *The Right Group*

Any group knows when it is being trifled with or dishonored. The people will never really trust that facilitator again. The facilitator has to believe in the group, even when this may be difficult. In turn, the participants have to have confidence in the facilitator and trust that they are facilitating this conversation in good faith way.

5. *Validity of the Data*

When a participant contributes to the conversation, we normally assume that statement to be valid and to come from an authentic life experience. The facilitator does not have to agree with any answers to his/her questions. The facilitator does need to understand them so that he or she can help the group see these objections and discuss them. If a question of accuracy arises and cannot be answered thoroughly at the time, it can be added to the official record with the intent that more accurate information will be obtained. The other option is to wait for it to become part of the record until more accurate information can be obtained. The facilitator will have to help the participant’s with a direction as to how they want to proceed.

6. *Group Ownership of the Issue and Content*

While the facilitator asks the questions, the group owns the issue being discussed. It is important to let the group know what will happen with their input, and how it will be used. At the local level the superintendent, or someone in a leadership role at the high school level may need to clarify how this input will be used locally. The participants need to clearly understand the purpose of this conversation from the very beginning.

7. *Facilitator’s Responsibility*

The facilitator has to do more than build a plan and go on automatic pilot. This usually means working very hard to interpret responses as they are made, and creating new questions on the spot that keep the group digging deeper for meaning. The facilitator may also need to help the recorded if they are concerned about exactly how to write down what needs to go on the record.

8. *Group Membership*

It is important that there be a diversity of people as part of the conversation. In order to obtain the benefits of the genius, wisdom, and experience of the community regarding the recommendations and information related to high schools, participants must represent a cross section of the community. This will limit the number of participants from any one group of people, including staff, but it will strengthen the conversation if parents, business people, college representatives students, staff, board members, and other groups within the community are all talking with one another. The diversity of people will also lead to a stronger set of results and position for the district to continue regarding high school and high school graduates.

THE O.R.I.D. METHOD IN A NUTSHELL

| | |
|-------------------------------------|---|
| THE OBJECTIVE LEVEL | |
| Focus of the questions | Data, the “facts” about the topic, external reality. |
| What it does for the group | Ensures that everyone deals with the same body of data and all of the aspects. |
| Questions are in relation to | The senses: what is seen and heard and touched, etc. |
| Key questions | What objects do you see? What words or phrases stand out? What happened? What does it say? |
| Traps and pitfalls | Asking closed questions, or questions not specific enough; no clear focus; ignoring objective questions because “they are too trivial.” |
| If this level is omitted | There will be no shared observation of what the group is discussing; the various comments may seem dis-related. |
| THE REFLECTIVE LEVEL | |
| Focus of the questions | Internal relationship to the data. |
| What it does for the group | Reveals individuals’ initial responses and validates their experience. |
| Questions are in relation to | Associations, memories, feelings, moods, or emotional tones. |
| Key questions | What does it remind you of? What part surprised you? What delighted you? Where did you struggle? What excites you about this? What worries you? |
| Traps and pitfalls | Limiting the discussion to an either/or survey of likes and dislikes; asking vague or broad questions that don’t evoke relevant personal associations; asking questions that demand embarrassingly personal answers. |
| If this level is omitted | The world of intuition, memory, emotion, and imagination is ignored, and no shared personal experience is articulated on which to build meaning. |
| THE INTERPRETIVE LEVEL | |
| Focus of the questions | The life meaning of the topic. |
| What it does for the group | Draws out the significance from the data for the group; focuses on learnings. |
| Questions are in relation to | Layers of meaning, purpose, significance, implications, “story,” values,, and patterns. Considering alternative, options, comprehension. |
| Key questions | Why is this happening? What is it all about? How does this compare? What does this mean for us? How will this affect our work? What are we learning from this? What is the larger pattern emerging? What is the insight? How would this look in actual practice? How important is this to address? What are the implications for this school? What are some of the underlying issues or priorities? |
| Traps and pitfalls | Inserting pre-cooked meaning that prevents real insight; over-intellectualizing or over-abstracting; judging responses as right or wrong. |
| If this level is omitted | Group gets no chance to make sense out of the first two levels. No higher-order thinking goes into decision-making. |

THE O.R.I.D. METHOD IN A NUTSHELL cont.

THE DECISIONAL LEVEL

| | |
|-------------------------------------|---|
| Focus of the questions | Resolution, implications, application, and new directions. |
| What it does for the group | Makes the conversation relevant or the future. |
| Questions are in relation to | Consensus, implementation, action, summarizing, and application of knowledge, future directions. |
| Key questions | How might you use this? How would you summarize your learning? What decision is called for? What are your next steps? What should the district consider doing to improve? Where should this initiative start and how should it proceed? |
| Traps and pitfalls | Forcing a decision when a group is not ready or avoid pushing group for decision. |
| If this level is omitted | Learning is not consolidated, and the responses from the first three levels are not applied or tested in real life. |

Excerpted from *The Art of Focused Conversation for Schools* by Jo Nelson.

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