

7. Democratize Schools: Circle Outlines

This circle outline is a part of a larger facilitation guide and community conversations toolkit from On Our Terms. Check out the full toolkit on onourterms.nyc if you want more background and guidance on how to use this tool.

GROUND AND CONNECT

1. Share the following quote from the On Our Terms project:
“The problem with schools is that they are too hierarchical, and I’m a big advocate for seeing democratic schools... you need to have student voice. But it needs to be a process of involving everyone in the community to really shape their vision of the school. So I don’t think it can be done in one day... [or] in just a conversation with a principal. I think it’s from the ground up really shaping, creating, co-creating a school.”
2. Take a moment to ground in your body by taking three deep breaths. With your eyes closed and without lifting your pen or pencil, draw a self-portrait.

COMMUNITY AGREEMENTS

1. What are agreements that you want to hold yourself and each other to? When we think of these agreements, we can think not only about agreements for this space, but the kinds of things you would like to see from the world behind you? Below are some starting agreements to kick us off (Note: If you are in a space that meets regularly and has agreements already established, feel free to you use those, and ask each participant to pick one to focus on that they are really strong at supporting the group through, and one they would like to tend to improving).
 - a. One mic, and speak from a place of “I”/our own experience
 - b. Active listening
 - c. Confidentiality, or the stories stay here but the lessons leave
 - d. If you say something that you think might have hurt somebody, say “Oops” and we can pause to address it; If you say something that you have been hurt by, say “Ouch,” and we can pause to address it
 - e. Passing is always an option

CRITICAL QUESTIONS

Peer-to-peer circle

1. Explore. When making a decision, what things do you typically think about? What is important to you in making choices?
2. Share Experiences. Can you think of a time where you were included in a decision making process by somebody else? What was that like for you?

3. Envision. If you had the responsibility to make choices for your school community, what kind of changes would you want to make? Who would you want to make those changes with?

Intergenerational circle

1. Explore. Can you think of a community where one person makes a decision? Where a group of people make decisions together? What similarities or differences do you see in those spaces?
2. Share Experiences. Can you think of a time where a decision was made that impacted you, but you weren't a part of the decision making process? What was that like?
3. Envision. What could happen to a community that makes decisions together? What possibilities might come?

CLOSING

1. Read the following recommendations around democratizing schools:
 - a. Create opportunities for staff and students to jointly plan and facilitate Intergenerational circle community building circles (e.g., on community norms and agreements), co-facilitate responses to staff-student conflict, and provide training on restorative justice to youth and adult members of the student community.
 - b. Ensure that teaching staff and administrators actively participate in circles alongside students, breaking hierarchical norms within the community and helping institute circles as a community-wide, democratic practice.
 - c. Involve young people and their families at every decision-making space that impacts their experiences in the school community, such as the school leadership team, school safety meetings, grade team meetings, and restorative justice action team meetings.
2. As you think about these recommendations, if you were to lead a conversation in your school, what topics of concerns would you bring up? Let's take a couple minutes to brainstorm as many as we can, in closing.