

How to Use This Document for Community Dialogue

Organizing a Community Dialogue

Dialogue not debate. Developing the shared purpose of the Twelve Principles requires that each community member has an opportunity to hear and understand the views, concerns and desires of others. That’s why we suggest that the secondary school renewal process begins with a community dialogue. Free and open dialogue, incorporating give and take among members of a community, increases a group’s understanding of the ideas presented. Debate, on the other hand, where sides are staked out early and opponents attack one another, divides communities.

Facilitation. Consider using experienced facilitators for group discussions. Community members who fulfill this role may be educators, planners, trainers, business people or personnel from social service organizations.

Use small groups; review one chapter at a time. It is difficult to grasp all of the ideas in this report in one sitting or through individual review and study. We suggest talking about one section at a time in small groups using the guidelines described below.



Text-Based Discussion Guidelines

- A. Group members read a section of the report before meeting
- B. Group members establish ground rules for the discussion, such as:
 - Listen actively
 - Build on what others say
 - Expose or suspend assumptions
 - Silence and pauses are okay
 - Converse honestly; there is no need to go through the facilitator
 - Let the conversation flow as much as possible without raising hands or using a speakers list
 - Emphasize clarification, amplification and implications of ideas
 - Refer to the text; challenge others to refer to the text
 - Watch your own “air time,” both in terms of how often you speak, and in terms of how much you say when you do
- C. Conclude the one- to two-hour dialogue with a written summary of ideas that could work in the school

Talking About the Report

Chapter One: A Call to Action

The Task Force outlines what is at stake in secondary education in Vermont and why communities should join the effort to renew and improve our schools.



Suggested discussion questions:

- What is the meaning and purpose of education?
- How widespread is concern about the quality of our secondary schools?
- What are the concerns of students and faculty?
- What is your response to the call for reform?
- What challenges do we face if we try to significantly reform our secondary schools?
- Where does responsibility fall for leading the effort?
- Where will leadership come from?

Chapter Two: Twelve Principles for High School Renewal

The values and beliefs described in this chapter support the Task Force's recommendations.

The Assessment Rubric for the Twelve Principles outlined in Appendix B provides indicators for each of the Twelve Principles. Using these indicators to assess your high school will give you a picture of how far along your school may be toward implementing a Principle. Therefore, completing this survey as a group is a possible method for organizing the discussion. Small groups could take one Principle and its set of indicators for review, or a larger group could review the Principles and indicators in sequence.

For a more general discussion, begin each faculty, board or PTA meeting with a dialogue around one Principle. Each Principle should evoke a rich dialogue about the meaning and purpose of schooling. The groups can also review the related effective practices (specific programs in schools that fulfill the vision of the Principle) to further enrich understanding of a Principle's impact on a school.

Suggested discussion questions:

- In what ways does the mission/vision/belief statement of your school support or conflict with these Principles?
- What would these Principles look like in practice?
- In what ways would your school look and feel different if these Principles were implemented?
- What would it take to improve the school's performance as assessed by the indicators?
- Which Principles would be easiest to implement, given the current culture and the institutional history of your high school? Why?

- Which Principles would be more difficult to implement? Why?
- Make your own list of the Principles in order of priority for your high school.

Chapter Three: Current Realities: Secondary Education, Schools and Communities

The data outlined in this chapter provide a background for the community's dialogue about Vermont's secondary schools.

Suggested discussion questions:

- Does this picture of public education in Vermont represent the current reality in your community?
- In what ways is your school data the same or different from state averages?
- What other data do you have about your school's resources and about student and teacher performance and satisfaction?
- Of the observations and challenges presented, which are of particular interest or concern in your school? Why?
- What do students say about this current reality?
- Do different members of the community (e.g., students, faculty, parents) find some of the data more compelling or interesting than others? Why?



Chapter Four: Effective Practices for Initiating Change

While many school districts in Vermont are using effective approaches to elevate student performance, the examples in this chapter were chosen to clearly demonstrate how the Twelve Principles can be put into practice.

Groups wanting more detail on these practices or wanting to find supporting evidence will find the bibliography and the Examples of Effective Practices (Appendix A) helpful. One method for organizing this discussion is to provide groups with a selection of readings or a guest resource person who can lead discussion about one of the effective practices.

Suggested discussion questions:

- Do you have any of these practices in place now?
- What are the responses of students, faculty, parents and employer-partners to these practices?
- Why did the school decide to implement a particular practice?
- What did you learn during implementation that could make the next process smoother?
- Are any elements of any of the practices already in place?
- Which practices support your priority Principles? Compare practices that support your priorities.
- Do some practices seem easier to sell to the community?
- What steps are necessary to implement any of these practices?



Chapter Five: Practices to Consider Phasing Out

This chapter outlines practices that are no longer useful in secondary schools. If we are serious about fulfilling the Twelve Principles and implementing effective practices, these ineffective practices must be retired.

This chapter may tempt members of the group to move from dialogue to debate. While schools are continuously asked to embrace new ideas, they may have a difficult time letting go of the old ways of doing business. However, the traditions of the secondary institution need to be seriously challenged if we are to fulfill the promise of providing the world class education that every Vermont student deserves.

Suggested discussion questions:

- What would you like to see phased out in your school?
- Are there policies, practices or traditions that do not support your central purpose or mission?
- Bearing in mind the Principles that you believe should be your early priorities, which outdated practices should be the first to go from your school?

Chapter Six: Conclusion

This chapter reflects on Vermont's readiness to embrace long-term, systemic secondary school change. Vermont's change strategy is discussed and the current state of the change effort is reviewed. The seven themes that emerged from the work of the Task Force with students and youths are listed. Final thoughts regarding the need for high school reform are offered. Readers can use this chapter as an entry point into discussion about the high school reform change process.

A self-assessment tool, the Assessment Rubric for the Twelve Principles, is included in Appendix B. Each discussion group could be responsible for one category of questions on a self-assessment tool. Results could be reported back to all groups for further dialogue, or all groups could review the same assessment category and compare results. There should be a process for developing a consensus on the entire self-assessment.

Next steps would include revisiting Chapter 2 for each Principle needed to address a school's weak areas. This stage of the dialogue should focus on which actions would improve the school's performance on the assessment for a given Principle, which obstacles are expected, what support or resources are available, etc.

Groups can also revisit Chapter 4 to identify effective practices that support priority Principles. Chapter 5 will help you to identify the undesirable practices that may be responsible for low performance; it also suggests effective practices to consider in their place. Discussion groups can also consider how to use the remaining tools offered in this report in their schools and communities.

Suggestions discussion questions:

- How will your school and community work together to personalize the high school experience through changing the structure of your high school?
- Where is your high school and community in terms of its readiness to embrace high school reform?
- How could you envision connecting to The Center for High School Renewal and Innovation and the High Schools on the Move network?
- How would the lives of secondary students and youth in your community change if the seven themes that they identified were implemented and achieved?
- What barriers to high school reform must be eliminated in your school and community to make high school renewal a reality?

Appendix G: Recommendations and Challenges

Because of the importance of the recommendations and challenges offered by the Task Force, suggested discussion questions for Appendix G are included in this section.

Suggestions discussion questions:

- How do district policies and procedures make it difficult to implement the Principles or effective practices?
- How does the contract negotiated with teachers affect implementation?
- What impact do the recommendations have on certification, graduation requirements and other state laws and rules?
- What impact does funding (both the current process of funding and the amount of funding) have on the entire school improvement process? How can state policy-makers be convinced to make the changes necessary to support high school renewal?

