

A GUIDE TO STUDENT DISCUSSIONS

Attendance in alternative schools

This is a guide for practitioners and policy advocates to speak with students about attendance in alternative schools.¹ Collecting student voice is crucial for adults to identify opportunities to make relevant, meaningful changes in how we support student attendance. The issues that impact attendance can be sensitive topics, but if these discussions are done well, they can empower students to share their rich life experiences.

Considerations for student conversations

Be **intentional about recruiting** students from a wide range of experiences and backgrounds.

Support students in having these conversations in their **primary language**, when possible.

If students are under 18 years old, identify requirements for and get **parental consent**.

Engage in **active listening** by responding with empathy to the discussion and creating space for **connection**. When responding to student experiences, avoid judgment, labeling, or advice.

Reflect on how **your social identities** (e.g., gender, race and ethnicity, socioeconomic status, positions of authority) and lived experiences relate to or differ from the students you talk to. Consider how the similarities and differences may affect how comfortable students are sharing their experiences.

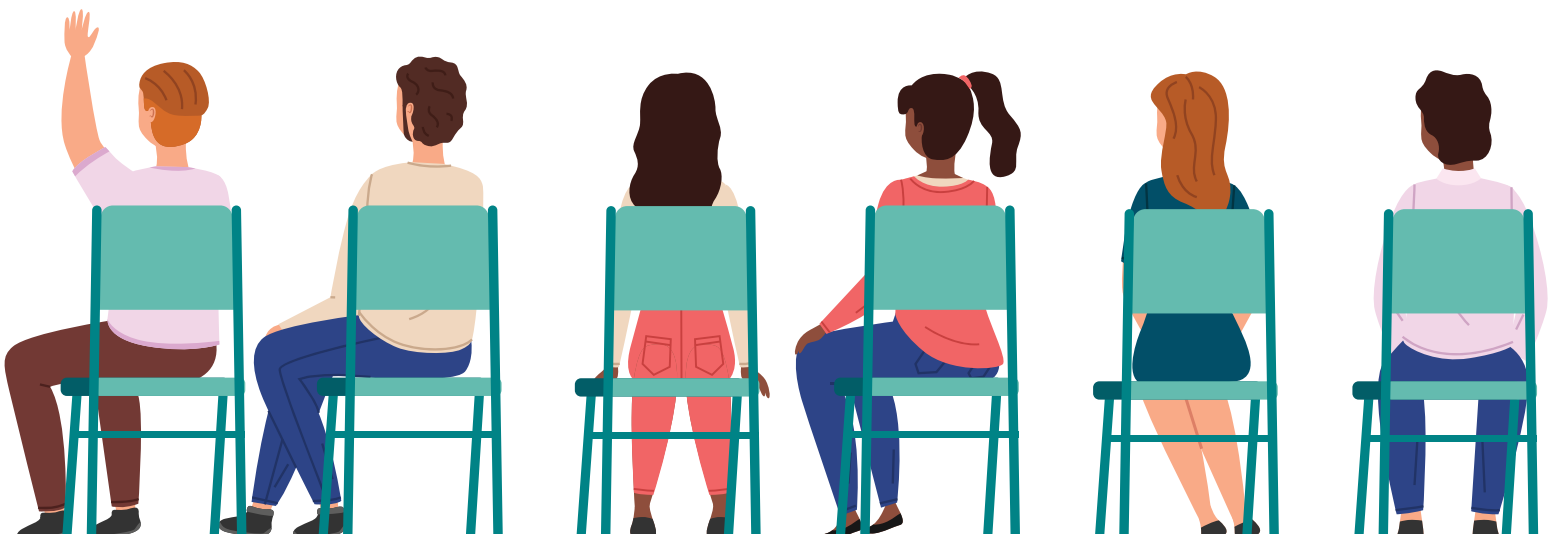
Ensure students feel **safe**.

- Tell students how you will collect the information they share (e.g., “I will be writing down notes” or “I will record our conversation”).
 - Describe how the information will be used and who will have access to their stories (e.g., “We will share themes from all the stories in a report, but no one will know who said what. I won’t share the recording with anyone, and I’ll delete it after we finish our project.”)
 - Inform students that their participation is voluntary and they can skip any questions they do not want to answer.
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Take a **trauma-informed approach**. The goal of a trauma-informed approach is to restore feelings of safety, choice, and control in students who have been impacted by trauma, while also reducing the risk of re-traumatization.

Questions for students

1. Everyone's school journey is different, and pathways to alternative school can look different for different people. Tell me about your school journey.
 - a. What brought you to an alternative school?
 - b. What made you choose this school, in particular?
2. Tell me about a time you felt like you really belonged in school. What were you doing or learning? Who was there?
3. Tell me about a time when you didn't want to go to school but went anyway. What made you decide to go?
4. Are there specific people in your life who help you get to school, even when it's hard? This could be parents or guardians, siblings, friends, educators, community members, or others.
 - a. What kinds of things do they do to help you get to school?
5. How often do you miss school?
 - a. What makes you miss school? This could be things like being sick, moving with your family, being suspended or expelled, or just not wanting to go.
6. What does your school do to make sure everyone shows up to school?
 - a. What does your school do if you don't show up to school? For example, you get disciplined or referred to a program or court for missing school.
 - b. If you could ask for anything from your teachers, principals, and other educators, what could they do or give you that would help you show up for school?
7. If you could ask for anything from an elected official, like your senator or the President, what could they do or give you that would help you show up for school?



Asking questions in listening sessions

The questions in this guide can be used for listening sessions with multiple students. When planning listening sessions, it is important to consider which students will be in the session and how they will interact: Groups may need to be similar in age, race and ethnicity, and/or gender for students to feel safe or comfortable sharing.

At the start of listening sessions, establish group norms to support students' privacy. For students who may not want to share out loud in the group, provide other ways for them to give you feedback (e.g., notecards to write on, an email or private chat).

Example of group norms:

There are no right or wrong answers. Please respect others' opinions. It is perfectly fine to have a different opinion or viewpoint than others in the group.

Please do not share other students' stories or experiences outside this listening session, as it is important to respect each other's privacy.

Do not hesitate to ask questions if something is unclear.

Everyone should have an equal chance to speak, but you do not have to respond if you don't want to. We will also pause after asking a question to give you a chance to think about your response.

We may ask you to repeat a comment to make sure we accurately capture what everyone says.

How do these sound to everyone? Are there any that you would like to add?

Endnote

¹ Alternative schools offer a nontraditional educational setting to address students' academic, behavioral, emotional, and social needs. This can include unique programming, nontraditional hours, hybrid experiences, and self-contained public schools. Alternative schools are necessary because traditional schools do not serve all students well or equitably.

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