



Vermont Students Critical Conversations Resource

Created at the Student Leadership Summit on Social Action -
October 14, 2022 Killington, VT

STUDENT LEADERSHIP SUMMIT ON SOCIAL ACTION 2022

WHO ARE WE?

Woodstock Union High School is a comprehensive, fully accredited public high school in Woodstock, Vermont. Our school provides education for just under 500 students and is composed of seven towns as well as students from school choice-offering towns.

HOW DID WE CRAFT THIS?

The Student Leadership Summit is an annual conference for students to learn and make decisions about social change in their schools. This year it included two schools and we hope to broaden its impact in the years to come. The conference is organized by the Superintendent's Advisory Council and the Social Action Club.

WHAT IS THIS BOOKLET?

Inspired by the Association of Washington Student Leaders, this booklet is a collection of student input for helping individuals to have difficult conversations in schools. Students have a lot to say on this topic, and their perspectives mandate a structural change. The booklet is composed of these four essential questions, each of which was considered by a group of students:

- Why student voice?
- What are the needs and hopes of students?
- What are some engaging phrases that adults can use with students?
- What are some strategies for having critical conversation?

The conference acted as a vessel for students to craft their responses to each question via collaborative and individual brainstorming. Their responses were synthesized to form this resource for teachers, administrators, students and communities everywhere.

WHY STUDENT VOICE?

Students have many valuable opinions and need more agency in creating a learning environment that is positive for them.



- Students take action and influence each other.
- Students experience policies firsthand and can provide alternative viewpoints, often with less bias.
- Students are able to interpret their surroundings and are aware of their own needs that may not be fully understood by others.
- Students strive to create a collective identity that they share with peers and teachers.
- Students experience acts of microaggression and racism in the absence of adults.
- Students will be better prepared for the professional world if they can become active members of their school community.
- Students need to create a community they feel supported in to learn most effectively.
- Student voice helps create a sense of belonging, respect, and ownership of our school community.
- Student voices lead to accountability for educators.
- Students are capable, smart, and able to advocate for change.

WHAT ARE THE HOPES AND NEEDS OF STUDENTS?

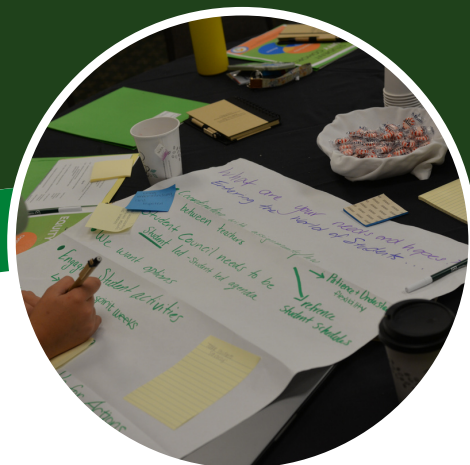
Finding ways to help educators learn the needs of students in the community so that everyone can work together and thrive



- Deeper dives into social issues like racism and sexism
- Constructive, engaging, and informational health/sex-ed classes
- Greater acknowledgement of minority cultures and heritages in our school environment
- Equal funding for all sports regardless of gender or history
- Student representation in curriculum decisions
- A safe, inclusive physical school environment via designated safe spaces
- Educational opportunities for economic, financial, and tax-related life strategies
- Accountability for student actions
- Engaging student activities like spirit weeks and assemblies
- Increased mental health and personal support
- Open tutoring
- Constructive communication between teachers and students
- Regularized and destigmatized check-ins between teachers and students

WHAT ARE SOME ENGAGING PHRASES THAT CAN BE USED FOR HAVING CRITICAL CONVERSATIONS?

Creating a mindful way to have uncomfortable conversations in schools



I am here to support you.

What do you think about this?

What is your plan for this subject?

Do you feel over/under stimulated?

Is this a private or class-wide issue?

What do you need to feel successful?

How do you feel about this situation?

What do you find confusing about this?

What do you need to approach this task?

How can we best communicate on this topic?

Can you name what makes you uncomfortable?

Do you feel comfortable talking about this here?

What do you want to see differently in class today?

WHAT ARE SOME STRATEGIES AND NOTES FOR HAVING CRITICAL CONVERSATIONS?

How should we approach this? What are some guidelines for these conversations?



Standout Points:

- Disagree respectfully with ideas, not people.
- Be open-minded: it is okay to change your mind.
- Maximize diversity of viewpoints.

Further Guidelines:

- Be direct; don't sugar-coat the topic.
- Emphasize accountability: create actionable steps and execute them.
- Participation should be an option for everyone; be inclusive.
- Be aware that conversations are only effective at the right time and in the right place.
- Be comfortable with being uncomfortable, as your ideas may be challenged.
- Establish norms for the group before beginning the conversation.
- Take breaks from heated conversations, as progress is only made by calm minds.
- Acknowledge that failure is a possibility, and that is okay,
- Note the atmosphere of a topic and be aware of who may be harmed by critical discussion.
- Train educators on how to monitor critical conversations.
- Create dedicated time for conversations and advertise discussion.
- Remain unbiased and leave emotions at the door.
- Establish a protocol for conversations.
- Remember that we are all human and acknowledge implicit biases.
- Be aware of your body language and remain approachable.
- Listen and engage actively.
- Have students lead conversations.
- Ask guiding questions.



Critical Conversations Resource

Thank you for using this resource!

If you have any questions please reach out to our team,
accessible through WCSU Superintendent Sherry Sousa or
District Board Chair Keri Bristow.

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