



**Talking with Young People:**  
School Discipline Discussion Guide

## Why Talk to Young People?

Community leaders and decision-makers should go directly to the source—young people themselves—to understand what youth need to thrive. Young people’s insights provide a fuller picture of how policies and practices affect them and provide information that may differ from information gathered only from adults. Creating venues for young people to inform the decision-making process by sharing their stories is critical.

This discussion guide was developed in connection with the release of [Disciplined and Disconnected](#), a research report from the [Center for Promise](#), the applied research institute of America’s Promise Alliance. The report explores the experience of school discipline from the perspective of students and uses their insights as the basis for understanding how to improve school discipline policies and practices.

The approach and questions featured in this discussion guide are based on the qualitative research methods the Center for Promise used for the *Disciplined and Disconnected* research report to learn about students’ experiences of school discipline. This guide is meant to aid practitioners, policymakers, and other caring adults in their efforts to learn about the experiences of young people in their communities and use those insights to inform improvement initiatives. For more information about these questions and about school discipline practices more broadly, download [Disciplined and Disconnected: How Students Experience Exclusionary Discipline in Minnesota and the Promise of Non-Exclusionary Alternatives](#).

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Follow these five steps to learn from young people about their experiences with school discipline.

### Step #1: Identify Young People to Engage

Consider the following when identifying young people to speak with about school discipline:

- **Engage young people who have experienced discipline.** Their lived experience gives them a fuller understanding of the current practices in place, the effects of those practices, and how those practices can be improved. While other young people may have a point of view about discipline, they may lack the context that experience provides. If young people who have not experienced discipline are engaged, be mindful that their points of view may be vastly different than those of their peers who have experienced discipline firsthand.
- **Speak with more than one young person.** A diversity of perspectives based on lived experience can give caring adults a fuller picture of the discipline landscape. Young people can be engaged individually or in a group as time and resources allow.

### Step #2: Build Trust

Ensure there is trust among the young people being engaged and the caring adult(s) who are interested in learning from them. **Without trust, young people—like all people—may be reticent to openly share their thoughts about what is working and what is not working.**

Here are three broad strategies for building trust:

- Caring adults need to address the power differential between young people and adults by demonstrating that they **respect young people as “the experts”** on youth experiences.
- Caring adults must **be transparent** about why the conversation is taking place and how the learnings will ultimately be used.
- Caring adults must **ensure confidentiality**. Young people may be unwilling to share their honest insights if their responses are not kept in confidence.

If trusting relationships do not already exist (especially when having group conversations with young people who do not already know one another), caring adults can use “icebreaker” warm-up activities (e.g., “[Group Count](#),” “[Big Wind Blows](#),” open questions related to the discussion topic, etc.) to establish rapport and demonstrate mutual respect.

### **Step #3: Ask the Right Questions**

Once trust is established, there are two broad questions to ask. These questions alone may lead to half an hour or more of discussion when engaging an individual young person or as much as an hour or more of discussion when engaging a group.

- **What are your experiences of school discipline? Tell me about a time(s) when you got in trouble in school.**
- **What influenced your experience of being disciplined at school whether it was specific people, your specific school or program, or other factors?**

Ask follow-up questions to learn about specific details of students’ experiences and their perceptions of the discipline process, if those details do not arise naturally in the conversation.

Follow-up questions might include:

- How does your school work to resolve conflicts?
- Who do you go to when you are having a problem at home or in your personal life? How about a problem at school in particular?
- How well does your school’s discipline process work? What, if anything, should be done to improve it?
- Who are the major players in the discipline process and what do they do?

- Explain the entire process to me from the time of the incident until you returned to school.
- How did the disciplinary action make you feel?
- What did you do while you were suspended?
- What happened to your coursework during your suspension? How were you able to keep up with your coursework while you were suspended?
- What happened when you returned back to school? How did you feel then?
- How much do think race, ethnicity, culture, gender identity, and religious beliefs factor in to how discipline is enforced in your school?

#### Step #4: Listen

When young people take time and energy to share their experiences—in some cases, making themselves vulnerable in the process of sharing—caring adults need to listen. Use the following techniques to facilitate a discussion where all participants feel comfortable sharing:

- Avoid interrupting,
- Avoid putting words into young people’s mouths,
- Avoid rushing to fill silence, and
- Allocate ample time for young people to share.

Ultimately, caring adults must recognize that the discussion is not about them or airing their points of view. **The discussion is about uncovering insights from young people who are experts about their lives and what they need.**

#### Step #5: Document and Apply What You Learn

It’s important to capture the moment. By having a record of the conversation, adults can share what they learn with young people and a range of practitioners and decision-makers.

- With permission, **document young people’s insights** about discipline and its impact on their lives. Use their stories to reflect on how young people can best be supported in educational settings. Be mindful that the documentation method used (note taking, video recording, audio recording, etc.) and how the methods are framed may influence participants’ level of comfort sharing their stories. Video and audio recordings can ensure accurate documentation of young people’s insights, but may be perceived as intrusive. On the other hand, note taking may limit how much a facilitator can capture but may be perceived as less intrusive.
- Share young people’s insights about discipline with practitioners, policymakers, and other individuals who have a role in implementing discipline policies and practices. This will **enable**

**Future Direction:** Facilitate conversations between students and teachers to promote mutual understanding and provide direction for improvement initiatives. Use the methods in this guide to mitigate power differentials and ensure that all participants feel comfortable sharing.

**young people’s perspectives to influence the development and evaluation of discipline policies and practices.** The insights that young people share should ultimately inform the policies and practices that shape their lives.

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### ***About Disciplined and Disconnected***

The Center for Promise sought to understand the experience of exclusionary discipline in Minnesota and the promising non-exclusionary practices that exist. It did so by hearing from middle and high school students in Minneapolis, St. Paul, and Chisago who had experience with exclusionary discipline. The Center also conducted key informant interviews with Minnesota school administrators implementing non-exclusionary practices at their schools to understand the leading alternatives to exclusion and how they can be implemented. This research is part of the GradNation State Activation Initiative and was generously supported by Pearson.

### **About the Center for Promise**

The Center for Promise is the applied research institute of America’s Promise Alliance and is housed at Boston University Wheelock College of Education & Human Development. It is dedicated to understanding the lived experiences of young people and how to create the conditions of success for all young people.