

Three Strategies for Community Engagement



Empathy Interviews
Listening Sessions
Feedback Partners

Adapted from the Family Engagement Toolkit by Accelerate ED and Community Design Partners.

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Introduction

Welcome to the Community Engagement guide. Your commitment to expanding the role that youth, families, educators, and communities play in the design and scale of programs is inspiring. We designed this resource to illustrate three ways you might continue to expand how you engage communities as you build, implement, and scale your improvement efforts. We can't wait to hear your success stories!

The first important step for anyone looking for community engagement strategies is to reflect on your **why**. So, before you jump into **how** to engage the communities you serve, we ask you to pause and reflect on the following questions.

- What is the goal of your project?
- What are your hopes and dreams if this project is wildly successful?
- How will engaging communities support these goals, hopes, and dreams?
- In what ways will community engagement impact this project?

Now that you've had a chance to reflect on your why, let's journey into mindsets¹ that cut across the different ways we might engage with communities. We humbly ask you to hold these mindsets throughout your time in this guide.



Seek Liberatory Collaboration

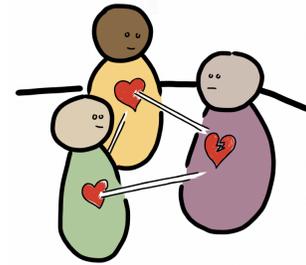
Seek liberatory collaboration asks us to reimagine the design process itself. Instead of reifying the conventional hierarchy of designing **for** communities, liberatory collaboration is designing **in partnership with** communities. This shift reorients power and creates the conditions for more just and equitable solutions. A few ways to work towards **liberatory collaboration**:

- Actively seek diverse identities, roles, and skill sets in building a design team.
- Acknowledge and build from the strengths, stories, and skills of team members.
- Define specific conditions for collective learning, risk-taking, and action.
- When framing the question, “How Might We...?” it is important to ensure that the “we” is diverse and inclusive.

¹ Mindsets are adapted from Liberatory Design Deck: Liberatory Design is the result of a collaboration between Tania Anaisie, David Clifford, Susie Wise, and the National Equity Project [Victor Cary and Tom Malarkey]. Resources are at www.liberatorydesign.com.

Building relational trust is the glue for improving systems through design. This is especially important when working through difficult problems with communities most impacted by current systems. Investing in deep relational work creates authentic and meaningful connections that engender trust and healing. Here are a few ways to work towards **building relational trust**:

- Facilitate personal connection by inviting people to share what matters to them.
- Dedicate time and space for people to bring forward their full selves and identities.
- Create space for the community to reflect, express, and process thoughts and emotions.
- Cultivate a culture that invites dialogue and collective sense-making.



Build Relational Trust



Embrace Complexity

Embrace complexity leans into the messiness of this work as a strength. Instead of shying away from complexity, liberatory design **seeks** complexity as a way of understanding the problem and finding better solutions. [Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie](#) speaks to the danger of a single story and by way of multiple stories, perspectives, and ideas, a more authentic and legitimate picture begins to emerge. Following are a few ways to work towards **embracing complexity**:

- Acknowledge the confusion and discomfort caused by the uncertainty present in our work.
- Bring together multiple perspectives on the challenge to open up ways of thinking, especially from those most harmed by current systems.
- Create opportunities for sense-making before decision-making.

With both the **why** and **mindsets** present we can now venture into the **how** of community engagement.

Three Strategies of Community Engagement

There are many ways to engage with communities, and depending on purpose, capacity, and intended impact, some ways might be more suitable than others. While there are many methods for engaging communities, this guide includes three methods that are accessible, meaningful, and support efforts to improve systems:

Empathy interviews are semi-structured interviews that utilize open-ended prompts and probing questions to elicit stories of participants' experiences within systems. As an interviewer, your goal is to follow the participants' stories—not try to direct them with leading questions. In essence, you create the conditions to really hear the stories of people navigating your system.

Listening sessions are a type of facilitated discussion with a group of people, aimed at collecting information about their experiences in the system. The sessions use a variety of activities and strategies to collect input and ideas.

Feedback partners are community members who provide perspectives, feedback, and ideas through ongoing involvement with design teams. This might include feedback on team priorities, root causes of a problem, and change ideas.

Which strategy is right for you? First, consider the types of community involvement you are looking for:

Empathize. *Try to deeply understand the experiences, perspectives, and feelings of communities and **apply** what you learn.*

Involve. *Engage communities in events and processes **with** the design team to share their unique needs, priorities, and perspectives.*

Share decision-making. *Community members play a **leadership role** in decision-making and have some decision-making **power**.*

The strategies of **empathy interviews** and **listening sessions** are almost always methods to **empathize** with others. That is, to try and understand experiences and perspectives and apply what you learn. These are great strategies when you are trying to:

- Identify or prioritize a problem you want to solve
- Understand or prioritize the root causes of a problem
- Uncover specific needs that will inform system redesign

Feedback partners offer a method to both empathize with and **involve** communities. This method involves a deeper and ongoing commitment to participants as trusted advisors. Feedback partners may or may not be directly involved in decision-making, but their input can help craft the vision, direction, and implementation of improvement efforts. This is a great strategy when you are trying to:

- Address any of the bullets mentioned above for empathy interviews and listening sessions
- Incorporate feedback on proposed change ideas to improve systems
- Reflect on the impact of changes to the system

If your goal is to **share decision-making** with communities, it is likely you need to move further than the three strategies in this guide and involve communities directly on your design team. As Dr. Brandi Hinnant-Crawford offers, “User-centered doesn’t mean just interviewing these folks but also means these folks are a part, and not just the part where they sit at the table. They have **agency** and **power** and **voice** in everything we do from what types of data we look at to what decisions we make after we look at that data.”

Caution: In any of these types of engagement, we risk sliding into tokenizing communities. This happens when we are unclear about the role, intention, and next steps of community engagement. We can do harm when we are not transparent about the type of engagement and mislead communities about how their participation fits into the larger scope of work. For example, a community may assume their input will directly shape the implementation of the project, when instead they’re involved in empathy interviews focused on better understanding the problem of practice. The empathy interview **will** help the project, but if it is not the direct involvement that the community assumes, this could lead to mistrust and disengagement in the future.

Part of transparency is also a commitment to **circle back** to communities no matter the type of engagement. In order to mitigate harm we need to reduce the extractive nature of community engagement (communities give and we take without reciprocity), so we go back to communities with updates on **how** their involvement has impacted the project. What this sounds, looks, and feels like can vary depending on the project but the essential part is that we **re-engage** communities as part of this process. As you can imagine, the impact of re-engagement is incredibly powerful for communities.

The next section of the guide provides some guidelines and practical tips for outreach and recruitment for any of the three strategies. The rest of the guide is divided into three sections: empathy interviews, listening sessions, and feedback partners. Each section includes where to start, important ideas to consider, as well as practical next steps to initiate community engagement in your context.

Outreach and Recruitment

Those who have the opportunity to share stories and experiences can be one of the most important decisions of any improvement project. Insight from community members can shape what problems we focus on, what we decide are the root causes of a particular problem, and what changes we make to a system. Project staff members have a limited amount of time and capacity—and so do community members! Carefully attending to outreach and recruitment is a crucial element of engagement.

While outreach and recruitment will vary slightly depending on which strategy you select, the overall approach is the same across strategies.

Decide who to recruit

Who you'll recruit for an interview, listening session, or as a feedback partner depends on the purpose of their involvement. This may be community members who:

- Are students within the system
- Are directly connected to a student in the educational system - family, sibling, grandparents, etc.
- Are a recent alumni of the educational system
- Are involved in education in some capacity - as a teacher, volunteer, or part time employee
- Identify as a community member with interest in the vision and mission of local education

You also want to consider the following:

- Demographic representation. Are we ensuring that we prioritize selecting communities who are historically and currently marginalized by education systems?
- Relationships. Is it possible to interview someone with whom we already have a trusting relationship?
- Power dynamics. Have we considered how race, position, age, bias, or gender might play out in an empathy interview setting?
- Language needs. Do we have multilingual interviewers or translators?

Consider: Incentives, transportation, childcare, and language support

It is often logistics that are barriers to authentically engaging communities. As we know, community members are often busy. Asking people to participate in additional activities requires us to offset some of the burdens that participation requires. Considering how you might holistically support communities will create the conditions for participants to fully engage.



Reducing Barriers Plan

1. Time and place: What time is best to maximize community engagement? Where can you locate the listening session so communities don't have to travel far?
2. Transportation: How will participants get to the listening session?
3. Childcare: How will you care for the whole family during this time to ensure full participation?
4. Language support: What languages do different members of the community speak and are translation services needed?
5. Sustenance: How can you provide snacks, meals, beverages, etc. as a conduit to share and learn together?
6. Incentives: Can you compensate community members for participation in listening sessions or feedback partners with money or useful gift cards?

Community members themselves offer the best insights and feedback on the barriers to participation. Reach out and ask them about your plan. And, be willing to change along the way as you find out what works and does not.

Design your recruitment strategy

Don't underestimate the time and capacity needed to recruit participants for one-time or ongoing engagement. People in the community are busy, and asking them to commit even an hour of their day for a listening session can be unfeasible. Make sure the purpose is clear and that there is plenty of time and capacity to recruit.

Recruitment is often most successful when outreach comes from an already familiar, trusted person. General recruitment through flyers, social media, etc. can support your efforts, but it is really the individualized outreach that is going to be most successful.

Some ideas to start with personal connections:

- Create a list of people connected to the project. Identify which possible community members have existing connections with a team member and consider if they would benefit from contact. At the same time, consider and determine which participants have the fewest connections; they are likely to need a personal connection in order to center their experiences.
- Partner with community-based organizations or faith-based organizations that have existing relationships with community members.
- Be present at local community meetings and events. Talk to people, make connections, and build your own network.
- Use what's called "snowball" recruitment: Each person who agrees to participate also commits to bringing someone else.

Some ideas to start more broadly:

- Prepare the information communities most need using multiple modalities: flyers, email, social media, and texts with QR codes. Explore which modes of outreach work best in your context and what language needs you'll need to meet.
- Follow-up written outreach with texts or phone calls.

Reminder: Even with the best intentions, we risk sliding into tokenizing communities through our outreach and recruitment. Re-read the mindsets offered in the first sections to ground your approach to outreach and recruitment and lessen the risk of this slide.

Empathy Interviews

Empathy interviews are semi-structured, one-on-one, interviews that utilize open-ended prompts and probing questions to elicit stories of participants' experiences within systems. As an interviewer, your goal is to follow the participant's story—not try to direct it with leading questions. In essence, you create the conditions to really hear the stories of people navigating your system.



This section includes many of the considerations for your team as you plan empathy interviews with community members.

Articulate your why

Empathy interviews with students, families, educators, etc. can reveal insights into what is working and not working for them in the current system. Consider these potential reasons why an educational institution might conduct empathy interviews with their communities.

- To explore what people know and don't know about opportunities, and how/why they learn about those opportunities
- To explore what has worked and not worked about teaching and learning
- To explore student needs from the community's perspective
- To explore strengths and needs of school support systems
- To unpack the root causes of a specific problem with any of these topics
- Other reasons



Why do we want to interview community members?

Create and train an interview team

Assemble a team of interviewers that is both broad and diverse. As you build the team, consider:

- Relationships. When possible, consider an interviewer who already has a trusting relationship with the communities you serve.
- Power dynamics. Consider how race, position, age, or gender might play out in an empathy interview setting. Deliberately work to reduce harm.
- Language needs. Include multilingual interviewers or translators on your team.
- Community. Consider including students, families, and community members as interviewers.

At a minimum, training for interviewers should include:

- The purpose of empathy interviews
- How to create the conditions for an empathy interview
- Practice opportunities with reflection and feedback
- Information on logistics, such as data entry and timeline



What training and experience do team members already have? What's our plan to provide more training/support?

Decide on virtual and/or in-person interviews

Empathy interviews are best conducted when the interviewer and interviewee can see one another. On the one hand, interviewing someone in-person is ideal because it usually allows for the deepest personal connection. On the other hand, virtual connections with a camera (Zoom, Facetime, Google Meet, etc.) have proven over the past several years to be a very effective strategy, often helping overcome barriers of time, transportation, or childcare that stand in the way of in-person meetings. If you are connecting virtually, use the platform(s) that work best for the community members you are interviewing. Connecting by phone alone is discouraged because of the loss of body language for both speaking and listening.

Decide who to interview

See the section, [Outreach and Recruitment](#), for details.

Create an interview protocol

A typical empathy interview protocol has four to eight open-ended, story-based questions which translate into a 10-25 minute interview. Use question stems such as:

- Tell me about a time when ____.
- Tell me about the last time you ____.
- What are your best/worst experiences with ____?
- Can you share a story that would help me understand more about ____?

These questions should be followed by open-ended prompts like, “Tell me more,” “Why?” and, “What were you feeling then?”

Below is a bank of community interview questions examples, but there are many other possibilities to match your purpose.

EXAMPLES OF EMPATHY INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Inclusion and Belonging Questions for Students

Question Examples:

1. Tell me about a place you spend time where you feel comfortable being yourself.
 - a. Suggested probes: What does it feel like? Tell me more about ____ Why do you think ____?
2. Tell me about a recent time when you were (weren't) able to be your most authentic self.
 - a. Suggested probes: What does it feel like? Tell me more about ____ Why do you think ____?
3. Tell me about a time you felt like [an adult at school] respected and cared for you.
 - a. Suggested probes: What does it feel like? Tell me more about ____ Why do you think ____?
4. Tell us about a time you or someone you know was treated unfairly or differently from other students.
 - a. Suggested probes: How did you know? What does it feel like? Tell me more about ____ Why do you think ____?
5. When was a time you were really excited about school. What were you doing?
 - a. Suggested probes: What did it sound like, feel like, and look like during this experience?
6. What is the best thing about attending ____ school/organization?
 - a. Suggested probes: Why? How do you feel? Tell me more.
7. What's the worst thing about attending ____ school/organization?
 - a. Suggested probes: What does it feel like? Tell me more about ____ Why do you think ____?
8. Tell me about a time you felt welcomed and included in [a class at school].
 - a. Suggested probes: What does it feel like? Tell me more about ____ Why do you think ____?
9. Tell me about a time you didn't feel welcomed or included in [a class at school].
 - a. Suggested probes: What does it feel like? Tell me more about ____ Why do you think ____?
10. Tell me about someone in the school community who you have ever turned to for help.
 - a. Suggested probes: Who was it? Why did you need help? Tell me more.

Retention Empathy Questions for Teachers

Question Examples

1. Tell me about a time that you were/weren't excited to get up and go to work.
 - a. Suggested probes: Tell me more about that? How did it make you feel?
2. Tell me about a time when you weren't excited to get up and go to work.
 - a. Suggested probes: Tell me more about that? How did it make you feel?
3. Tell me about a great day you had at school? What happened?
 - a. Suggested probes: Tell me more about that? How did it make you feel?
4. Tell me about a not so great experience at school?
 - a. Suggested probes: What happened? How did you feel?
5. Tell me about a time when you felt affirmed and supported at work.
 - a. Suggested probes: What did it feel like? Tell me more about... How would you define...
6. Tell me about a time when you felt discouraged or isolated at work.
 - a. Suggested probes: What did it feel like? Tell me more about... How would you define...
7. Tell me about a time when you felt fully prepared to teach a class.
 - a. Suggested probes: Why do you think you were prepared? How did it feel? Tell me more.
8. Tell me about a time you didn't feel prepared to teach a class.

- a. Suggested probes: Why do you think you weren't prepared? How did it feel? Tell me more.

Open Ended Empathy Questions for Families

Question Examples

1. Tell me about a recent time you visited your student's school.
 - a. Suggested probe: What was the visit like? How did it feel? Tell me more about...
2. Tell me about a time your student had a great day at school?
 - a. Suggested probe: Tell me more about...? Why do you think...? How did it feel?
3. Tell me about a time your student had a bad day at school?
 - a. Suggested probe: Tell me more about...? Why do you think...? How did it feel?
4. Tell me about the thing you value most for your student at school?
 - a. Suggested probe: What would that look like, sound like, or feel like?

Write and practice your interview introduction

An introduction to an empathy interview should include the following:

- Describes why we are conducting the interviews
- Explains how we will use the data
- Includes our confidentiality agreement
- States that the interview, and each question in the interview, is voluntary

Example: Thank you so much for agreeing to talk with me today. We are trying to learn more about how to create a more supportive environment for _____. Specifically, we want to find out how _____. We will not be recording your name with your response. Our notes will help us look across responses from multiple interviews with people like you to see what we can learn and how to improve. I have only a few questions and most of them ask you to think of a specific example or story. Take as much time as you need before answering. Any question I ask is voluntary to answer and we can stop at any time. I will be taking a lot of notes, but it is important to do so to protect against any bias I may have in remembering what you said.



What's our introduction?

Create a data collection plan

Make sure interviewers can store their notes in a secure data portal and that names and identifying information are not recorded in the data set.

It is easy to build a simple data collection form in Google forms. Usually, you should put demographic questions at the end of the form, not the beginning. Include the interviewer's name, but make sure you do not have anyone write the interviewee's name, number, or address.

Reflect and communicate throughout

Interviewers usually appreciate a chance to connect, reflect, and learn from one another. Create time to check in on what's going well, what might need more attention, and how interviewers are feeling about the experience. If certain questions are not working as well as expected, it is perfectly okay to modify the protocol.

Analyze data

Your plan for analyzing data should consider the who, how, and when.

Who: Invite as many diverse perspectives as possible; multiple perspectives are one way to guard against bias. Consider whether the interviewed community members can also join the analysis.

When: Analyze data any time after the data set is complete. The amount of time you need depends on the number of interviewers and the number of people on the analysis team.

How: A common approach to analyzing data is called "headlining and theming" - participants on the improvement team pull out specific "headlines" from the data and then cluster those into themes. This step might require additional training.

Circle back

As part of being responsive to communities, it's important to circle back to your interviewees with any summary or follow-up. This could be as little as a quick communication blast outlining the actions a team has implemented as a result of empathy interviews, or perhaps, returning with more questions. Either way, by circling back to empathy interview participants you are showing that their stories and experiences matter.

Example: Ohio Design Team Parent Empathy Interviews

The Ohio Design Team heard loud and clear from the student empathy interviews that parents or other caregivers were most often the people who guided and supported students through their postsecondary education journey. This began with making plans when they were younger, and continued through college entry and attendance. We were curious about what we could do as part of our design process to support parents so they can help their students make plans for the future.

Questions:

1. Tell me about your child's plans for the future. What are they at this point?
2. Tell me about a time your child began making plans for after high school. Tell me more about that. What was your role in helping with their planning? How did you know your child needed help?
3. Tell me about a time you were able to help your child with their future planning? Tell me more about that. What support did you provide? How did you feel about your supporting role?
4. Tell me about a time you weren't as able to help your child with their future planning. Why was that? How did you feel? Tell me more about that. What support or resources did you wish you were able to provide but couldn't?
5. Tell me about a person that you think knows a lot about planning for after high school. Who are they? How has your community accessed them (if at all)? Why? Tell me more. Is there anyone else you would go to for advice, resources, or information about postsecondary planning?
6. Tell me about a person, place, or resource that has been helpful to your community in making plans for the future. What or who was it? Why was it helpful? Can you think of any other examples [e.g., the school]?
7. When you think of helping your child plan for the future, what remains mysterious, difficult, or unknown? Why? Is there anything you can think of that might help with that?

Demographics/Interviewer comments:

1. Role as a caregiver: mother, father, grandparent, other (please specify)
2. Is your child currently in high school?
3. If not, what is your child currently doing?
 - a. Working full-time
 - b. In a career training program
 - c. Pursuing an associate's degree
 - d. Pursuing a bachelor's degree
 - e. Serving in the military
 - f. Other (please specify)
4. Where does or did your child attend high school?
5. Does this person identify as a person of color?

Listening Sessions

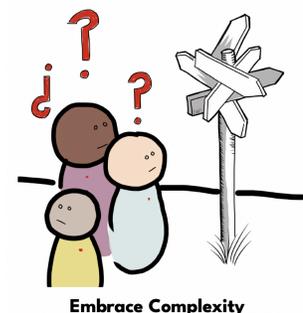
Listening sessions are a type of facilitated discussion with a group of people, aimed at collecting information about their experiences in the system. The sessions use a variety of activities and strategies to collect input and ideas. We call them “listening sessions” rather than “focus groups” to emphasize the purpose—deep listening to community members’ perspectives, stories, and experiences. Listening sessions can provide vital feedback on the following:



- **What is the problem you're trying to solve?** Is this problem something the community values? How will addressing this problem improve how our system serves communities? How will community input help us better understand what is actually a problem vs what we might *think* is the problem? How can community engagement help us think differently about the problems we are trying to solve (from a different angle or more divergently)?
- **Understand or prioritize root causes:** What is causing the problem in the first place? How can community members help us brainstorm other causes we might not be considering? In what ways will diverse perspectives support or challenge our current understanding of root causes?
- **Uncover strengths and needs:** What are some of the cultural strengths communities bring that might help us design better solutions? How can we connect and leverage these strengths? In what ways will community input help us uncover hidden needs in our system? What will their stories and experiences reveal about our system that we are not considering?

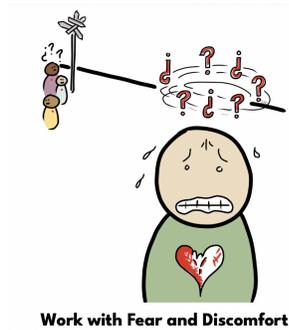
Listening sessions are often a discrepant event, organized as a singular experience to better understand the stories of people as they navigate our systems. However, even though it is limited in scope we can still attend to the liberatory design mindset of **embracing complexity**, which leans into the messiness of this work as a strength. Here are a few ways to work towards **embracing complexity** in listening sessions:

- Be open about uncertainty
- Bring together multiple perspectives in listening sessions, especially perspectives from those most harmed by systems
- Honor and legitimize different perspectives, realities, and lived experiences



Another liberatory mindset to consider is to **work with fear and discomfort**. Often in listening sessions, the first concern is fear. Fear of what might be said. Fear of who might or might not show up.

Fear of hearing difficult, challenging, and contrary experiences. We must lean into this fear and explore what is at its root in order to learn and grow from it. Here are a few ways we might face these fears in listening sessions:



- Create the time and space before listening sessions to name these fears and work through them
- Utilize processes and protocols to mitigate fears while also being honest with listening session participants about your hopes and fears
- Reflect after listening sessions to further explore and address what fears were realized

Listening sessions are a meaningful and accessible way to engage communities in different aspects of the design process. We highly encourage teams to think creatively! What would a successful listening session sound, feel, and look like? How might you encourage communities to move around the room to respond to questions? What stories might you hear if participants interviewed each other? What would change if we saw listening sessions as a community lab to get real-time feedback on some of our initial ideas? The possibilities are endless!

So, what's our first step? ...Keep reading!

Articulate your why

Communities are often not given the opportunity to share their stories and experiences within our systems. Often, our communication with communities is unidirectional or transactional. Creating the conditions for communities to connect with us, so they are truly heard, can be a powerful intervention in and of itself. Listening sessions can create conditions in which communities can provide their input without feeling tokenized or decorated.



Discuss

1. Why do we want to hear directly from the communities we serve?
2. In what ways will the stories and experiences of community members give us insight or help shape our approach to things like engagement, instruction, participation, communication, and logistics?
3. What hopes and fears do we hold as we consider listening sessions?
4. In what ways can we reduce our fears and amplify our hopes in our listening session?

Decide who to recruit

See the section, [Outreach and Recruitment](#), for details.

Determine the location

Location is vital to ensure communities can attend and fully engage. Are there spaces that are centrally located around neighborhoods where communities live? Which of these spaces is most inviting and comfortable for community members? Consider schools, churches, community centers, libraries, or the offices of community-based organizations as potential locations. Finding a space that has roots in the community will ensure the listening session starts off on the right foot.

Listening sessions can also take place virtually. In fact, virtual listening sessions with camera capability (Zoom, Facetime, Google Meet, etc.) have been an increasingly effective way to overcome barriers of time, transportation, or childcare. If your listening session is going to be virtual:

- Find a platform that is most familiar to the communities involved
- Offer an early log-on time for people to test their connection
- Have tech support people available during the session
- Encourage but don't require cameras to be on
- Revise your protocol to work in a virtual setting
- Use small breakout rooms even more often than you would in person

Create your protocol

We want to immediately disrupt the typical interpretation of “listening sessions.” We are sure this term conjures an image of five to seven people sitting at a table responding to questions much like a focus group or panel. Again, we call them “listening sessions” rather than “focus groups” to emphasize the purpose—deep listening to community members’ perspectives, stories, and experiences. Listening sessions can be lively, engaging, and involve movement.

In general:

- Listening session protocols should plan for 60-90 minutes.
- Group size can vary greatly. In a group of six-ten participants, you can usually remain in one group. Groups of larger sizes usually need smaller breakout groups and, thus, a larger number of facilitators and note-takers.
- Even for the smallest groups, consider having two facilitators and one or two note-takers.

Sample Listening Session #1 Math Educators		
4-6 Educators, administrators, students, or families (preferably “role alike” grouping)		
Purpose: Explore strengths and needs of mathematics instruction and professional learning		
Min	Details	Facilitator and

		resources
5	<p>Welcome and Overview</p> <p>Explain the purpose of the listening session: <i>Welcome to each of you. Thank you so very much for taking time out of your day to attend this listening session. My name is _____ and I'm with _____ in support of a district project aimed at improving mathematics instruction and outcomes. I'm here with my colleagues from _____ [others introduce themselves]. We're here today because a group of district representatives from _____ are trying to more deeply understand and enhance mathematics instruction and professional learning in our schools. We can only do that by listening and learning from each other. The things you share from these listening sessions will help produce district profiles which will be used to better understand strengths and challenges in mathematics education in our district. We'll be looking at feedback across all of the listening sessions and interviews in order to identify what educators need and then design some ideas to meet those needs. We have a note taker here today but she/he is not using your names in the notes. [Add callout for transcription if used] We just need an accurate record of the stories you share with us. I invite you to review the agreements we have set for today and see if you have any suggestions or modifications.</i></p>	
HIT RECORD		
5	<p>Participant Introductions</p> <p>Let's take a minute for everyone to introduce themselves. Please share:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Your name and role • How long you've lived in this community or taught at this school • What is one word to describe your experience as a student in mathematics? <p>I'll go first to model. Go around the room for all answers.</p>	
~1	<p>Agreements</p> <p>On the slide you see the agreements we suggest for this space. I'll read them now and I would ask you all to consider which one you want to hold center during our time together.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Listen from a place of love. No judgment. • Answering is always optional. • Confidentiality. Please don't share the information from this listening session with others. • Share the space. We want to hear from everyone. • Disagreement is okay. If you have a different experience or perspective, please share. • Take care of your needs. 	
10	<p>Question 1</p> <p>We are going to jump in right away to better understand your hopes and dreams for mathematics instruction. We have a jamboard with a prompt at the top: What do you hope students experience as part of their journey in mathematics education in your district? What might they see, hear, and feel?</p> <p>We will take 4 min with our cameras off to respond to this prompt. [show participants how to use the jamboard]. I will play music and when the music is done I would love for you to turn</p>	

	<p>your cameras back on for a whole group discussion. [play music]</p> <p>Thank you! Does anyone want to share what they added to the jamboard and why?</p>	
10	<p>Question 2a: For this next question we would love for you to take about 4 minutes to populate another jamboard with all the mathematics instruction strengths in your district or school.</p> <p>Once folks populate the jamboard: I would like for you to now pick one strength and use the sentence stem to expand on this strength. I will show the prompt, there will be some think time, and then you can respond when you are ready. I might ask follow up questions to better understand your responses.</p> <p><i>A strengths in mathematics instruction in our district/school is _____ and I think this because I have seen/experienced _____ and _____.</i></p> <p>If time permits: After folks have had a chance to respond follow up by asking why they believe these areas are strengths, specifically ask: What were the conditions that supported these strengths?</p>	
10	<p>Question 2b: The same as above, for this next question we would love for you to take about 4 minutes to populate another jamboard with all the mathematics instruction challenges in your district or school.</p> <p>Once folks populate the jamboard: I would like for you to now pick one challenge and use the sentence stem to expand on this strength. I will show the prompt, there will be some think time, and then you can respond when you are ready. I might ask follow up questions to better understand your responses.</p> <p><i>In our district, the biggest challenge in mathematics instruction is _____ because _____.</i></p> <p>**Make sure to reemphasize that they should be focused on mathematics instruction and not deficits of students or their families.</p> <p>After each person has responded follow up by asking “why” a few times for folks who have shared a challenge. This series of why’s will help elicit root causes to the challenges and help folks clarify what they identified.</p>	
15	<p>Question 3a and b: For this activity, we are going to put up a slide with a prompt and have you annotate the slide using the zoom “annotate” function. You will rate these prompts based on a scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree. [Show folks how to annotate on zoom...quickly]</p>	

	<p>Underneath each statement is a scale: Strongly disagree -----Strongly agree</p> <p>1. <i>In our district, there is a shared belief that all students can meet the standards by the end of the school year if given the appropriate resources and support.</i></p> <p>Following the rating: Does anyone want to share where they put their answer and why? How might professional learning support or hinder this statement?</p> <p>2. <i>Across our district, we have the resources and support we need to ensure students meet math standards.</i></p> <p>Following the rating: Does anyone want to share where they put their answer and why? How might the district better support mathematics instruction?</p> <p><i>Ask probing questions as appropriate.</i></p>	
10	<p>Question 4: Circling back to the first prompt given, we have a final jamboard where we will spend time responding to the following prompt: What would you or other educators need in your district in order to meet your hopes/dreams for students in mathematics education?</p> <p>We will take 5 min with our cameras off to respond to this prompt. [show participants how to use the jamboard]. I will play music and when the music is done I would love for you to turn your cameras back on for a whole group discussion. [play music]</p> <p>Thank you! Does anyone want to share what they added to the jamboard and why?</p>	
~	<p>If time remains: We just talked about a lot of things. I'd like to open up the space for a few minutes if there are other things on your mind related to what we just talked about. Does anyone have anything else they'd like to share?</p>	
5	<p>Closing Ask everyone to share an appreciation for something they heard or learned.</p> <p>Share what will happen next with the information collected from this listening session.</p>	

<p>Sample Listening Session #2 Any number of participants Purpose: Get feedback on specific design ideas</p>
<p>Design a listening session where community members give very specific feedback on ideas or components of a program.</p>

After an introduction to the purpose of the listening session and some agreements (see sample 1), share and practice a simple feedback protocol, such as this:

- Present idea, grounding in the liberatory design mindset of “Share, Don’t Sell” (5 minutes)
- Clarifying questions (4 minutes)
- Warm/cool feedback (6 minutes)
- Presenter summarizes feedback (3 minutes)

Practice the protocol with something light and fun, first, to give people practice with feedback.

Have presenters rotate from group to group, changing the content but repeating the protocol.

Select and train facilitators

In a listening session, a facilitator is primarily there to:

- Set the tone and establish agreements
- Ask questions using an established protocol
- Facilitate a space where each person has an opportunity to contribute
- Listen, listen, listen
- Not engage in conversation, get defensive, take sides, or suggest solutions

Look for facilitators who reflect the diversity of the community and who have the skills or experience to fill those roles. As you build the team, consider:

- Relationships. When possible, consider a facilitator who already has a trusting relationship with the invited communities.
- Power dynamics. Consider how race, position, age, or gender might play out in a listening session setting. Deliberately work to reduce harm.
- Language needs. Include multilingual interviewers or translators on your team.
- Community. Consider including students, communities, and community members as part of the listening session.

The training needs for facilitators will vary based on their experience. Everyone needs practice with the agenda, clear roles, and information on logistics. If facilitators need training in facilitation, some hints are below but must be accompanied by practice opportunities.

Strategies and Prompts for Facilitating Listening Sessions

Effective facilitation of a listening session involves the recognition and employment of different perspectives and different skills to create an inclusive environment. A well-facilitated discussion allows each participant to explore ideas while recognizing and valuing the contributions of others. The key is to recognize which strategy you need to employ in each situation and be able to apply the most appropriate action or prompt. Below are some specific strategies for different situations.

- Probe for more information from an individual:
 - “Tell us more.”
 - “Tell us more about ____.”
 - “Can you give us an example?”
 - “What do you mean by ____?”
- Encourage—but don’t require—quiet participants:
 - “It is important that we hear from everyone in the room.”
 - “I notice someone/not everyone has not spoken to this topic.”
 - “Can we hear from someone who hasn’t had a chance to talk?”
 - “Person X, is there anything you’d like to add?”
 - If the above statements aren’t helping, another strategy is to change the format. Have people talk first to a partner which might feel safer. Then, they report out to the whole group either what they’ve said or what their partner said.
 - Ultimately, remember that participation is voluntary. If gentle requests to participate are turned down, respect their wishes.
- To quiet a long-winded/dominant participant:
 - (Insert yourself in a short lull.) “Thank you for your ideas. Person B, do you have any comments about this topic?”
 - “I’m going to ask you to pause there so we can get some reactions to this topic from a few other people.”
- Deal with extreme emotions (anger, sadness, etc.):
 - “I want to remind everyone that this is a confidential place to express your views. I can understand that these topics have an emotional side to them. I wonder if anyone else can express how they are feeling right now?”
 - Call for a five-minute break and talk to the individual(s) during that time.
 - “There are a lot of emotions surfacing in this conversation. Do we need to take a break? Do we want to revisit our agreements for this space?”

Send reminders

Establish multiple ways of communicating both with communities and folks supporting the listening sessions. Text messages, emails, calls, social media direct messages, and reminder cards are all reminder options. We encourage you to air on the side of “over reminding” participants because, in our experience, folks often forget. Life is busy! At the minimum, remind participants weekly. Send a regular reminder the day before and the morning of the listening session.

Set up the space

It is important to arrive early and do everything you can to make the space comfortable and inviting. Some suggestions:

- Either put chairs in a circle or arrange larger four-person tables so people can see each other

- Set out supplies and snacks
- Post the agreements in a visible location
- Facilitators and note takers review the protocol together. Make sure everyone has an assigned role and understands the protocol. Look at the participant list and note any personal connections.
- Note taker: open your note-taking form and prepare
- Begin to greet participants at the main door of the building and the room itself. Ask participants to fill out a nametag and invite them to have some snacks. Make them feel welcome.

Hold the listening session!

Circle back

As part of being responsive to communities and not tokenizing listening session participants, it's important to circle back to communities with any updates or follow-up. This could be as little as a quick communication blast outlining the actions a team has implemented resulting from the listening sessions, or developing a more robust and ongoing listening session structure that pairs updates with follow-up questions. Either way, by circling back to the listening session participants, you are showing their stories and experiences matter.

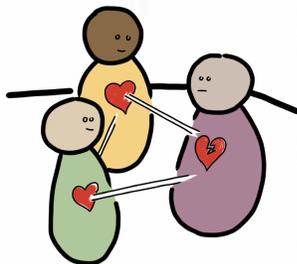
Feedback Partners

Feedback partners are community members who provide perspectives, feedback, and ideas through ongoing involvement with design teams. Feedback partners can offer critical perspectives on things such as:



- **Design feedback.** What would it take for this idea to work? What would make it a disaster? How should it be modified? What haven't we thought of? Is there a better idea?
- **Root causes of a problem.** What is causing the problem in the first place? How can communities help identify other causes we might not be considering? In what ways will diverse perspectives support or challenge our current understanding of root causes?
- **Data collection, analysis, and interpretation.** How might we interpret different types of data? What could the findings mean? What data is missing? How might we design more inclusive data strategies?

By design, feedback partners play an ongoing role, rather than being invited to a one-time event like a listening session or empathy interview. This allows time to attend to the liberatory design principles outlined in the introduction to this guide, especially the principle of **build relational trust** through strategies such as:



Build Relational Trust

- Facilitate personal connection by inviting people to share what matters to them.
- Dedicate time and space for people to bring forward their full selves and identities.
- Create space for community to reflect, express, and process thoughts and emotions.
- Cultivate a culture that invites dialogue and collective sense-making

Another important principle with feedback partners is: **share, don't sell**. This means that people practice transparency and non-attachment in sharing ideas with community and community members. In other words, find ways to invite community members into the process as collaborators instead of trying to convince them or "sell" an idea. Sharing humbly invites questions and feedback that can advance the work.



Share, Don't Sell

Ready to get going?

Articulate your why

Why do you want to involve community and community members as feedback partners? Are you seeking feedback on where to focus your work? On the root causes of a problem? On the design and implementation of change ideas? On the design and interpretation of data? All of these things? Be clear about what aspects of your work you think will be influenced by feedback partners. But also embrace the notion that the community members themselves will tell you—once involved—the ways they want to be involved.

Also, articulate the type of partnership community members can expect. As outlined in the beginning of this guide, clarify the purpose. Are they there to share their unique needs, priorities, and perspectives? Or, will they play a leadership role in decision-making and have some decision-making power? The most important thing is to be transparent about their roles in this space.

Decide who to recruit

See the section, [Outreach and Recruitment](#), for information.

Design the structures

Feedback partners are not a one-time strategy, but an ongoing partnership over time. How often will you meet? When? Where? There is no single formula for how to structure feedback partners. And, in fact, you are not going to be able to design permanent structures until you have community member input on what works best for them. In other words, start by designing the initial engagement(s) and then partner with communities to design from there. Remain open and flexible to change as you go.

Examples of structures:

- Monthly meetings that alternate between in-person and virtual.
- Feedback “intensives”: half-day or full-day convenings with feedback partners.
- Small group structures: instead of whole-group sessions, create structures where pairs or trios meet with one or two members of a design team.
- Alternate with design sessions in the community. For instance, reserve a room in the library or ask a local coffee shop to reserve a room and provide coffee.
- Train up local community leaders who can run community partner sessions in support of the larger improvement effort.

Design activities and agendas

For ongoing relationships with feedback partners, pay careful attention to what is needed to **create spaces of care, truth, and hope** with community members. Creating spaces of authentic care starts with real listening. In order to listen, we must intentionally build time and space in our meetings—both formally and informally—to engage with one another and deepen relationships. In common spaces,

we must move beyond the traditional five-minute “ice breakers” to offer more time and space to listen.

Consider these questions as you think about the space you want to create:

- What can deep, authentic listening look like, sound like, and feel like?
- In what ways can we demonstrate care for one another in our meetings?
- What ways can we create space to understand and share our personal truths?
- What are the historical truths about your school and/or our community that you are curious about? How might they relate to the work of your team?
- To what extent do we have a shared belief that change is possible? How do you know?

The possibilities for protocols and meeting activities with feedback partners are many. You can start with some of the methods from empathy interviews and listening sessions.

Check out [this case study](#) from West High School that highlights how community members became important feedback partners in their efforts to improve the school experience for Black students. What started with a focus group became a much longer engagement strategy with multiple methods.