

Community culture questionnaire

An approach to centering student voice in decision-making about community building, rules and policies, and student leadership.

Team-based practices are approaches that leverage multiple adults to create deeper and personalized learning opportunities for students.

Strategy: Educator teams center student voice in decision-making about community building, rules and policies, and student leadership.

Frequency and duration: Two to three times, over the course of the school year.

Adapted from: Elm Street Academy, Cuba, NY

Educators at Elm Street Academy created a community culture questionnaire out of their desire to ensure students had a voice in school decision-making about community building, rules and policies, and student leadership. Although their process addressed culture at the school level, it works equally well at the team level with only light adjustments. Read on to explore an adaptation of Elm Street's community culture questionnaire.

▶ The educator team develops the questionnaire and makes key decisions about its implementation

The educator team develops a set of questions for students. Taken together, the questions are intended to help the educator team better understand students' perspectives on community building, team-level rules and policies and opportunities for student leadership.

Additionally, the educator team makes key decisions about implementation of the questionnaire. For example, they decide on when and how frequently they will implement it (e.g., at the close of each quarter), how and when they will administer it (e.g., digitally during media lab time, paper-based during afternoon advisory), and whether it will be anonymous.

Example questions:

- What are a few of your favorite things about our community?
- What changes or improvements could we make to our community? What might they look like?
- What helps you feel connected to others in our community?
- Are there any community processes or protocols that you wonder about or disagree with? What are they?
- Do you feel heard and valued within our community? Can you give examples?
- What can we do better as a community?

▶ The educator team plans the roll-out of the community culture questionnaire

The educator team plans how they will roll out the community culture questionnaire to students. This way, even if students aren't in the same space when the questionnaire is introduced, they will have a shared understanding of its purpose.

Example roll-out speech:

“At the close of each quarter, we ask you to complete a questionnaire that helps us, as your teachers, better understand how you are feeling about the health of our community. We are all members of this community together, and we want to ensure we are centering your voices when we make decisions about how we build community, the rules and policies we have in place within our community and the different opportunities available to you as students to lead this community.

“Please share your honest feedback so that we can become stronger and better together. The questionnaire is anonymous, but you are welcome to add your name if you feel comfortable doing so — especially if you have a question you’d like to discuss further with the educator team or with our community.

“You’re probably wondering what will happen once you’ve completed the questionnaire. Here’s what’s next: Our educator team will analyze the results, looking for themes in things we’re doing well and ways we can improve. We’ll share our learning with you at our community meeting next week, and we’ll launch some small groups that will meet during advisory time over the next month to plan how we can be responsive to what we learn from these questionnaires.

“Thank you for helping us in building a better tomorrow. What questions do you have?”

▶ The educator team analyzes students’ responses

After administering the questionnaire, the team gathers to analyze students’ responses. They identify themes that highlight what the community is doing well and what they could do better. They plan how they will present these themes to students.

▶ Educators and students work together to strengthen the community

After educators present themes from the questionnaires to students, they invite discussion about what next steps the community might take to nurture their strengths and respond to areas for growth (e.g., create additional opportunities to build relationships; make changes to policies; introduce new student leadership roles).

Why educators, students and families enjoy this practice

Students feel cared for when we ask them what they think and what they want. The questionnaire process elevates their sense of responsibility for their community. More often than not, students will share positive responses that also help educators see the impact their work and care is having on young people. Rather than just relying on our own feelings about school community and what we’re doing well or struggling with, questionnaire results can show us the student perspective. As priorities for change emerge from the responses, students will often volunteer to join work groups or committees, offering solutions and ideas that may not occur to us.

Considerations for implementing this practice

Adjust for young learners: Although this process was developed for a high school learning community, it could easily be adapted to suit younger learners. Questions might be simplified or read aloud. Emergent writers might respond to questions by circling images of facial expressions (e.g., smiling face, neutral face, frown).

Consider the benefits of scales and multiple choice questions: While the example questions shared in this resource are entirely open-ended, consider the benefits of pairing scales and multiple choice questions with the open-ended questions in your questionnaire. Analysis is likely to be quicker, for example, and the community can track change over time if questions remain stable. You can then analyze responses more quickly while still including unique insights and space for student voice in narrative form.