Conversations with Kids:

WALKING THE ROAD TO REINVENTION

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Transcend

Transcend
BUILDING BEYOND THE LIMITS OF SCHOOL DESIGN

Transcend is a national nonprofit organization focused on innovation in school design. We support communities in creating and spreading extraordinary learning for all.

Inspired by what we are learning from communities across the country, we share insights to fuel progress and innovation for more and more schools.

To learn more about partnering with Transcend, reach out to us or visit our website.

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About the Author

Hello! I'm Jenee Henry Wood and I head learning for Transcend where I work to surface and share insights from our work in school communities across the country. I'm a former middle school social studies special educator where I co-taught in inclusion, resource, and self-contained classrooms. I'm passionate about sharing knowledge and collaborating across the education sector,

Jenee Henry Wood,
Head of Learning

Is your school community moving forward toward 21st-century learning or backwards to the industrial model?

Schools are navigating incredibly complex demands and often conflicting expectations. They're asked not only to educate young people but also to support their mental and emotional well-being, nurture a sense of belonging, respond to evolving academic and social needs, and do it all amid tight resources, staffing constraints, and increasing scrutiny. It's a lot—and it can feel exhausting and disheartening, especially when schools are striving for steadiness in an ever-shifting landscape.

And yet, amid these pressures, we are seeing schools meet the moment with creativity, commitment, and deep love for young people. I'm so inspired by these communities and I'm coming to see this time as a unique opportunity to reimagine what school can be when we listen closely to young people and put their voices at the center of the conversation.

We're challenging ourselves and inviting school communities to start conversations with young people to better understand if our schools are moving toward the future. To support this, we have developed a resource grounded in our Leaps toward Extraordinary Learning for All, essential shifts in young people's schooling experiences that unlock the infinite potential of every child.

"Typically the perspective of the student is overlooked, as if we're not fully conscious of oursituation, which is something that just isn't true, especially today. I think in order to be a responsive school system, you need to understand the needs of the community, in this case the student population.

...Asking the right questions is very important to serve [students]."

- **Ali Khatib**, Senior at Salisbury High School in North Carolina

School and system leaders, educators, and caregivers can use this resource to:

1. **Listen to your young people.** You can...
   - Use our conversation guide to talk to one student or a small group of students, OR
   - Survey groups of students with our online tool, and receive a confidential report with your results
2. **Make meaning of what you hear from students.** Determine if your school is moving forward toward more extraordinary experiences, or backwards to industrial-era learning.

We hope this will be a valuable step on a journey to reimagining the purpose and experience of school. We know schools are in very different places; we're sharing this now so it's available whenever you and your school community are ready. Though this year looks very different than we'd hoped, it also represents a unique opportunity to engage students in charting the road ahead. Let's seize this moment to maximize young people's potential and prepare them to see, confront, and tackle society's greatest challenges.

- Jenee Henry Wood & the Transcend Family

HOW IT *Works*

Step 1:

GO TO STEP 1

Learn the Leaps

Familiarize yourself with the Leaps toward Extraordinary Learning for All. The Leaps describe how studen texperiences must change to be responsive to the demands and opportunities of the 21st century.

Step 2:

GO TO STEP 2

Listen to Young People

Use the conversation starter guide for individual and small group discussions, or the online survey for larger groups of students.

Step 3:

GO TO STEP 3

Reflect on What You've Heard

Reflect on what you've heard from young people. Using the reflection guide consider your school's progress on the Leaps — are you moving forwards or backwards?

Step 1: Learn the Leaps

The experiences young people have in our schools today will shape our society tomorrow. Transcend's Leaps toward Extraordinary Learning for All describe the key ways we believe these experiences must change so that every young person can reach their infinite potential. These Leaps help schools move from experiences that often leave young people disconnected and struggling to experiences that are engaging and effectively build the knowledge, skills, and mindsets young people need to thrive in and transform the world. Bringing these Leaps to life requires thoughtful and coherent decisions across every part of a school's design.

Industrial-Era Learning	Extraordinary Learning
Narrow Focus Learning focuses exclusively on academics and developing students' minds, overlooking their holistic growth and well-being.	**Whole-Child Focus** Learning nurtures every young person's mind, body, and heart, promoting holistic development and well-being.
Isolation & Conformity Learners share space with peers and adults but often lack deep connections, meaningful opportunities to collaborate, or ways to get to know and celebrate one another, leading many to feel pressure to conform or risk isolation.	**Connection & Community** All learners are part of a supportive community where they form meaningful, collaborative relationships with peers and adults and are deeply known, appreciated, and respected for who they are while also embracing the uniqueness of others.
Low Expectations with Surface-Level Learning Learners complete rote, low-level tasks aimed at memorizing broad but shallow content, with varying access to opportunities and treatment from adults shaped by inconsistent and often low expectations.	**High Expectations with Rigorous Learning** Every learner is treated as capable of excellence with access to appropriately challenging tasks that deepen understanding, broaden perspectives, strengthen higher-order thinking, and help them apply learning in new situations.
Irrelevance Learning is disconnected from real-world topics and challenges, as well as from the prior knowledge, interests, goals, and life experiences of young people.	**Relevance** Learning connects to young people's life experiences, interests, goals, and prior knowledge, as well as to real opportunities and challenges in their local community and beyond.
One-Size-Fits-All Approach Learners experience the same content and activities at the same pace, holding some back from more advanced content and activities while leaving others behind.	**Customization** Learners experience flexibility in the focus, pace, setting, and sequence of learning, as well as variability in the resources and supports provided, ensuring each learner can succeed.
Passive Compliance Learners follow directions, absorb content, and adopt behaviors and ways of thinking without question, motivated primarily by external rewards or fear of consequences.	**Agency** Learners take charge of their experience in meaningful, developmentally appropriate ways, and through this, they all have opportunities to impact both their life path and the world around them.

Step 2: Listen to Young People

OPTION 1:

Have a conversation with one student or a small group of students using the *Kid Conversation Starter Guide*.

CLICK HERE to go to the Conversation Guide

Use the conversation prompts to learn about how young people are experiencing school. These starter questions will give you insights around whether your school community is moving forwards or backwards on the Leaps toward Extraordinary Learning for All. We recommend these questions for grades five and above. If using with younger students or children who learn differently, you can tailor these questions for their comprehension. Time may be limited, so we recommend choosing one to two questions from each section.

OPTION 2:

Survey groups of students with our online tool, and receive a confidential report with your result

If you want to gather information about the experiences of groups of students, this survey tool will help. It was developed to determine whether students' experiences reflect the Leaps toward Extraordinary Learning for All, as a way to gather firsthand accounts of students' experiences. Once your students complete the survey, you will be able to access a summary report, along with supporting resources, that you can use to have conversations within your learning community. If you are interested in a deeper, more customized analysis, please contact us.

CLICK HERE to learn more about how the survey works

Step 2:

Listen to Young People

KID CONVERSATION STARTER GUIDE

Use the questions below to learn more about...

...whether learning is challenging and tailored to young people's needs:

- When do you learn the most at school? Tell me about that class or experience.
- Tell me about something you're doing in school that is super challenging for you. Are you getting the help that you need to not give up?
- When in school do you have options for how, when, where, and from whom you learn?
- What's something that you've made or built at school that you're very proud of? How come?

Leaps Illuminated: *Customization, High Expectations with Rigorous Learning*

...to what extent do young people drive their learning in alignment with their interests and goals and take meaningful action to make the world better:

- When do you get to make choices about what you're doing in school? Tell me about that.
- If you could be learning anything at school, what would it be and why?
- Tell me about something you're doing in school that matters a lot to you. Why does it matter? How will you use it today or in the future?
- When in school do you get to do something that makes the world a better place?

Leaps Illuminated: *Agency, Relevance*

...to what degree is school a relationship-rich environment nurturing the complex factors that support learning and development:

- Who loves and cares about you at school? How do you know?
- Can you be yourself at school or do you feel pressure to fit in? How so?
- Does your school help you learn to be happy and healthy? How so?
- When do you learn about things other than math, reading, or science at school?
- Do you learn from people other than teachers at school? How so?

Leaps Illuminated: *Whole-Child Focus, Connection & Community*

Step 2:

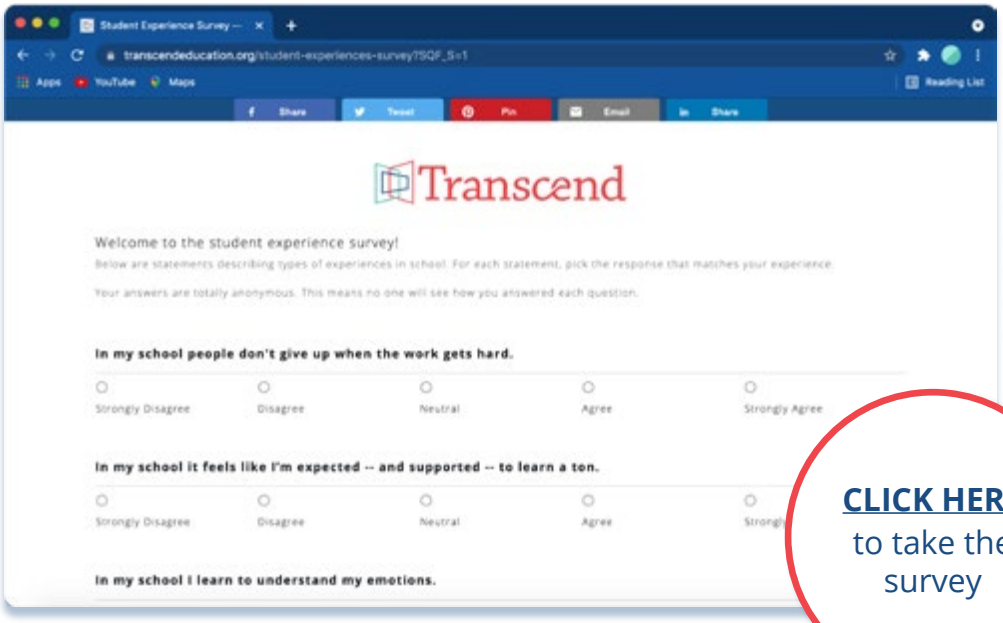
Listen to Young People

STUDENT EXPERIENCE SURVEY

How the Survey Works:

1. Once you click on the link below and complete the form, a Transcend team member will reach out to you to support you in administering the Leaps Student Voice survey.

2. This survey is designed for students grades three and above, and is currently available in English and Spanish.



CLICK HERE to take the survey

3. Surveys can be totally anonymous or you can provide a roster through a secure upload link to allow for disaggregation of results by learner characteristics.

4. You will also be provided a link to access your report and conversation resources, along with the opportunity to have a Transcend team member facilitate meaning making.

5. We will not share this data in a way that associates the responses with you or your school/ district without your express written consent.

Photo by Allison Shelley/The Verbatim Agency for EDUimages

Step 3: Reflect on What You Heard

ADULT REFLECTION GUIDE

What have students revealed about your school community's progress towards Extraordinary Learning for All, are you moving forward or settling backwards into the industrial model? After your conversations, use the spectra below to reflect your school community's Leaps progress. Fill in the circle that best represents what you've heard and learned. Dots to the left suggest industrial-era student experiences, dots to the right suggest movement towards extraordinary learning, and the middle dot can represent mixed evidence. This reflection tool will help you and your school community brainstorm specific future focus areas grounded in the Leaps.

Consider This:

For each Leap think about what it might take for your school community to make progress toward extraordinary learning for all.

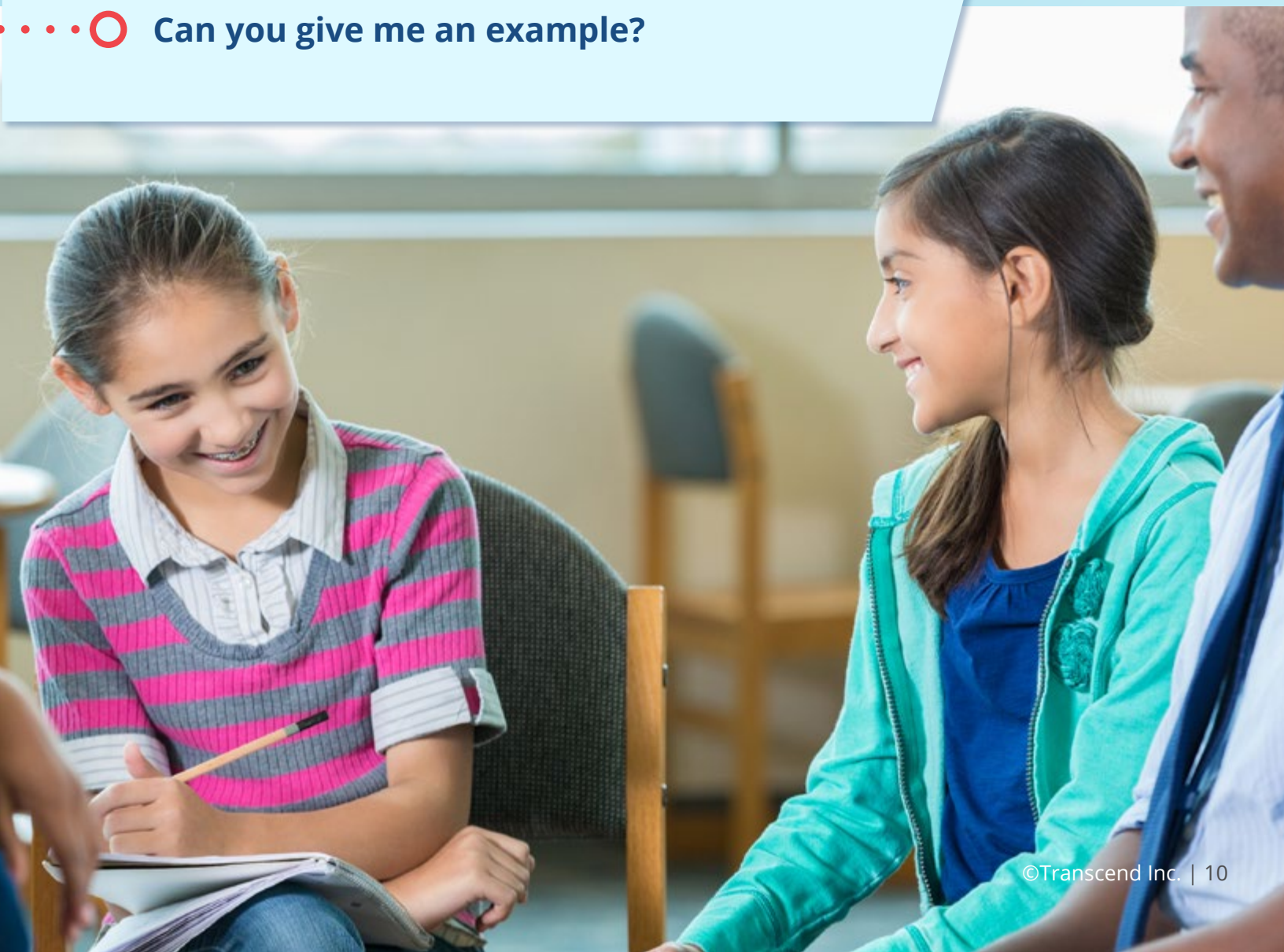
What design choices, resources, or other steps would it take?

Tips FOR GREAT CONVERSATIONS WITH KIDS

Follow-Up Probes

Sometimes conversations can fall into the “yes/no” trap. To get as much learning as possible, you’ll want to probe young people with follow-up questions. Below are some of our handy go-tos.

- **Tell me more about that.**
- **Does your answer change by class or teacher?**
- **What makes you say that?**
- **Can you give me an example?**



Tips FOR GREAT CONVERSATIONS WITH KIDS

Principles for Listening

Listen with Intentionality

Focus on what the young person is sharing with you, rather than your opinion about their perspective, needs, and aspirations.

Listen From a Place of Love

Be humble and acknowledge that you are not the expert on a young person's experience.

Trust the Narrator

Respect and honor their worldview. Stay curious about what makes them hold their opinions instead of applying your own lens or drawing hasty conclusions.

Trust the Process

Sometimes the conversation will require you to take detours. Follow the conversation where it leads, it might uncover gems.

Tips FOR GREAT CONVERSATIONS WITH KIDS

Pitfalls to Avoid

Below are some obstacles to leading a strong conversation with young people. Often, these are habits that have become part of how we communicate. Consider each of these pitfalls so that you can prepare to have a strong, student-centered conversation.

ASSUMING

Drawing an unsubstantiated conclusion based on prior knowledge, experiences, or stereotypes. *Example: Most kids her age listen to hip-hop, therefore it is the best tool to augment relevance.*

SILVER LINING

Cheering up, downplaying, reassuring; trying to make them feel better or different immediately. *Example: It's not so bad. There's nothing to be upset about. Don't cry, it's not the end of the world. You'll feel better soon. (Notice how we do this to kids all the time!)*

FIXING

Giving solutions, advice, beliefs or opinions. *Example: You should try … Have you thought of …? When I was in that situation, I just …*

INTERROGATING

Asking questions in an evaluative, analytical way. *Example: What did he mean? Why did you do that? What were you thinking? What are you going to do about it?*

DISCOUNTING

Minimizing the person's feelings by blaming, criticizing, disagreeing, or defending someone else. *Example: You are being oversensitive. I'm sure he didn't mean to hurt you. You should have known better. Why didn't you think about that before?*

THUNDER-STEALING

Shifting the focus to yourself. *Example: What happened to me was way worse. Now you know how I felt when ___ happened to me. You think you have it bad? Just listen to what happened to me.*

SYMPATHIZING

Feeling sorry for them, showing pity. *Example: Oh, you poor thing. Poor baby. Oh, bless your heart. I'm sorry that happened to you.*

How What?

Listening is just the start: How can you walk the road to reinvention together *with* young people?

You've listened to students. You've gotten insights. You've considered whether your schools are making Leaps toward Extraordinary Learning for All. You may be challenged. Inspired. Provoked. What's next? Here are some additional resources:

Continue this conversation with like-minded education leaders from across the country by joining the Transcend Community:

The Transcend Community (TC) is a free, vibrant network of leaders, educators, and designers of innovative schools and learning environments, along with talented individuals and organizations who support them.

Transcend Community

Deepen your exploration of school design and reinvention:

- Engage with our designing for learning resources that introduce the four key factors that impact learning
- Read about using a school design blueprint to accelerate your school design journey
- Sign up for our newsletter to get the latest resources as they come out
- Reach out and explore ways Transcend can support your school's design journey