

## Staff Support Sessions: Some Considerations

Providing support for the adults in the school is a first step in re-constituting the school after any kind of disruption. Adults who are centered in themselves and connected to each other are better able to be calm, caring educators with their students and families.

Creating those connections during the time of a pandemic and public health directives for social distancing is challenging, but also provides opportunity. Whether online or in person, community-building work is part of school climate improvement: connectedness, relationships and social emotional learning. Here are some suggestions for organizing online or in-person community-building sessions for adults, with key considerations to reflect upon to ensure that the sessions are as safe and welcoming as possible.

### Size

Consider the size of your gathering. Conversations are best held in a group size that allows everyone to be able to be heard. Circle keepers suggest groups of 6-12, or 20, depending upon the amount of time you have for discussion. Online circles are easier to facilitate if the number of participants is 10-14. Very large groups might consider the engaging practice of pair-share, trios, or using online breakout rooms of 5-7 people. Keeping pairs, trios or groups together for all prompts can help in deepening the conversation. Mixing people up helps to broaden perspectives.

### Participant Groupings

Mixing people across the groups of the school can provide everyone with insight that they might never hear if they stayed with their job-alike colleagues. However, sometimes it is kind to offer affinity groups, so that the conversation can be the safest for the participants. For instance, provide a space only for people of color to discuss the impact on them of the death of George Floyd, while white staff talk with each other about their response to the death. This can allow participants to speak more freely. Participants in any group may learn from each other, without causing further harm to the people most impacted by systemic racism.

Consider also that there are white staff who have partners or children who are people of color. Their experiences also may be more safely shared with each other. Other groupings obviously suggest themselves: LGBTQAI staff, or women, or men, for instance.

## Choice

Participating in any staff support session for any reason is best a choice. Individuals have their own time and their own needs. Offering the chance to talk is just that: an offer. Forced participation can further harm people. In that regard, participation in an affinity circle is not the only option to offer. It is possible that some staff would look forward to the opportunity to share their experiences with any colleague.

## Method

There are a variety of ways to provide guided, supported conversations. Facilitators might use the process that they are most familiar with, be that with the guidelines from equity sessions, their own teaching practices or the circle process, for instance.

Social Emotional Learning's (SEL) Three Signature Practices provide a simple outline for setting up, conducting and closing a process: warm welcome, engaging practices and optimistic close. Guidelines, the use of a talking piece or an order for speaking, can ensure that everyone has a predictable opportunity to share. As noted above, the chance to speak is offered along with the chance to pass. Everyone has the opportunity to listen.