

Responding to the Newtown Tragedy

What parents and educators can do to make schools safer

Introduction

Read This First

As we all struggle after the Newtown, Connecticut, shootings, NSPRA leaders have stood up to offer an engagement process to help set future directions on local school safety. This issue clearly falls into the “schools cannot do it alone” category where schools and communities must work as one in securing our schools and children as best we all can.

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Additional thanks go to NSPRA President Joe Krumm, APR, for his editorial contributions and guidance on this project and to the Center of Clear Communication, Inc., for its pro bono editorial and graphic assistance. In addition, we are thankful to NSPRA Board Members who served as reviewers as well as representatives from various engagement organizations for their input.

What This Guide Can Do for You

This guide gives you organizing suggestions and discussion materials to hold a productive school-community forum in which large, diverse numbers of people take part in small-group discussion, deliberation, and action planning.

The key word is **suggestions**. You know your community best and where this type of an engagement process can work for your school community. Even if your community is a not a fit for this process, you may still be able to use a number of items in this NSPRA resource.

Setting a Tone and Avoiding Pitfalls

Before embarking on an engagement process, your leadership team should consider the following:

- **Make sure your small-group facilitators have some training. Ideally, you should use professionally trained facilitators.** To help you prepare, this guide contains some training tips for facilitators.
- **Make the process a community process.** Involve leading government, safety, parent, faith groups, and others in this process. We list suggested groups in the guide.
- **You must decide if law enforcement officials may not want some security measures that you now practice to be part of these discussions.**
- **If possible, try to set up some ground rules with the media.** As noted in the guide, the media can help recruit participants, but it would be best for any reporting of the process be offered at the time of the final recommendations. Emotions run high when talking about children, guns, and school safety. One parent who demands having armed school resource officers and principals could make headlines that may be counterproductive. We suggest that you even consider involving the publishers or owners of your local media outlets in this process as leaders in your community.
- **It could be beneficial to have some fiscal facts available on measures that some may offer as solutions.** For instance, research safety and security systems, new locks on entry and classroom doors, added security staff at schools, new mental health measures, etc.

With these considerations in mind and with your special knowledge of your local school community, we urge you to involve your total community in reducing the risk for all your students. We all have to do the best we can to avoid other incidents in all our communities.



Rich Bagin, APR
NSPRA Executive Director

Material for an interactive school-community forum

All across the country, the tragedy at Sandy Hook Elementary in Newtown, Connecticut, has provoked outrage and concern for the future. Engaging the community in dialogue and action can help people sort out their reactions to this event — and decide how they can reduce the possibility of repeating such a tragedy. This guide gives you organizing suggestions and discussion materials to hold a productive school-community forum in which large, diverse numbers of people take part in small-group discussion, deliberation, and action planning.

You can achieve a number of goals by engaging parents, educators, and others on this issue. **It is important to plan carefully** — and to think about the reasons that people in your community might want to take part. (Their goals and your goals ought to overlap, if not match completely).

The forum can help you reach these goals:

- Share information about current safety procedures,
- Help the community weigh options for making schools safer,
- Tap into the capacity of parents and other allies to help make your schools safer, and
- Build relationships that will help the community address these issues moving forward.

It is a good idea to talk through these goals with a few parent leaders, allies in law enforcement, and others who have a good read on why people might want to take part and what can be achieved through the forum.

If you decide to focus solely on sharing information, you should use Parts 1 and 2 in the discussion materials, and not Parts 3 and 4. If you want to share information and help the community weigh the options facing school decisionmakers, you should use Parts 1-3, but not Part 4. For all four goals, use all four parts of the guide.

When you recruit participants, make sure your description of the event matches the goals you have chosen. You also must be clear about how your school system will use the input you receive — and make this a key part of your message.

It is likely that your forum will receive some media attention. Consider asking local newspapers, television and radio stations, and other media outlets (including local blogs, and ethnic media) to help you recruit participants. Be sure to prepare a spokesperson with an explanation of the purposes and plans for the evening.

It is also important to be clear that this forum will *not* focus on state or federal policy questions related to the Newtown tragedy. People may well bring up these kinds of things at the forum — and they may well decide to get involved in trying to affect state or federal policy — but the main purpose of this forum is to facilitate discussion and planning for local action.

For more information on organizing school-community forums, consult these resources:

- www.publicagenda.org
- www.everydaydemocracy.org
- www.kettering.org

Organizing suggestions

1

Recruit participants through a wide range of groups and networks

Simply announcing the forum will not necessarily result in a large turnout, and participants will tend to be the same people you have seen at other meetings. To attract a truly large and diverse set of people, you must use a proactive, network-based approach. **The main reason a person will attend is if someone they already know and trust asks them to come.** This is particularly true for people who haven't typically been involved in the schools, or in other aspects of public life.

A successful forum requires advanced planning and some time and energy invested in recruitment. Broadcast emails, flyers, Facebook event listings, Twitter hashtags, a page on a website, newspaper articles, and other kinds of media coverage are good supplements to this approach — they can spread the *why*, *when*, and *where* information about the forum.

But successful recruitment is based on relationships: you must directly approach a set of key people, who can then directly approach their own sets of people.

Groups and networks to consider contacting:

- Neighborhood and homeowner associations
- Parent Teacher Associations
- Churches and other faith congregations
- Community foundations or the local United Way
- Service clubs
- Sports teams
- Police departments and fire stations
- Restaurants and coffee shops
- Youth groups
- Ethnic clubs, associations, and media outlets
- Senior citizens' groups
- Grocery stores
- Libraries
- Businesses
- Chambers of Commerce
- Newspapers and radio stations
- Police or sheriff's departments
- Universities, university extension networks, and community colleges
- Chapters of the League of Women Voters
- Unions
- Political parties
- Social service agencies
- Book clubs
- Extended families.

Think in particular about the kinds of people who may be least likely to participate, but who should be present because they have a stake in the outcome and something important to contribute. What networks do they belong to, and how can you reach them? Where do they meet now? What barriers — such as a lack of childcare, lack of transportation, or language differences — might make it hard for them to take part? If you can overcome these barriers, perhaps by partnering with particular groups and organizations in the community, you will help a wider variety of people participate. For example, if you have people who are not English speakers, consider organizing a forum or small-group discussion in a second language or providing translations of the discussion materials. You might also consider holding the forum in a location other than the school if you think that doing so would support participation.

Online tools can also play a key role in recruitment. Think about the online networks of friends, neighbors, and colleagues, and how you can use technology — from neighborhood email lists to Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter — to expand the reach of your recruitment.

2

Recruit enough facilitators for small-group discussions

People usually learn, deliberate, and plan for action most effectively in facilitated groups of about 10-12 people. On an emotional topic like the Newtown tragedy, small-group discussion is particularly important. In the forum agenda, most of the time is spent in small groups — for this discussion, you could even form groups as small as 6-8, assuming you have enough facilitators.

If you can, enlist people who have some experience or training in some form of facilitation — many communities have trained facilitators working within school districts, court systems, local government, universities, and other settings. But the facilitators for the forum can also be volunteers who have attended a brief training. Again, you may be able to find an experienced facilitation trainer locally. You can download for free one comprehensive guide to training facilitators at <http://www.everyday-democracy.org/en/Resource.106.aspx>.

Above all, **facilitators should have good “people skills”** (they’re good listeners, they can put people at ease, etc.) **and should not contribute their own views and opinions to the discussion.** The facilitator’s main task is to create a safe environment where each participant feels comfortable expressing ideas and responding to those of others. The facilitator does not “teach” but instead guides the process. For more on the role of facilitators, see *The basics of facilitating a deliberative small-group discussion*.

3

Make it a gathering that highlights kids

The Newtown tragedy is a serious topic, and people will want to focus on what can be done about it. But it is also important for this to be an occasion that highlights positive things: our children, our schools, and our community.

That is why the proposed forum agenda suggests you begin with a potluck supper and time for informal conversation before the forum begins. You could also use this time to feature students: consider a brief musical performance, exhibits of student work (artwork, science experiments, other assignments) displayed in the room, or displays on school sports teams and other extracurricular activities. Or invite one or two students to speak briefly to the entire group about why they think this forum is important.

People will participate in this forum if they think it will help make their schools safer. They will feel that their time was well spent — and be more likely to engage in other events in the future — if it also deepens their feeling of being part of their school community.

4

Consider other ways to use online tools

In addition to recruitment, online tools and arenas can aid this process in a number of ways, including:

- **Building networks of people who can remain engaged.** By building and expanding an interactive network of parents, educators, and other community members, you can help people find the information they need, make it more likely that they will work together, and make it easier for them to act quickly in an emergency situation. For this purpose, you can use a wide range of social media tools, from Facebook to e-democracy.org.
- **Gathering and ranking ideas.** “Crowdsourcing” can help you tap into the skills and knowledge of the community by asking people for ideas and solutions — and then asking the “crowd” to prioritize, comment on, and improve the ideas that emerge.
- **Forming teams to work on action ideas.** Online tools like “wikis” and CivicEvolution are designed to help small groups of people accomplish shared tasks such as producing a document or implementing an action idea.

5

Welcome the participants, hand out materials, and mix up the groups

The “host” who welcomes people to the forum could be a principal, a superintendent, a parent leader, a city or community leader, or a law enforcement official. A joint welcome from two different leaders is also a possibility — but it must be brief.

At the beginning of the evening, hand out the *Agenda and Discussion Guide for Participants*, a brief summary of the school safety policies and procedures that parents and others should know about (this should be in plain language, no more than 1-2 pages), and slips labeled *Questions About School Safety*.

People almost always learn more, and enjoy themselves more, if their small-group discussion at the forum includes a mix of different ages, backgrounds, and roles in the community. You can achieve this diversity in a number of ways, including:

- Assigning people to tables randomly as they walk in the door;
- Giving them nametags with different colors and asking them to find others with the same colored nametags; and
- Urging them to sit next to people they don’t know, or don’t know well.

6

Follow up

Accomplishing the goals of the forum will require some meaningful follow-up work by educators and parents. At the very least, all participants should receive some sort of follow up information (for example, how school practices have been adjusted, research that is being conducted, partnerships that are being formed, etc.).

Beyond that, people can be invited to serve on task forces to do more detailed action planning on the ideas for action that were raised at the forum, organizations that are working on school safety may offer volunteer opportunities, and so on.



National School Public Relations Association

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Discussion materials and agenda for facilitators

Agenda

6:00 – 6:05	Welcome, and goals for the forum
6:05 – 6:50	Potluck supper
6:50 – 7:00	Transition to small groups
7:00 – 8:35	Discussion in small groups
8:35 – 9:00	Wrap-up and next steps

Good facilitators:

- Are impartial. The facilitator's opinions are not part of the discussion.
- Help the group set some guidelines or ground rules, and keep to them.
- Help group members identify areas of agreement and disagreement.
- Use the discussion materials to bring in points of view that haven't been talked about.
- Create opportunities for everyone to participate.
- Focus and help to clarify the discussion.
- Summarize key points in the discussion, or ask others to do so.
- Are self-aware. Good facilitators know their own strengths, weaknesses, "hooks," biases, and values.
- Are able to put the group first.
- Appreciate all kinds of people.
- Are committed to democratic principles.

Discussion

Part 1: Setting the ground rules (5 minutes)

What kinds of guidelines do you want to set for your discussion? Here are some examples:

- Listen with respect.
- Each person gets a chance to talk.
- One person talks at a time. Don't cut people off.
- Speak for yourself, and not as the representative of a group.
- It's OK to disagree with someone else — in fact, it can be helpful — but personal attacks are not allowed.
- Help the facilitator keep things on track.
- After this forum is over, it is OK to share the main ideas discussed in the small group, but not OK to link specific comments to specific people (“*He said...* and *she answered....*”)

Tips for small-group facilitators

- Welcome everyone.
- Explain that you will be facilitating the discussion — not joining in with your own opinions.

Part 2: Starting the discussion (30 minutes)

1. *For each person:* Introduce yourself and say a little about why you wanted to be part of this discussion.
2. Do you and your kids feel safe at school? Why or why not?
3. Take a few minutes to read the handout on school safety procedures and policies.
 - What questions do you have about the current school safety procedures? Write them down on the slips labeled *Questions About School Safety*.
 - Once people have filled out these slips, we'll collect them for the Q&A session at the end of the evening.
 - *Facilitators:* Invite participants to share their most pressing questions.

Tips for facilitators

- On the first two questions in Part 2, go around the circle and make sure everyone has a chance to answer.
- After that first question, you don't have to go around the circle in order — just make sure everyone has a chance to speak if they want to.

Part 3: Options for making schools safer (30 minutes)

The tragedy in Newtown has caused many people to think hard about how to make schools safer. People’s ideas about it differ, in part because people are responding to different aspects of the incident.

Schools can implement some action ideas on their own, but many ideas will require the support and assistance of parents, other volunteers, and other organizations in the community. You may decide that some of these options require further research to determine if they will be effective or feasible; this discussion can help you start this process and decide what you want to do next.

The list of views below is intended to help the group consider a range of ideas. You may find yourself agreeing with more than one. Some views that are important to you may not be on the list — feel free to combine views or add new ones.

Tips for facilitators

Ask for volunteers to read each view aloud, and then use the discussion questions at the end of the section.

View 1:

Strengthen school security procedures

According to this view, we should review and tighten policies and procedures having to do with locking school doors, admitting visitors to the building, dress codes, and emergency drills with students. Schools should consider upgrading their safety-related equipment, such as metal detectors, intercom systems, and security cameras.

Another option is to have more people on school campuses who are there to ensure safety — this could mean more police officers in schools or qualified volunteers to patrol the building. Law enforcement should train staff on how to respond to situations involving an active shooter.

View 2:

Take a closer look at how school systems deal with mental health issues

According to this view, we can reduce the likelihood of school shootings and other violent acts by addressing how we deal with mental health issues. School systems should review and enhance their policies and procedures for identifying and responding to mental illnesses among students and staff, and ensuring that people who show signs of mental or severe emotional disturbance get quality treatment as early as possible, before problems arise.

View 3:

Focus on guns, gun safety, and gun violence

According to this view, how we deal with firearms is a key factor in ensuring student safety. People should be educated more extensively about guns, including gun laws, gun safety, and measures being taken in the community to prevent gun violence.

We should ensure that gun laws are enforced, and find other ways to restrict access to firearms, especially by students. The use of guns is a public health issue, and spreading knowledge and awareness is an important step toward addressing it.

View 4:

Focus on approaches that address the emotional development of young people

According to this view, violence is a societal problem that we can address by supporting the emotional development of students, and giving them the skills they need to interact and resolve conflict effectively.

Violence is glorified in the media, in toys and video games, and in many other things that influence children. We should limit children's access to entertainment that promotes violence. Programs in character education, peer mentoring, bullying prevention, conflict resolution, emotional intelligence, and other skills can help students become stable, responsible adults.

Questions about the views:

- Which view (or combination of views) best describes what you think? Why?
- Why is this view important to you?
- What are the downsides of the views you like best?
- What other views would you add?

Part 4: How should we move from talk to action? (30 minutes)

1. Has this discussion affected the way you think about these issues? If so, how?
2. Did any action ideas emerge in the discussion? Do any action ideas seem important to you?
3. Are there any action ideas that you would like to work on? Write them down on the slips labeled *Actions We Should Take*.
 - *Facilitators:* Invite participants to share their action ideas.
4. What would be the most helpful next steps to take?

Wrap-Up and Next Steps (in plenary, 25 minutes)

If possible, have the host of the event (perhaps a principal, superintendent, or parent leader) answer some of the most common questions on *The Questions About School Safety* slips.

For questions that can't be answered immediately, have the host pledge that he or she will confer with others and provide an answer within a week.

Then have the host read some of the action ideas on the *Actions We Should Take* slips, announce that groups will be forming to take on some of these ideas in the following week, and direct people on how they can sign up.

Optional: Allow interested participants to form their own groups on the spot.

Tips for facilitators

- Hand out *Actions We Should Take* slips.
- Consider using a flipchart to list action ideas in Part 4.
- If the group seems interested in one particular action idea, ask for suggestions about how group members could work together on it.
- If a range of ideas arise, ask each person which one or two ideas seem most important to do right away, and also what (if anything) they would like to do personally as a result of the discussion.

The basics of facilitating a deliberative small-group discussion

A deliberative discussion requires a facilitator who can help focus and structure the discussion and, at the same time, encourage participants to take ownership of their group. The facilitator's main task is to create a safe environment where each participant feels comfortable expressing ideas and responding to those of others.

The facilitator does not “teach” but instead is there to guide the process. He or she does not have to be an expert in the subject being discussed; in fact, facilitators should not contribute their own views at all.

Being able to stay impartial is probably the most important skill a facilitator can have. Remember to:

- Explain your role.
- Encourage and affirm each person.
- Try to be aware of things you might do unconsciously, like leaning back when you hear something you don't agree with.
- Never “take off your hat” and step out of the role of facilitator.
- Ask for the group's help if you need to.
- If you are working with a co-facilitator, decide beforehand how you will work together.

Here are some other tips for being an effective facilitator:

- **Be prepared.** Make sure you are familiar with the discussion materials, and think ahead of time about the directions in which the discussion might go.
- **Set a relaxed and open tone.** Welcome everyone and create a friendly and relaxed atmosphere. Humor is always welcome.
- **Help the group establish some ground rules.** At the beginning of the session, ask people to suggest how the group should behave. Use the sample ground rules — invite the group to add others, or delete some of the ones that are already there. The point is for the group to feel that the rules are their own.
- **Monitor and assist the group process.** Keep track of how the group members are participating — who has spoken, and who hasn't spoken. Don't let anyone dominate; try to involve everyone.
- **Allow time for pauses and silence.** People need time to reflect and respond. Don't talk after each comment or answer every question; allow participants to respond directly to each other. When deciding whether to intervene, lean toward non-intervention.

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 - It's OK to disagree with someone else — in fact, it can be helpful — but personal attacks are not allowed.
 - Help the facilitator keep things on track.
 - Other: _____
-

Part 2: Starting the discussion (30 minutes)

Introduce yourself and say a little about why you wanted to be part of this discussion.

Do you and your kids feel safe at school? Why or why not?

Take a few minutes to read the handout on school safety procedures and policies.

What questions do you have about the current school safety procedures? Write them down on the slips labeled *Questions About School Safety*.

Part 3: Options for making schools safer (30 minutes)

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- Why is this view important to you?
- What are the downsides of the views you like best?
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Part 4: How should we move from talk to action? (30 minutes)

- Has this discussion affected the way you think about these issues? If so, how?

- Did any action ideas emerge in the discussion? Do any action ideas seem important to you?

- Are there any action ideas that you would like to work on? Write them down on the slips labeled *Actions We Should Take*.

- What would be the most helpful next steps to take?

Wrap-Up and Next Steps (in plenary, 25 minutes)
