The Better Together Commission (BTC) Youth Sessions Toolkit is an active guide designed to help community organizations engage youth in discussions and activities about their hopes and aspirations for their educational experience in Jackson Public Schools (JPS). The toolkit offers a step-by-step guide to facilitate robust discussions among JPS students to ensure the youth voice is elevated in this community-wide conversation about solutions for JPS. The discussion prompts and activities will enable youth to identify innovative solutions and provide space for them to share their individual experiences in JPS with their peers.

Please be sure to read the toolkit in its entirety before hosting or facilitating sessions. For additional support in organizing and executing BTC Youth Sessions, contact Aisha Carson, youth engagement liaison, at aisha@bettertogether.formississippi.org.

TOOLKIT CONTENTS

AGENDA
• Details recommended time to complete facilitated conversation and activities.

FACILITATION GUIDE
• Provides a brief overview of how to facilitate conversations that prioritize youth voice
• Includes prompts that guide discussion and session summaries each youth will complete

ACTIVITIES
• Includes activities designed to facilitate dialogue and feedback from youth
• Sessions should be facilitated amongst peer groups (Grades 3-5; Grades 6-8, and Grades 9-12)

SUPPLIES (Not included)
• Self-adhesive flip chart
• Markers
• 8.5”x11” paper
• Writing Utensils

SOCIAL MEDIA
• Provides youth with social media hashtags, profiles, and messaging to use to while participating in sessions

EVALUATION
• Summary statement worksheet must be completed by each participant
• Evaluation template must be completed and returned to youth engagement liaison
AGENDA

OPENING
Facilitator(s) Introduction
Purpose of the Session
Goals of the Session
Session Instructions

DISCUSSION
Group Introductions
Discussion Prompts
Discussion Closing

ACTIVITY
Redesigning Your Community Activity

CLOSING
Reflections and Summary Statements

ADDITIONAL INSTRUCTIONS
The minimum amount of time needed for the session is 2 hours. Facilitators can allow more time for session discussion and activities. There is no time limit on the session, but it is recommended that participants have at least a 2-hour session.
FRAMING THE SESSION

Based on the Developmental Assets Framework by Search Institute, children’s needs can be broken down into external and internal assets. External Assets are the supports, opportunities, and relationships young people need across all aspects of their lives. Internal Assets are the personal skills, commitments, and values they need to make good choices, take responsibility for their own lives, and be independent and fulfilled.

With that framework in mind, the purpose of these conversations is for young people to discuss the external assets that currently exist in their school and community and how the community as a whole, particularly the school district, can improve in those areas. During the conversation, young people will also assess their internal assets and identify ways to help their peers develop those.

EXTERNAL ASSETS

External assets include support, empowerment, boundaries and expectations, and constructive use of time.

SUPPORT: Young people need to be surrounded by people who love, care for, appreciate, and accept them. This includes caring neighborhoods and schools.

EMPOWERMENT: Young people need to feel valued and valuable. This happens when youth feel safe and respected.

BOUNDARIES AND EXPECTATIONS: Young people need clear rules, consistent and restorative consequences for breaking rules, and encouragement to do their best. This includes adult modeling positive behaviors and communication as well as high expectations from both parents and teachers.

CONSTRUCTIVE USE OF TIME: Young people need opportunities—outside of school—to learn and develop new skills and interests with other youth and adults. Creative, religious, and/or youth programs are essential to ensuring youth are spending their time in learning environments that help them develop outside of the classroom.

The purpose of this toolkit is to ensure youth can add their voice to the ongoing conversations of what it takes to radically transform their school district. The goal of the following facilitated session is to provide youth with the platform to do just that.

Through this session, students will have the opportunity to:

• Engage in meaningful conversations about their education
• Actively participate in exercises that help them reimagine their school district in an innovative way
• Talk about what they need to feel supported and empowered.

By the end of the event, you want young people to be excited and ready to make a difference in their community.
These internal and external assets are important framing for conversations with youth because it helps identify exact areas to create improvement and build assets using their feedback.

Use the asset-building model as a framework for the session by ensuring that students not only talk about their current experiences but also explain what they think needs to happen to improve upon those experiences. For example, if a student explains that they do not feel supported at school, ask the student what will make them feel more supported at school. Be sure to record the youth’s prominent reactions to the different assets in their current context in both school and community.

The following is a facilitation guide to help guide the discussion and activities included in the toolkit.

**The Facilitator of this Session Must:**

- Make sure that participants are able to clearly express their experiences and ideas
- Keep discussion on topic
- Keep the discussion on time
- Ensure that all participants have an opportunity to contribute
- Assure that a recorder is assigned
- Briefly share some of your own experiences around this session topic

**Internal Assets**

Internal assets include commitment to learning, positive values, social competencies, and positive identity.

**Commitment to Learning:** Young people need a sense of the lasting importance of learning and a belief in their own abilities.

**Positive Values:** Young people need to develop strong guiding values or principles to help them make healthy life choices.

**Social Competencies:** Young people need the skills to interact effectively with others, to make difficult decisions, and to cope with new situations.

**Positive Identity:** Young people need to believe in their own self-worth and to feel that they have control over the things that happen to them. This creates a sense of purpose and builds high self-esteem.
SESSION FORMAT

1. Have everyone share brief introduction: name, school, why each of us is here today. (maximum 30 seconds) Students should be seated in a circle.

2. After introductions, the facilitator should share some basic ground rules for the session:
   • Encourage full participation in the discussion and activities.
   • Encourage a balanced discussion in which no one person (including the facilitator) dominates a discussion.
   • Use a talking piece (any object) to dictate who has the opportunity to speak.
   • Encourage active listening and respectful discussions. Not all ideas work for all communities, but encourage participants to use this session as an opportunity to think about their community’s initiative in a new way. There should be no “side” conversations.
   • Encourage students to explain their answers. The dialogue should not consist of “yes or no” answers. Encourage students to further explain the things that they are attempting to articulate.

3. Ask a recorder to take notes and keep time. (Each session should have a facilitator. If none of the youth want to be the recorder, the facilitator can assume this role.)

4. As facilitator, spend 2-3 minutes sharing your own experience related to the conversation prompt (below) with youth.

5. After your presentation, prompt the youth to begin the discussion based on your presentation and their own experiences with the conversation prompt. Ask questions of those who are not contributing. Gently cut off or ask for a wrap-up of anyone who begins to monopolize the discussion.

6. When there is five minutes of discussion time left, you should wrap up the discussion by encouraging youth to provide summary statements and highlights from the discussion that can be reported back to a larger group.

7. By the end of the session, you want young people to be excited and ready to make a difference in their community by using their voice.
CONVERSATION PROMPTS

Prior to starting the conversations, the facilitator should explain to the group the purpose of the conversation and activity that are a part of the session. Once participants have an understanding of the purpose of the conversation, the facilitators should guide the students through the following prompts:

• What does the perfect school look like? In what specific ways is the perfect school different from your school? What opportunities and resources exist that aren't in your school?
• Do young people in your community live in a place where they feel the adults in the community value them? Why or why not? How do or should adults show that they value young people?
• Do young people in your community experience caring neighborhoods and schools? Why or why not? How do or should caring neighborhoods and schools look?
• Do adults hold high expectations for youth? Do you feel that the adults in community expect you do well?
• Do you feel heard when discussing issues that you experience in your community or at school? Explain your answer.
• What is something you can do to make your school community a better place? What is something the school can do to make your school community a better place? What is something that people in the community can do to make your school community a better place? (At the end of the conversation, have each young person share the answers to these last questions aloud with the group.)

Note: Not all students have to answer each question; however, everyone in the group should have the opportunity to answer the final set of questions.

SOCIAL MEDIA

No need to put phones away! Ask youth to use their phone to share their ideas and thoughts with their peers participating in conversations throughout the city. Youth can use the hashtag #BTCYouthSession on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram to include highlights of the discussions and activities and share the amazing they generate.

@BTJXN
REIMAGINING YOUR COMMUNITY ACTIVITY

PURPOSE
To identify specific and innovative strategies to make your school district and community better.

SUGGEST GROUP SIZE
5-30 students. Split students up into equal groups.

ESTIMATED TIME
30-45 minutes, depending on group size.

MATERIALS NEEDED
4 Sheets from a self-adhesive flip chart; markers

EXTERNAL ASSETS
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1. Before the activity begins, label each flip chart section headings:
   • SUPPORT – How can your community and school make you feel more supported?
   • EMPOWERMENT – What will help you feel respected and valued as a member of your school community?
   • BOUNDARIES AND EXPECTATIONS – What rules and expectations help you do your best and reach your goals?
   • CONSTRUCTIVE USE OF TIME – What activities, not currently available to you, do you wish you had the opportunity to participate in both at school and in your community?
2. Place the sheets around the room and give each group a different color marker. Ask each group to think critically about specific ways and examples that can help redesign their school environment and community.
3. Give participants the following instructions:
   • Each group has approximately 10 minutes to discuss and include their recommendations for each question.
   • Take a few minutes to think about how you would like to answer each question. Think creatively as a group; do not be limited by the traditional ways of doing things. What can adults do physically, emotionally, and socially that will help to improve outcomes for you and your peers.
   • Choose a writer for each group to record the group’s opinions for each topic on the flip chart paper. At the end of the 10 minutes, rotate to the next chart.
   • Reconvene the groups and allow each group to report out what they wrote and added to each section.

TIPS FOR SUCCESS

• Encourage participation by monitoring each group’s discussion. The result should be colorful charts with amazing ideas about how to improve external assets for young people.
• This activity can create a lot of conversation, so be careful to watch time.
• Allow students to be as creative as possible. If green walls and dance music is what they feel will make their environment more conducive to learning allow them to include those ideas in the activity.
• If your session allows more time for students to discuss, you can extend the time for each topic.
• This activity can be done with youth in grades 3-12. However, sessions should be done among peer groups. For example, high school students should be in sessions with other high school students. For younger students, be sure to explain what each topic means in a way they can clearly understand it.
In your own words, summarize the discussion you had with your peers in your BTC Youth Session. Include your favorite parts of the session, quotes that you liked, or ideas that you felt were great!