

GUIDELINES FOR HOLDING LISTENING/LEARNING MEETINGS

A lot of what follows may be evident to our experienced staff and leaders. The Organizing Team publishes these guidelines only as way of trying to stay consistent with the central values of this process. We hope the meetings are as varied and unpredictable as the people who attend.

Values. The values that inform this process are inclusion, diversity, openness, the presumption of goodwill, active listening, and action. The Organizing Team thinks there are thousands of teachers, parents, school officials, academics, public officials, and policy experts who have ideas about creating excellent schools but lack the forum to discuss them. Whereas none of us believe there is a silver bullet solution to creating excellent schools, we believe that harnessing the brainpower of the widest range of thinkers and practitioners, particularly of those closest to the children, yields the best possibility of developing a solid, practical strategy worthy of support. By committing to submit a strategy proposal to the CTA Board by April 4, 2002, we are assuring that people's input will not only be listened to, but also factored into the strategy.

Who Holds the Meetings? Any CTA member or staff may hold a listening/learning meeting. The only requirements are that the time and dates of the meetings, the names and titles of the participants, and results of the meetings be submitted to Barbara E. Kerr at the CTA office by March 1, 2002.

Who and How Many Attend? We recommend a maximum of 10 people be included in each meeting to assure participation and discussion. The leader of each meeting chooses who to invite and sets the time and place. In the first phase, the goal is to engage CTA Board Members, chapter presidents, State Council representatives, and CTA staff. In the second phase, all entities and individuals within CTA are encouraged to convene group meetings for the purpose of generating data from deeper and wider perspectives. Special emphasis should be placed on including parents, teachers, and students (high school) from high need schools. Those who hold meetings are also strongly encouraged to make sure that the group is as diverse as possible. Other probable targeted groups would include teachers from higher percentile schools, school reform and policy experts, school dropouts, and decision makers.

How Long Are the Meetings? The meetings should be from one and one-half to two hours long. They should start and end on time, respecting people's schedules. The ending time of the meeting should be announced at the beginning of the meeting.

What Are We After? The CTA Board wants four things from these meetings: engagement, ideas, felt meaning, and leaders to hold additional meetings. (1) *Engagement.* The process itself should be energizing because of who is there and the seriousness of the subject. The goal is real discussion, not just a list. (2) *Ideas.* A space is being created to produce a lot of ideas, from different perspectives, maximizing our chance of producing a creative strategy. (3) *Felt meaning.* The process is meant to discover about what people have passion, anger, or energy, and what they feel most deeply about this subject. (4) *Leaders.* The Organizing Team hopes each meeting produces leaders who will hold other meetings, increasing the breadth of ideas and the

depth of commitment to implement them. Part of our focus is to build capacity so that this is not viewed as a single event but rather as approach to how we learn and understand each other.

Meeting Do's and Don'ts.

- Your stance: As the facilitator for the meetings, you are neither a thoughtless sponge nor the Grand Inquisitor, meaning that you should not just take everything in without intervention nor should you feel you need to comment on everything. You are the leader of a discussion. Often people need to be probed or questioned to get their best thinking. Your own thinking needs to be shared like everyone else's so that everyone is on equal footing. You should try to deepen and broaden the conversation, to provoke new thinking.
- Establish the end time of the meeting at the beginning. Tell the participants it is your job to be sure that everyone has a chance to speak and that the meeting ends on time.
- Don't feel compelled to fill silence. If a question is asked and people don't initially say anything, just wait. You will be sending a message that it is more important to you to listen to them than to ease your anxiety by filling the silence.
- Once people have suggested some ideas, invite others to ask them questions, ask a question yourself, e.g. "How would that work?" "What obstacles do you see?" "How do you see that fitting with what Jane said earlier?" "Others have said ...," etc. The goal is to clarify, get a little more precise, stimulate the discussion, and raise other questions.
- Try to create the dynamics of a group discussion rather than a series of dialogues between the speakers and you. The more people together, the better the meeting.
- Don't let anyone dominate the group. Don't let anyone sit it out. "I want to be sure everyone has a chance to share his/her ideas." "We haven't heard from Jose. Jose, what do think about...?"
- Argument is good. Put-downs are off-limits. People must leave the meeting feeling that some of their thinking has been challenged. They should not leave the meeting feeling ridiculed or dumb.
- Don't react to attacks on CTA, teachers, or the whole school establishment ("This whole thing is a joke. CTA never cares about anything but getting more money for itself." "Nothing is going to come from all this listening.") Don't try to answer. Don't defend. Instead, go back to the question: "What do you think our strategy should be?" Go on to the next person.

- When people are very general or loaded up with “shoulds,” ask “how to” questions. E.g. “Schools should be the top priority in the nation.” “Teachers should care more about the children.” Responses: “What would it take to make schools a higher priority?” “What could be done to maximize the number of teachers who care deeply for children?”
- Don’t try to summarize or synthesize the discussion at the end of the meeting. Let what has been said stand on its own. Point them to the next steps of the process. Thank them for participating. Send them home on time.
- Try to learn something. Don’t get so technically worried about doing the meeting right that you fail to enjoy the opportunity to engage with others on this important subject.
- If someone appears to be particularly insightful, ask that person, after the meeting, whether he/she will submit his/her thoughts in writing. Give specific instructions on where to send their responses.
- Crucial end of meeting details:
 - Collect the sign-in sheet with the complete contact information (tell them they will be contacted about the final strategy).
 - Write your notes on the meeting as soon as possible. Don’t trust your memory. (You should have a colleague taking notes during the meeting, but not as a substitute for your own instincts and judgment.) You want both the ideas that emerged and the depth of feeling.
 - Return the meeting form to Barbara E. Kerr at the CTA headquarters office (P.O. Box 921, Burlingame, CA 94011-0921).