WHY DO YOU GO TO SCHOOL?

A classroom discussion tool for reflecting on the individual and collective purposes of school

1. **Towards the beginning of the year, ask students, "Why do you go to school?"**

   Give students a few minutes of silent thinking time. Then, ask students to do one of the following…

   - Individually write or draw (accompanied by an "artist's statement") responses on large post-its (hard-copy or virtual)
   - brainstorm and record answers in a small or large group, followed by individual written responses
   - interview each other and record each other's answers

2. **Record individual responses in a format that all can see**

3. **Ask students to review the responses. Facilitate a discussion using the "See-Think-Wonder" routine:**

   - What do you notice about the different responses?
   - What do they make you think?
   - What do they make you wonder?

   Probe responses by asking, "What makes you say that?" Record the responses on chart paper.

4. **Invite one or more small groups of students to group similar responses and create a map or other visual representation of the clusters of responses.**

   Post the map in the classroom with the date. Occasionally return to the map throughout the year as ideas or questions arise that either support or challenge the ideas represented. Post them in a different color or post-it.

5. **On another day, facilitate a discussion along the lines of, "Why are there schools?" or "All modern societies have schools. Why might this be? What would society be like if most of us didn't go to school?"**

   Record highlights from the discussion and post them next to the map.

6. **At the end of the year, revisit the earlier responses with the students.**

   What do they notice? Ask them to complete the prompt, "I used to think the purpose(s) of school was … Now I think the purpose(s) of school is …"

Purpose: This tool invites students to reflect on their assumptions, beliefs, and values about the purpose of school for themselves and others, and for society itself. School is one of the first organized group learning settings that children experience. Why do schools exist? How do they benefit not just the individual, but also society as a whole? This tool asks students to think about the *interconnectedness* between the individual and the community writ large. Students reflect on the purposes of school and their motivations for being there as a way to clarify why they go and perhaps gain a sense of agency—ideally making their experience more meaningful and purposeful.

Application: This tool proposes just one of many ways to prompt students' reflections about the purpose of schools. Feel free to modify or adapt it as you see fit!
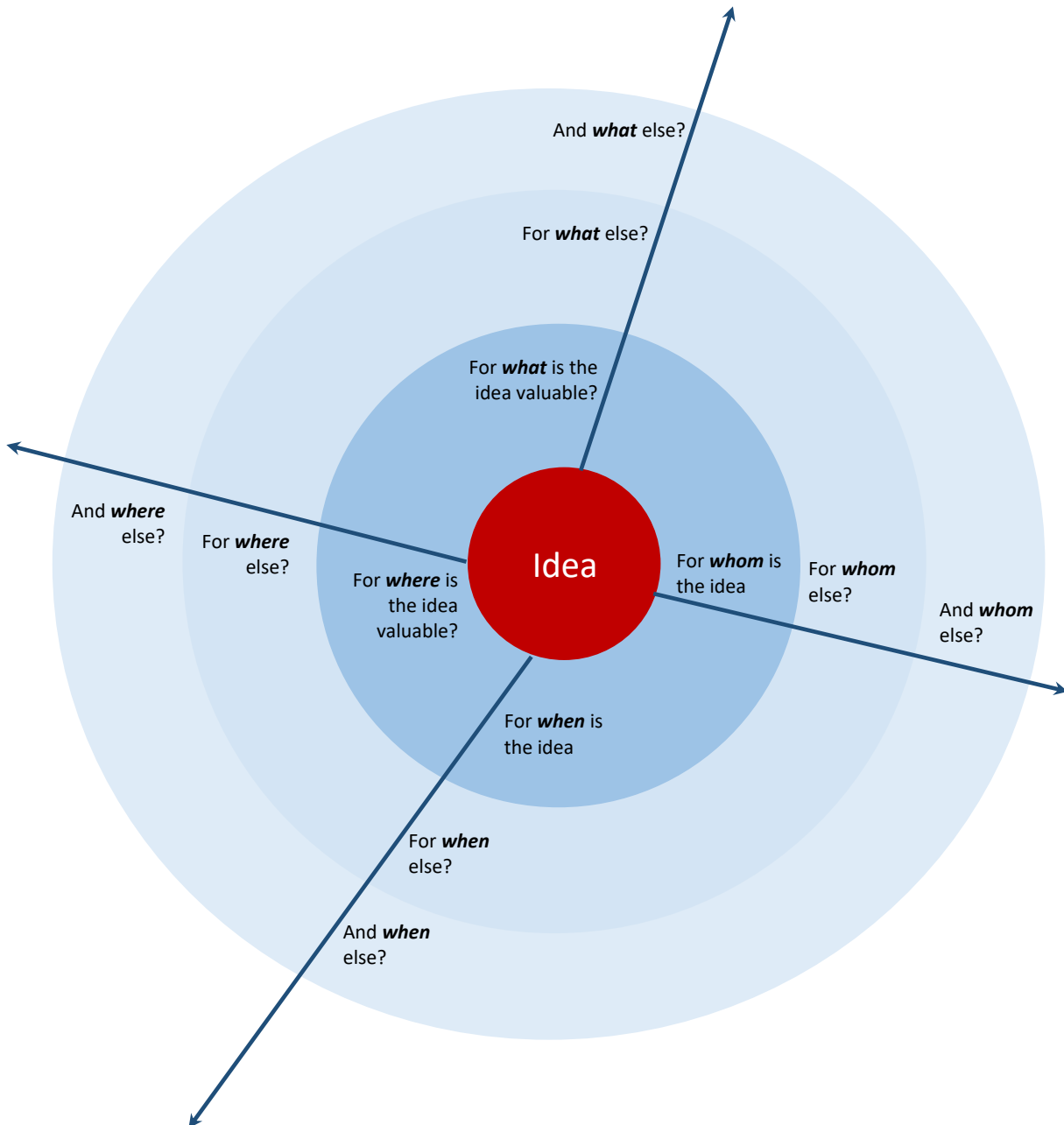
Variations and Extensions:

- If students would be more comfortable responding anonymously, ask them to choose an alias to identify their responses.
- You can also respond to the same question, from the perspective of your role as teacher and/or learner.
- Share the responses of one class with another (grade, subject) and ask what students notice.
- Ask caregivers to respond to a similar question ("Why does your child go to school?"). In advance, ask caregivers to predict how their children would respond to the question about why they go to school, and ask students to predict what their caregivers would say. Share the actual responses as a basis for a conversation with students and families together. You can also ask other groups (teachers, older and younger children, children in different parts of the world, etc.) to make predictions about each other's responses.
- Save the posters that each class creates to share with future classes.
- This tool can give you a sense of the messages about teaching and learning that students perceive you as sending, either implicitly or explicitly.
- Consider asking students to:
  - share what is hard about achieving the goals they or others name.
  - respond to a similar question about other topics ("Why do you do play videogames, participate in sports, join clubs, etc.?") and compare answers.
  - think about how their school is doing at achieving the purposes they've identified. What should stay the same and what changes might they suggest? What would be a next step?
  - respond to the question, "If we could design our own school, it would…"
  - create a name for the class based on their responses
- Reflection questions for you and your colleagues:
  - Is it important to have a conversation with students about why they go to school? If so, toward what end?
  - What do you want students to see as the purposes of schooling, and how might you help them see it that way?
  - Is there a connection you want students to be aware of between why you teach and why they go to school? If so, what is it?
  - How important is it that students and teachers share similar purposes for being in school?
  - How does compulsory education change the context for thinking about this question?

4 Ws

A tool for helping students think more broadly about an issue or idea they are considering

It is important to consider how issues and ideas impact other people and communities. Use the following prompts to investigate an issue or idea for its value to other people. Begin by writing the idea in the smallest (red) circle. Then, work your way from the innermost circle of prompts to the outermost circle.

And **what** else?

For **what** else?

For **what** is the idea valuable?

And **where** else?

For **where** else?

For **where** is the idea valuable?

Idea

For **whom** is the idea

For **whom** else?

And **whom** else?

For **when** is the idea

For **when** else?

And **when** else?

Purpose: This tool invites learners to think more broadly about an idea by considering its value across several important dimensions: (1) *for whom*, i.e. who is the idea targeting?; (2) *for what*, i.e. what is the purpose for generating the idea?; (3) *for when*, i.e. what about this time makes the idea especially important?; and (4) *for where*, i.e. where is the idea best implemented and why? To deepen learners' thinking, use the following follow-up questions for each dimension:

For whom?	*For what?*	*For when?*	*For where?*
Whom does this idea not consider and why? Whom will this idea benefits? Who will it disadvantage? How might people respond to the idea? What makes me think that?	Why does this idea matter to me and to others? Are there other purposes or objectives that this idea should have addressed but did not? Why do I think that?	Would this idea have worked 50 years ago? What makes me think that? Would it work in 50 years' time? What makes me think that?	Where might this idea be less successful? What makes me say that? How will this idea work in a different part of the world?

Application: Have learners work with the prompts from the innermost (blue) circle to the outermost (gray) one. For instance, learners will first address *For who is the idea valuable?*, followed by *For who else?*, and finally *And who else?* Using the prompts in this order helps learners understand that there are some people/purposes/contexts/timeframes that do not immediately come to mind when we are engaging with ideas, and it's important that they ask themselves why that is so. Going through the prompts systematically in this way will push them to probe what has hitherto been invisible, ignored or hidden to them.

You may want to use all four dimensions (*for whom, for what, for when, for where*) together, or focus on 1 or 2 that feel more relevant for your purpose. Or, you may assign groups of learners different dimensions to consider. What is important about the use of this tool is using all three layers of each dimension in the order specified, e.g. *For who is the idea valuable? For who else? And who else?*

However, if you don't have a lot of time for using this tool, consider using the prompts in the blue circle. Familiarizing learners with even those four dimensions will broaden the way they engage with ideas.

Variations & Extensions:

- To assess learners' developing ideas, you could use the tool at the beginning of a unit as a diagnostic exercise to understand their preconceptions and what may be needed in the unit to deepen their thinking.
- At the end of the unit, the tool may be used to understand whether learners have developed a more nuanced and complex understanding of the idea.
- Using the tool in these two ways will help you track the development of learners' thinking as well as assess what particular aspects of the unit supported their thinking and what else could be included or revised in the unit to achieve the desired outcomes.

IMAGINING A MORE POSITIVE WORLD

A tool for experimenting with ways that a civic issue could be more hopeful or positive

What about the issue would we **magnify** to make our world more positive? Why?

What about the issue would we **minimize** to make our world more positive? Why?

_____

_____

(write down a civic issue that feels unfair, unhealthy, or unsustainable)

What about the issue would we **delete** to make our world more positive? Why?

What would we **add** to the issue to make our world more positive? Why?

This tool is based on an activity developed by Molly Hinkle.

Purpose: This tool encourages learners to imagine a better world by asking them to pick one issue and think about how to modify or fine-tune it to make the world more positive. Civic issues such as global warming, food insecurity, systemic poverty, or gender inequalities often demand multifaceted solutions that are challenging even for experts. Regular use of this tool empowers learners to imagine small-scale changes that might have an impact on a civic issue. In the process, they reflect about what civic issues they care about most.

Application: Begin by selecting an age-appropriate civic issue that is rich with opportunities for conversation and bold imagining. Consider issues that have been in the news lately (e.g., air pollution; poverty; gentrification of neighborhoods; sea levels rising), or that have a visible presence in the students' lives (e.g., bullying; racism) or the local community (e.g., rising costs; community safety). An important criterion for selecting civic issues for the tool is *relevance,* i.e., relevant to your life and the lives of your learners, and to the community and the world.

Use this tool with an artwork, text, or image that presents a particular perspective on a civic issue or situation. Check out the collections on the Columbus Museum of Art's website, which you can browse by artists, subject, or medium. The *Learning Network* by The New York Times also offers rich resources for teaching about current events.

Give learners a few minutes to silently view the selected artifact, and then ask them what they notice about the way the issue is presented, how it makes them feel, what it makes them think, and what it makes them wonder. Then, invite learners to brainstorm responses to the 4 prompts in the tool. Follow this up by asking learners to share their responses in small groups. Then bring them together to harvest highlights from their small group conversations.

Variations & Extensions:

- There is no particular order to the four prompts in the tool; invite students to use them in any order that they see fit. However, leaving the "Delete" prompt to the end may be helpful because trying to figure out what to remove can be challenging for learners unless they have worked on magnifying, minimizing, and/or adding first.
- Feel free to add new prompts to the tool or modify them to suit your context. For instance, you could include prompts that ask learners to "recolor" a part of an image to elicit different emotional responses, or to change the relationships among the various components in the material.
- Consider using an overarching question for the year such as, "How can we use our imagination and words to build a better world for ourselves and our communities?" Over time, give learners opportunities to share their ideas about how to make the world a better place in writing or another medium to learn what they care about.
- Ask students to identify patterns, trends, commonalities, or differences in their responses: *Is there a common issue across all the responses that could lead to a collective product (e.g., a mural, poster, video, collage, or other visual or oral/written presentation)?*
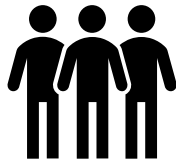
FROM VISION TO DECISION

A tool for scaling down ideas to an actionable size

First, fill in the blanks.

The civic challenge we want to address is _____.
Our idea for how things could be different is _____.

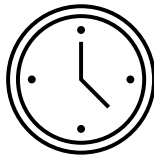*Then, use the following questions to plan how to move from idea to impact.*

Audience

How can we focus our idea on our own community?

What kind of impact would we like to have?

Now vs. Later

What can we start today?

What might we do down the road?

Teammates & Allies

What are each of our roles on the team?

What kind of help do we need, and whom can we ask?

Purpose: When moving from idea to action, getting started can be the hardest part. This tool offers students a series of questions to scale down their ideas to a manageable size, so they can take some initial steps, experience success, and understand that complex civic challenges can often be addressed in small ways. Learning in school is often treated as separate from the "real world," yet learners often have strong feelings about the world around them and possess the imagination and agency to help shape this world. By focusing on their own community, what they can do in the here and now, and who they can enlist to help, learners take a first step in influencing the world around them and develop their capacity to create even bigger change moving forward.

Application: Use this tool as a way for learners to create an action plan in response to a civic challenge they see in their classroom, their community, or the world. To use this tool, learners should already have a civic challenge in mind – whether it be a classroom dispute or a global issue – as well as ideas about how things could be different. Although this tool can be used by individual learners, it is currently designed for small groups or teams of learners.
Learners should ideally have a written record of their responses to refer back to later, so either use the tool as a worksheet or ask them to document their responses in some other way.

Variations & Extensions:

- Try this tool after using the *Imagining a More Positive World* tool with learners.
- Encourage learners to be very specific about who in their community they will focus on for their action plan (e.g., their classroom or school community, their friends and family).
- Engage learners in a discussion about how they would define their "community" and why.
- Engage learners in a discussion about what gets in the way of people being able to make meaningful change in the world.
- Ask learners to respond to just one category of prompts (Audience, Now vs. Later, Teammates & Allies) depending on what aspect of their idea they are trying to develop.
- Invite learners to share their action plans with each other for feedback.