

Let's Build Our Future

Youth Discussion Guide



A student guidebook for talking, deciding, and acting together



**NATIONAL ISSUES
FORUMS INSTITUTE**

Why Are We Here?

In 2026, the United States will turn 250 years old. That anniversary is a chance not only to look back, but also to ask what should come next for our country, our communities, and young people like us.

From the start, people in America have had to work through hard questions, different views, and difficult choices. They didn't always agree, and not everyone was allowed to take part fully. But one lesson still matters today: a strong democracy depends on people being willing to talk with one another, make decisions, and act together to solve problems.

The Constitution and Bill of Rights establish a new government and outline important rights and responsibilities.

The 19th Amendment expands voting rights for women, marking another major step in widening participation in American democracy.

The 26th Amendment lowers the voting age to 18, expanding young people's formal voice in public life.

YOU ARE HERE: America turns 250, and your generation has a chance to help shape what comes next. How will you help lead the United States into its next 250 years?

1770's

Young people **debate independence**, share ideas, and join boycotts and local efforts.

1787-1791

1860's

The Civil War brings an end to slavery, an important step forward in helping the young country live up to its ideals of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" for all Americans.

1920

1960's

College students lead sit-ins for the **Civil Rights Movement**, using the power of disciplined, nonviolent action. Thousands of children and teens join the Children's March in Birmingham.

1971

2000's-Today

Young people keep shaping public life through service, storytelling, student leadership, public meetings, and local problem-solving.

2026

What's Next America?

Young people have always been part of America's story. "What's Next, America?" is an opportunity to add to that story of active citizenship and youth leadership in your own school or community today.

This guide will help you:

- Share your perspective with others
- Listen to people with different views and experiences
- Think about tradeoffs and choices
- Decide what matters most
- Work with others to improve your community and our country!

You do not need to have all the answers. You just need to be willing to work together to make your school, community, and country the best it can be.

How We'll Work Together

For this conversation to work, we agree to:

- Listen to understand one another, not to win an argument
- Respect different opinions and experiences
- Speak honestly and thoughtfully
- Stay focused on improving our community

**Disagreeing can be healthy and productive.
Disrespect is not.**

Part 1: Looking Back to Look Forward

Before deciding what's next, it helps to think about the past. At America's founding, people had to practice important civic skills:

- 1 Listening to others
- 2 Explaining their views
- 3 Making choices together
- 4 Taking responsibility for what they decided

Those same skills matter today.

THINK ABOUT IT

What civic skills were important in the past? Which of those skills are still important now? Which skills do you want to strengthen?

Part 2: Where Are We Now?

This discussion is about understanding your school or community today. A strong future can mean different things to different people. For some, it might include:

- 1 Feeling safe and welcome
- 2 Being treated fairly and respectfully
- 3 Having a voice in decisions
- 4 Having opportunities to learn and lead

What do you want the future to look like in your school or community?

DISCUSS

How would you describe our school or community right now? What are some strengths we already have? What are some challenges young people face here?

Part 3: Mapping Strengths and Challenges

Work with your group to list the following.

Strengths: good things that help your community

Some examples of strengths might include:

- People who care – including YOU!
- School clubs, sports teams, or youth programs
- Safe and fun spaces to play and learn
- Our community's history and cultural traditions.

It's your turn! List your examples here.

Challenges: things that make life harder

Some examples of challenges might include:

- Problems students face
- Needs that are not being met
- Challenges that families face
- Barriers that keep people from participating or being heard

It's your turn! List your examples here.

CHART YOUR PATH FORWARD

Use the roadmap to turn ideas to action



1. Our Direction

What are we working toward?

2. Our Strengths

Who and what can help us?

3. Our Challenges

What obstacles might arise?

4. Our Goal

What will success look like?

After mapping, answer this question together:

If you could do **one** thing to improve life for young people in your community, what would it be?

Find others in the group who want to work on a similar idea. Discuss how your different answers to the question connect. Is there a common theme or idea that emerges?

This becomes your group's **Big Idea!**

Share your Big Idea here:

Part 4: Where Do We Want to Go?

Now think more deeply about your Big Idea. Discuss the following:

- 1 Why does this idea matter?
- 2 Who would it help?
- 3 What might be hard about doing this?
- 4 Why is it still worth trying?

There may be many good ideas. Choose one your group is excited to work on.

NOTES TO YOURSELF

Part 5: How Will We Get There?

Turn your Big Idea into a simple plan. Answer these questions with your group:

1 What exactly is our idea?

2 Who needs to be involved?

3 Where and when could this happen?

4 What are our next steps? Who else do we need to talk to? What else do we need to learn? What potential obstacles should we be prepared for?

5 What is one small step we can take after we leave today?

Big changes often start small.

NOTES TO YOURSELF

Part 6: Sharing Ideas and Learning

You'll then share your Big Idea with others.

When listening to other groups:

- 1** Notice what you like about their ideas
- 2** Ask questions to understand
- 3** Offer suggestions respectfully

When sharing your group's idea with others:

- 1** Answer questions respectfully
- 2** Highlight what you like about suggestions
- 3** Incorporate ideas for making your Big Idea stronger

This is about building civic skills, and learning and improving ideas together.

NOTES TO YOURSELF

Reflection

Take a moment to think about today.

- What did you learn about working with others?
- What was challenging?
- What skills did you practice?

These skills matter far beyond this conversation.

Use this space for yourself, including notes and reflections.

What's Next?

It's Up to You!



The story of America has always been shaped by people who stepped forward, shared ideas, worked through differences, and took action for the good of their communities. That work does not belong only to adults. It belongs to all of us. Your Big Idea is one small part of that larger story.

Young people have the power to lead right now — by listening, speaking up, solving problems, and working with others. As the United States turns 250, the question “What’s Next, America?” is for all of us. The answer is up to **We the People** — including you. One of the best ways to celebrate America’s 250th birthday is to work together to help shape what comes next.

About Us

The National Issues Forums Institute is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization with a mission to equip, empower, and mobilize people to use deliberation to take action for the public good.



WHAT'S NEXT, AMERICA?

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Learn more at whatsnextamerica.com.

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