



## Conversation starters help teachers get unstuck

BY KRISTINE JAMES

Coaches are expert listeners, and we're well-positioned to hear about teachers' concerns and needs. Lately, we're hearing one particular message loud and clear: Teachers are tired and stressed. Teaching and learning conditions are changing by the week, pressure to close learning gaps is mounting, and political tensions are weighing on everyone.

Given the high levels of stress and burnout, it's understandable that teachers are expressing a lot of frustrations and sharing that they aren't sure how to deal with them. My colleagues and I have been hearing a lot of overwhelmed statements like, "The kids don't know how to be at school anymore" and "The students are so far behind that I don't know where to begin."

Teachers who are usually optimistic and solution-oriented are saying things like, "I'll never get all these assessments

done" and "How am I supposed to get through the curriculum?"

As a coach, I try to help teachers get unstuck and move through these understandable frustrations. One of the ways I do that is through conversation starters that help teachers look under the surface and identify positive action steps. I create these reflection questions based on concerns that are coming up frequently so that I'm prepared to respond helpfully.

For example, when a teacher tells me her students don't know how to be at school, I can ask, "What's the biggest change you're seeing in your students? And how have you tried to address it so far?" Other times, when a teacher says she's overwhelmed by responsibilities, I

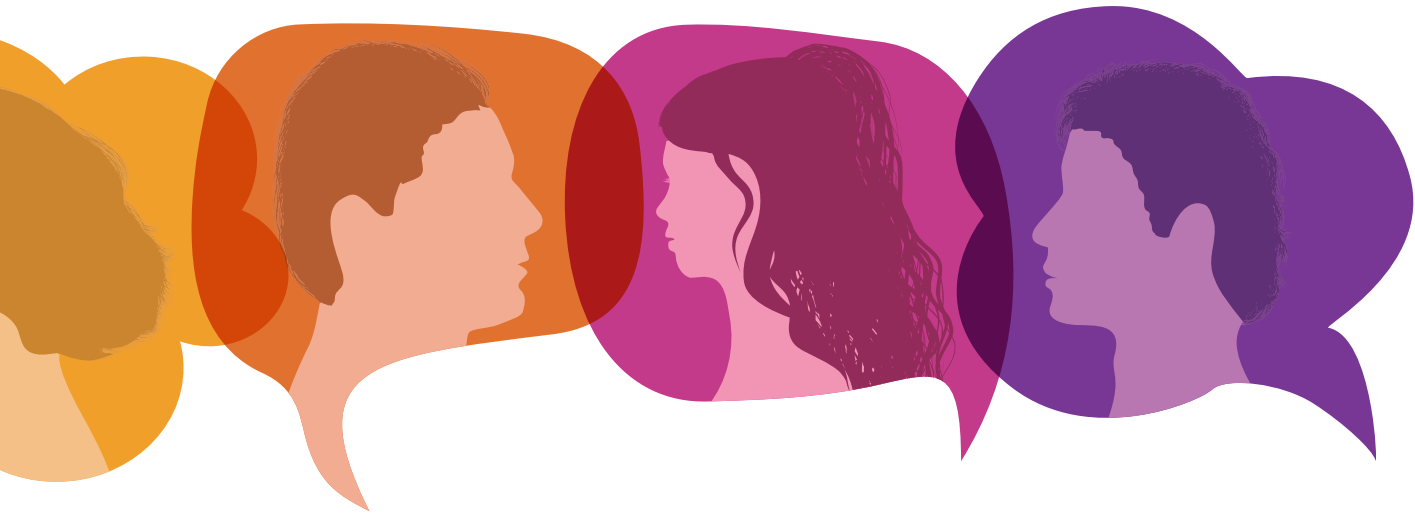
can offer to help by saying, "What feels heaviest right now? I have some time tomorrow afternoon. Can we meet to look at ways I can support you?"

The following tool shares some examples of conversation starters I use, along with prompts to create your own. These can be used to initiate a coaching cycle or find out how to support a teacher this week. They can also be used by administrators, teacher leaders, and anyone else who wants to help teacher colleagues succeed in these stressful times.

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### FOR MORE INFORMATION

This tool was inspired by Kristine James' presentation during Learning Forward's webinar on "Coaching during 'other duties as assigned'" on Dec. 16, 2021. To listen to the archived webinar and see related resources, visit [learningforward.org/webinar/coaching-during-other-duties-as-assigned/](https://learningforward.org/webinar/coaching-during-other-duties-as-assigned/)



## CREATE YOUR OWN CONVERSATION STARTERS

### DIRECTIONS

List teachers' current concerns and frustrations in the left column. In the middle column, set goals for your work with teachers based on those concerns. In the right column, identify one or more questions you can use to start a productive conversation with teachers to work toward the goals.

In this table, the rows below are filled in as examples. On the following page, the next three rows include a common teacher concern but leave space for you to set the goals and create the questions. At the end are rows for you to fill in additional concerns, goals, and questions you wish to work on with teachers.

Teacher concern	Coaching goal(s)	Conversation starter(s)
<i>Filled in as examples</i>		
The students don't know how to be at school anymore.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Help teachers build on student assets.</li> <li>• Build teachers' efficacy.</li> </ul>	What is the biggest change you are seeing? How have you addressed this already?
The students are so far behind I don't know where to begin.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Address teachers' sense of overwhelm.</li> <li>• Help teachers identify most immediate student needs.</li> </ul>	What are the strengths you are seeing in your students this year?
I'll never be able to finish these assessments without subs.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support teachers to use data effectively.</li> </ul>	Can I help assess the students and then meet with you to share results and discuss next steps?

# TOOLS

CREATE YOUR OWN CONVERSATION STARTERS CONTINUED		
Teacher concern	Coaching goal(s)	Conversation starter(s)
<i>Common teacher concerns with space for you to set the goals and create the questions</i>		
I don't know how I'm supposed to get all of this done.		
Students' skills and needs vary widely in the same class.		
I'm spending so much time keeping up with changing COVID-19 protocols that I'm not getting my grading done.		
<i>Rows for you to fill in additional concerns, goals, and questions</i>		