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Including Students in Fall Planning

The importance of seeking student input as K-12 educators work toward reopening schools

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As more and more of the country starts to reopen after being in lockdown mode since mid-March, one big question still looms: What about public K-12 schools? Experts and school leaders have started to weigh in on how best to reopen in the fall, with suggestions such as having students wear masks, attending on staggered days, and moving classes outdoors when possible. In some districts, surveys are being sent to parents asking for their feedback on what worked and what didn't during the past few months of home learning.

But where in the strategizing and planning is the student voice? As schools re-imagine what learning will look like post-COVID, are students being asked for their input?

According to Gretchen Brion-Meisels (/node/125602), Jessica Fei (/node/578541), and Deepa Vasudevan (/node/577631), authors of *At Our Best: Youth-Adult Relationships in Out-of-School Time Settings* (<https://www.infoagepub.com/products/At-Our-Best>), some are being asked, many aren't, but all should be. Usable Knowledge asked the authors how student perspectives can inform school decisions going forward.

No one knows yet what “school” will look like on the other side of the COVID-19 pandemic, but some have predicted we won't go back to business as usual. Do you agree?

While we don't have specific predictions about what schools will look like this fall, we certainly have hopes for what this disruption to “business as usual” can help us confront and transform in our education system. With COVID-19 exacerbating existing inequities in our country, and with the heightened visibility of state-sanctioned anti-black violence in this moment, it is more important than ever for us not to return to business as usual and to instead take a definitive stand against the injustices of the status quo. This is a moment for us to invest fully in remaking schools as spaces for community, healing, and liberation.

Are students currently being asked for their input as we move forward?

We know many teachers and youth workers are asking for feedback and input from their students about what is and isn't working with remote learning. In these spaces, educators are taking advantage of the relative, and new, freedom that they have to expand definitions of teaching and learning, and to creatively build relationships and community through both tech platforms and distanced activities. These teachers, counselors, and principals are pausing and listening, using this moment of unknown to begin to co-construct a better way forward with their students.

Some haven't reached out yet. Why do you think that is?

There are many educators who are so busy trying to meet their students' and families' basic needs, as well as holding space to process the recent visibility of police violence across the nation, that they have not yet had the time or space to seek input about learning and the structure of school. We know educators who are delivering food and supplies, connecting with students experiencing depression and anxiety, providing social and financial support for overwhelmed parents, joining youth-led protests and the Movement for Black Lives, all while caring for their own extended families and communities. Fundamental survival needs can take up so much time that there is no space for more reflective thinking.

Perhaps of greatest concern to us are the schools that remain solely focused on academic achievement and traditional forms of attendance at this time, failing to care for the physical, emotional or psychological needs of their students and teachers, and also missing this unique opportunity to look inward and co-construct with their youth.

Should all students be asked to weigh in, even younger students?

We certainly think that students and their families should be asked for their input, at all ages. One thing we worry about is that teachers probably already receive quite a bit of input from their students and families, but that the feedback they are receiving isn't prioritized by school and district leadership who may be more preoccupied by traditional measurements of academic success.

"The real question is, how can adults create the space and time for students' ideas to be taken seriously? Where can we, as adults, push back on outdated or harmful requirements and, instead, co-create new visions of teaching and learning with the young people in our classrooms?"

What's lost when this happens, when the student voice is missing?

We lose an opportunity to re-engage students who already didn't like school and who didn't feel seen in the physical realm of school, let alone the virtual space. We also lose the chance to use this moment as a catalyst for the type of political change, racial equity, and healing justice that current uprisings across the country demand. From youth-led mass mobilization for black lives and student driven campaigns for police-free schools (see student campaigns in Chicago, New York, and Philadelphia, to name just a few), young people are already leading and voicing their needs. The question is, are we joining in and addressing their critical demands for change? If we do not stand in solidarity with our students, we will fail in our responsibilities as educators: to create conditions for students to fully experience the power of their own voice and leadership, to enrich students' academic skills and socio-emotional development through authentic, trusting relationships with adults, and to understand the interconnections between personal and social transformation for our students.

You mention that especially helpful would be the young people who already participate in leadership and activism clubs and programs.

Yes. We need to draw on this existing knowledge and expertise of youth workers and other out-of-school time educators who have experience with supporting youth organizers, councils, and boards and collaborating with youth through community organizing or critical participatory action research. We suggest that school leaders identify and partner with youth organizers and out-of-school time agencies so that the pressure is not just on teachers to do it all. Also, many cities have student unions, youth boards, youth councils that we should be connecting with to better understand the impact of COVID-19 on young people's engagement and learning in schools.

What are a couple of examples of how students can help?

Honestly, the sky is the limit. Students can participate in processes related to the evaluation and design of online learning, and they can plan and facilitate online workshops focused on topics that are of relevance to young people today. The real question is, how can adults create the space and time for students' ideas to be taken seriously? Where can we, as adults, push back on outdated or harmful requirements and, instead, co-create new visions of teaching and learning with the young people in our classrooms?

Through the process of creating *At Our Best*, we had the honor of learning from more than 50 adults and youth who have already begun to build partnerships and co-construct new ways of being, together. These folks all spoke about the importance of adults honoring youth expertise and building strong, trusting, consistent relationships with young people in order to achieve positive change in schools, neighborhoods, and organizations.

If you were a school leader, how would you get this started now?

Listening tours are often amazing ways of getting out into the community and better understanding how folks are experiencing their time at school, work, and home. We can imagine school leaders conducting virtual or physically distanced focus groups with students, families, and educators this summer to try and really understand how they experienced school this spring.

To this end, it is important for school leadership and teachers to come together to think about what questions are emerging and how they will honor and integrate student voices in authentic ways. For example, they might ask students, “What was most helpful and most challenging to your learning and participation this spring? What topics are motivating your learning right now? What do you miss about physically gathering at schools? What changes are a priority for you in how teaching and learning is happening?” These questions can support more co-planning with students around the specifics of distanced or hybrid learning, community building, and the structures and routines that scaffold learning. As always, place and context matter — the specifics of a setting will shape the kinds of questions educators pose. But fundamentally, the ideas and insights that students bring to the table should be seen as equally valuable to those of adults.

The good news is, we have powerful legacies of intergenerational organizing and racial solidarity on which to build as we imagine educational settings anew. We need to study those who have come before us in these challenging and uncertain times, and better understand the ways in which they have built authentic partnerships across stakeholder groups.

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