The California Center for School Climate
YOUTH ADVISORY TEAM

This is Part 1 of a two-part brief designed to capture the importance of student voice in understanding the complexity of student experiences in order to provide interventions and supports that are well matched to their needs.

This audio gallery is a product of the California Center for School Climate (CCSC), a California Department of Education initiative operated by WestEd that provides free support and trainings on school climate and data use to local education agencies in California.

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MEANINGFUL YOUTH ENGAGEMENT TO GUIDE SCHOOL CLIMATE

Since the California Center for School Climate (CCSC) launched in January 2022, one of the core principles guiding CCSC supports is the notion that partnering with students, caregivers, and community partners is crucial in creating environments that are safe, supportive, and inclusive.

CCSC has also prioritized youth engagement through the creation of the **Youth Advisory Team** (YAT), a group of six high school students who provide input on climate needs based on their lived experiences in public schools throughout the state.

The Need for Youth Engagement

Increasingly, climate improvement efforts collect youth feedback through surveys and focus groups, which can demonstrate the value of student perceptions and opinions while improving their sense of belonging and engagement. Yet, statewide data from the 2019 California Healthy Kids Survey indicates that less than one third of secondary students report having opportunities for meaningful participation at school.[1]

School leaders can achieve a higher level of participation by offering students collaborative roles in affecting change based on their critical examinations of learning conditions.[2] Collaborating with students is especially important for secondary students, as creating opportunities for youth to practice decision-making skills aligns with the neurological and developmental needs of adolescents.[3]

Youth advisory team members are valued partners in the design and assessment of CCSC resources and services. YAT members regularly offer feedback on technical assistance supports and co-create resources such as the [Cultivating Caring Relationships at School Toolkit](#) which contains 15 activities that support the development of positive relationships between educators and students. Throughout the collaboration between CCSC and YAT, themes centered around benefits and challenges that YAT members experience have consistently been raised. In Fall 2022, CCSC staff conducted interviews with the YAT to capture and expand upon these topics in an audiocast. The themes that emerged from these interviews are important for school leaders to consider when designing support systems for students in a rapidly changing world.

Diversity and Inclusion on Campus

Major demographic shifts have occurred statewide over the past few decades, including major growth in Latino/a/x and Asian American communities, with more than half of young Californians identifying as Latino/a/x.[4] Research has shown that exposure to and interactions with individuals from diverse backgrounds can help combat stereotypes, reduce implicit biases, and improve cognitive skills such as problem solving and critical thinking.[5] Some youth advisory team members felt that their generation is particularly inclined to accept and respect this increased diversity, though they all noted that educators play a significant role in promoting or inhibiting inclusiveness in the classroom. Teachers can draw upon culturally responsive and sustaining education (CRSE) practices to affirm, sustain, and strengthen students' identities, supporting positive outcomes for all students.[6] YAT members identified the use of CRSE strategies such as connecting students' cultural identities and lived experiences to instructional content on their campuses.[7] Julian, a senior from Saratoga, gave an example: "... history and English teachers are really good at directing conversations about being open-minded and being aware

of the different people that we're surrounded with and respecting each different thing [which] creates a more aware and inclusive student body."

Research has demonstrated that building on students' prior knowledge and experiences while introducing new curricular content can increase motivation and improve information processing.[8] On the other hand, a few YAT members discussed how some of their educators avoid addressing the impact of identity-based discrimination in the classroom. While there is no universal solution for these issues, school leaders can establish clear expectations and norms about naming and challenging bias, oppression, and injustice to ensure that educators feel adequately prepared to support students of color.[9]

Digital Advances

In schools that overlook cultural identities as assets for teaching and learning, students increasingly turn to alternative, online spaces to explore their identities. Adolescents have become increasingly connected, especially on social media platforms which youth often use to share their experiences, learn about social issues, and connect with peers. Studies have shown that technology can offer a crucial space for growth and learning, but its pervasive use can amplify both positive and negative impacts among adolescents.[10] YAT members substantiated the capricious nature of social media, which can offer meaningful opportunities for youth of color, LGBTQ+ youth, and other youth from marginalized groups to express their opinions and create community. At the same time, youth often explore multiple "selves" with families, friends, and in the classroom during adolescence, increasing the potential for contradictions between the "ideal" and "real" versions of teen selves across contexts.[11] As YAT member Amiya, a junior from Sacramento, put it, "if you have an online persona . . . you feel the need to carry up with it in person, and [when] you're not able to do that, it can probably create a lot of stress and anxiety."

When you represent yourself in such a kind of perfect way, as so many people do on social media, it then becomes pretty difficult to talk about the challenges you're facing, or if you need help and reaching out to other people and trying to push away the kind of perfect online persona that you've created for yourself, and try to deal with the human problems that you currently face.

Julian, YAT member

Students who already experience mental health problems and bullying may find that these challenges are amplified online.[12] The youth advisory team cited increasing amounts of online posts and videos that harass and misrepresent students. Often, these posts are made anonymously which can create an uncertain and unsafe environment for students. Adults can limit the harm these risks pose in students' lives by providing guidance and tips for all learners to safely navigate new technologies while ensuring that youth who are extra vulnerable due to pre-existing challenges receive extra supports.[13] Research has demonstrated the overlap between offline and online risk, which challenges the assumption that digital technologies are creating novel problems that are unable to be solved.[14] Students from the CCSC Youth Advisory Team provided extremely valuable insights into areas of strength and opportunities for growth in school climate. A recurring theme throughout these interviews was the need for adults to center and respond to student voice, so that school leaders, educators, and more can better understand how to effectively support students.

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Consider while you listen . . .

The youth advisory team allows high school students to connect with like-minded peers, share their experiences, and gain leadership skills. **How does your school or district currently collect and respond to students' climate experiences? What co-creation and/or decision-making roles exist for students at your school or district?**

YAT members discussed the crucial role that educators play in creating welcoming, inclusive learning environments, especially for students of color. **How does your school or district currently address racial, ethnic, and other cultural identities through instruction? What norms or expectations exist for responding to identity-based discrimination?**

YAT member Aisha commented, "Gen Z, we are digital natives and though that is a good thing in a sense that we have access to so much education and information, it's also something that we have had to navigate without any form of guidance because it's so new." **How might your school or community leverage new technologies to foster social connection, school engagement, and well-being?**

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