California Center for School Climate

WestEd
WestEd.org

Centering the Experiences and Perspectives of Educational Partners

Five Considerations for Schools and Districts

Authors: Timothy Ojetunde, Arturo Chavez

EDUCATIONAL PARTNERS

Centering the stories, experiences, and perspectives of students, families, staff, and community partners—especially those in historically and currently marginalized groups—is an essential activity for meaningfully transforming education systems. Exploring quantitative data alone is not enough to understand the strengths and challenges that students and their families face or the opportunities that exist to serve them effectively. To ensure that system improvement efforts succeed, educational leaders must spend time conversing with and, most importantly, listening to the individuals they hope to serve. Doing so is an important equity stance because education systems often have embedded cultural norms that do not reflect or respond to the cultural assets of most communities.

California
Center for
School Climate

This resource discusses why centering the experiences and perspectives of all educational partners is essential for effective school climate improvement and provides approaches for connecting with and including the voices of these partners in school climate decision-making or similar systems change efforts. After exploring **five considerations** for engaging with school and district communities, this resource concludes by highlighting the perspectives of high school students and recent graduates on centering the experiences of educational partners. Educational leaders, including school site administrators, district administrators, and other staff dedicated to improving school climate, can select, adapt, and implement the ideas in this resource to strengthen their efforts in building connections and gathering insights from those they aim to serve.

Key Terms

Educational partners: refers to essential collaborators such as students, parents, teachers, other school-based staff, and community members

Educational leaders: refers to school site administrators, school district administrators, and other staff dedicated to improving the school climate

Meaningful, liberatory, and lasting change is more likely to result when young people, families, community partners, and system leaders work side by side to design and improve child-, youth-, and family-serving systems.

—Valdez et al., 2023

1. Making Authentic Connections

The purpose of seeking new perspectives from educational partners goes beyond merely finding solutions to school and community challenges. Calling upon educational partners only when we need to collect survey data or fulfill a mandate is a short-sighted approach that will be evident to educational partners and can ultimately lead them to participation fatigue (Field, 2020). It is crucial to foster ongoing and authentic interactions that are anchored in genuine interest and a spirit of curiosity. This is not just about collecting data or checking boxes—it is about truly understanding the various experiences and viewpoints within educational communities.

By fostering connection and seeking to understand the experiences of educational partners more fully,

educational leaders can unlock a wealth of knowledge that cannot be gleaned from mere data dashboards or survey reports. These insights come from educational leaders engaging in meaningful conversations with educational partners through active listening and shared meaning-making opportunities. They may include a student's innovative idea, a teacher's creative instructional strategy, a caregiver's insightful feedback, or a community member's unique perspective on enhancing school–community partnerships. Even more crucial, this proactive approach to engagement sends a powerful message to all partners—that their voices are heard, their experiences are valued, and their perspectives are integral to the decision-making process.

California Center for School Climate

Example: Listening Sessions

Listening sessions play a fundamental role in making authentic connections. They are structured opportunities for educational partners to share their own experiences and insights regarding school and district systems. In this process school or district site staff reach out to educational partners and provide space and opportunity for sharing. The role of staff here is to simply listen.

The listening session opportunity should be reflective of the needs of the educational partners and should thus be located in an easily accessible location and scheduled according to their availability. It is an open-ended process absent of judgment and one that leads to true connection. Listening sessions can be done one-on-one or in groups. The questions that guide the session can be specific or broad depending on what one hopes to learn. Listening sessions also help to shed light on initial data that have been gathered, thereby offering opportunities to go beyond the numbers and to connect with people. When genuine listening occurs, there are more opportunities to make authentic connections through shared experiences. (Oregon Health & Science University, n.d.)

2. Seeking New Perspectives

Even though we may hesitate to acknowledge it, our roles and experiences within society and the educational system lead to biases. Specifically, implicit biases can impede our capacity to fully comprehend the very system we seek to change. In some instances, making decisions without checking our biases can result in causing real harm (Gilliam et al., 2016). Actively seeking new perspectives and working alongside ("with" rather than "for") a range of educational partners can lead to collaborative and innovative solutions that have transformative impact (Daly-Smith et al., 2020). Each school represents a microcosm—a community with its own strengths, histories, cultures, backgrounds, and struggles. Educational partners possess unique perspectives about these school microcosms that can shed light on the root causes of inequities from various angles that may not have even been considered. Seeking new perspectives helps ensure that decisions (e.g., budgetary, strategic, instructional) are informed, inclusive, and considerate of the diverse needs, challenges, and assets present within educational communities.

Example: Empathy Interviews

Conducting empathy interviews is a valuable approach that schools and districts can take to understand the experiences of educational partners more deeply. These are one-on-one conversations that use open-ended questions tailored to elicit input and personal stories about a topic. They offer an approach for deeper level questioning that goes beyond the surface, where many data collection and engagement activities end. They allow for a genuine opportunity to listen, learn, and more deeply understand root causes of system challenges. This can result in refocusing priorities and designing equitable solutions, among other benefits. (Nelsestuen & Smith, 2020)

California
Center for
School Climate

3. Identifying Areas to Celebrate

When educational leaders consistently, intentionally, and deeply engage with educational partners, it opens up opportunities to identify and celebrate achievements that might not be apparent in school data reports. For example, personal growth among students, increased levels of collaboration among staff, strengthened relational trust between families and educators, or positive shifts in school culture may go unnoticed because they are not easily quantified. These nuanced successes may be evident in the stories shared by students and educators or observed in daily interactions.

Celebrating strengths also helps to shape the narratives of the school community, which is often a mix of diverse histories, backgrounds, and aspirations. By recognizing and celebrating our successes and those of our educational partners, we can create a sense of pride and unity that can inspire a sense of community and collective responsibility, which can in turn create possibilities for meaningful and participatory education system transformation.

Example: Asset Mapping

Asset mapping is an activity that focuses on the strengths that currently exist within a system or community. The activity looks at the school, district, and surrounding community as a whole and identifies the assets that should be celebrated and learned from. There are multiple benefits to this activity, such as building and expanding on current successes and strengths, generating shared awareness of school and community assets, and identifying opportunities to increase capacity. (Advancement Project, 2012; UCLA Center for Health Policy Research, 2023)

4. Highlighting Promising Practices

A regular routine of identifying and celebrating achievements within school and district communities and among educational partners also creates opportunities for uncovering promising practices. These promising practices could include teaching strategies that resonate particularly well with students, effective communication methods that foster parent and caregiver engagement, or community initiatives that enhance the overall school environment. With these insights, educational leaders and partners can strategically allocate time and resources toward nurturing and expanding these

successful practices, and less effective approaches can be gradually phased out or adapted.

By genuinely valuing the insights and experiences of educational partners, we can identify successes and best practices and foster an environment of continuous learning and improvement. Capturing and centering the experiences and perspectives of educational partners also ensures that decision-making processes remain inclusive, effective, and truly aligned with the needs and strengths of educational communities.

California Center for School Climate

Example: Start, Stop, Continue

An activity that can highlight promising practices is the Start, Stop, Continue process. This process allows district and school staff to engage educational partners in reflecting on problems of practice or school climate goals. In this activity, educational partners reflect on what promising practices need to be started to see progress. Next, they reflect on what current practices should be stopped because they may be causing harm or yielding fruitless results. Lastly, educational partners reflect on what practices should be continued because they are indeed leading to beneficial outcomes. (Miles, 2023)

5. Fostering Thoughtful Solutions

In the fast-paced environment of K–12 education, decisions are often made swiftly to address challenges that arise. Further, a lack of time, resources, and staffing frequently leads educational leaders to make important decisions on their own. Constantly making rushed decisions in isolation can lead to a phenomenon known as "solutionitis." The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (n.d.) defines solutionitis as "the tendency to jump quickly on a solution before fully understanding the actual problem to be solved." This tendency is especially dangerous when dealing with multifaceted issues related to school climate (e.g., safety and wellness, sense of belonging and connections, environment), as these problems are rarely simple and are often intertwined with larger institutional challenges (Grooms et al., 2021). It is crucial for school leaders to stay vigilant against the trap of solutionitis. A quick fix might seem attractive, but it is important to pause, take a step back, and evaluate the situation in its entirety.

Complex issues require thoughtful solutions and collaboration with others. It is essential to acknowledge that, as a single individual, one's perspective might not fully capture the root causes of the problem or the potential effectiveness of a proposed solution. An individual's ability to solve or even accurately identify the problem might be limited by their personal experiences or biases. Thus, actively seeking input from a diverse range of educational partners such as students, teachers, families, and community members can provide a broader understanding of the problem.

Example: Focus Groups

One approach that can be taken to foster thoughtful solutions is conducting focus groups. These conversations can be an effective way to hear firsthand from multiple educational partners and create an environment in which participants can build on each other's ideas. This process allows groups of individuals who hold unique perspectives on a given topic to share their experiences. Using qualitative data from focus groups can help educational leaders see beyond the numbers and better understand what's really going on and how to help. Focus groups are different from listening sessions in that they are smaller, more intimate, and more focused on specific outcomes and responses to predetermined questions. (Sage Publications, n.d.)

California Center for School Climate

Youth Voice and Perspectives

This section is based on interviews with Aisha Bilgrammi, Alexa Southall, Jubia Chavez, and Sarah Nava, high school students and recent graduates who serve as School Climate Advisors to the California Center for School Climate.

During the development of this resource, we held multiple informational interviews with youth advisors from the California Center for School Climate. Their stories and experiences made resounding connections to the work of Californians for Justice, a statewide youth-powered organization whose Student Voice Continuum challenges us to explore the nuances of student involvement and engagement. Californians for Justice offers three significant questions that adults should address in our work with students:

» What messages are you sending to students with youth voice policies?

» Are young people viewed primarily as consultants or collaborators?

» How can you go from merely informing youth of existing policies to leading together with shared ownership between students and adult staff? (Californians for Justice, n.d.)

Our interviews with the youth advisors centered these questions. Even though the youth advisors are spread out across various counties in California, the interviews revealed common themes related to school decision-making, student involvement, and engagement.

All of the young people interviewed shared experiences in which they felt that students were not adequately involved in decision-making processes within their schools. They mentioned instances in which decisions were made by administrators or teachers without seeking meaningful input from students. The youth discussed existing feedback mechanisms in their schools and stated that the most common method was surveys. Some shared that students' feedback is collected through surveys only occasionally, and even when it is collected, it is not always clear whether that feedback leads to tangible changes in school policies or practices. They shared that while other feedback mechanisms do exist in their schools, they often seem inadequate or infrequent.

The youth expressed a desire for more open and transparent communication between students and administrators. They suggested that decisions should be accompanied by clear explanations and reasons, supporting students to better understand the context behind rules and policies and generating opportunities for student input and decision-making.

Overall, the interviews highlighted a shared desire for increased student engagement in decision-making and more transparent communication. These perspectives point toward the need for educational leaders to foster environments where students' voices are valued, and their feedback contributes to the creation of policies that truly reflect the needs and aspirations of young people.

California Center for School Climate

Questions to Consider for Strengthening Mutual Decision-Making, Communication, and Collaboration:

» Are there opportunities for your school or district team to engage in one or more of the recommended activities in this resource? How might you ensure this takes place?

» How is your team learning from the experiences and perspectives of various educational partners?

» How is your team partnering with educational partners to make sense of the data that have been gathered?

» Are there opportunities for educational partners to reflect, react, and respond to school transformation efforts?

Adapted from Valdez et al., 2023

References

Advancement Project. (2012). *Participatory asset mapping.* https://communityscience.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/AssetMappingToolkit.pdf

Californians for Justice. (n.d.). *Student voice continuum: How to build student power.* https://caljustice.org/resource/student-voice-continuum-how-to-build-student-power/

The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. (n.d.). *Solutionitis.* https://carnegienetworks.zendesk.com/hc/en-us/articles/115001233068-Solutionitis

Daly-Smith, A., Quarmby, T., Archbold, V. S. J., Corrigan, N., Wilson, D., Resaland, G. K., Bartholomew, J. B., Singh, A., Tjomsland, H. E., Sherar, L. B., Chalkley, A., Routen, A. C., Shickle, D., Bingham, D. D., Barber, S. E., van Sluijs, E., Fairclough, S. J., & McKenna, J. (2020). Using a multi-stakeholder experience-based design process to co-develop the Creating Active Schools Framework. *International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity, 17,* 1–12. https://ijbnpa.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12966-020-0917-z

Field, A. (2020). Survey fatigue and the tragedy of the commons: Are we undermining our evaluation practice? *Evaluation Matters—He Take Tō Te Aromatawai, 6,* 1–11. https://www.nzcer.org.nz/system/files/journals/evaluation-maters/downloads/EM_Field_OF.pdf

Gilliam, W. S., Maupin, A. N., Reyes, C. R., Accavitti, M., & Shic, F. (2016). *Do early educators' implicit biases regarding sex and race relate to behavior expectations and recommendations of preschool expulsions and suspensions?* Child Study Center, Yale University.

Grooms, A. A., Mahatmya, D., & Johnson, E. T. (2021). The retention of educators of color amidst institutionalized racism. *Educational Policy, 35*(2), 180–212.

Miles, M. (2023). *Start, stop, continue: How to implement this retrospective model.* BetterUp. https://www.betterup.com/blog/start-stop-continue

Nelsestuen, K., & Smith, J. (2020). *Empathy interviews.* The Learning Professional. https://learningforward.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/tool-empathy-interviews.pdf

Oregon Health and Science University. (n.d.). *Community listening sessions.* https://www.ohsu.edu/university-center-excellence-development-disability/community-listening-sessions

Sage Publications. (n.d.). *Using focus groups in schools.* https://www.sagepub.com/sites/default/files/upm-binaries/7305_jayanthi_ch_1.pdf

UCLA Center for Health Policy Research. (2023). *Asset mapping.* https://healthpolicy.ucla.edu/sites/default/files/2023-08/tw_cba20.pdf

Valdez, A., Cerna, R., & Hashmi, S. (2023). *Participatory systems change for equity: An inquiry guide for child-, youth-, and family-serving agencies.* California Center for School Climate & Center to Improve Social and Emotional Learning and School Safety. WestEd. https://www.wested.org/resources/participatory-systems-change-for-equity/

Acknowledgments

Suggested citation: Ojetunde, T., & Chavez, A. (2024). *Centering the experiences and perspectives of educational partners: Five considerations for schools and districts.* California Center for School Climate at WestEd.

WestEd is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization that aims to improve the lives of children and adults at all ages of learning and development. We do this by addressing challenges in education and human development, reducing opportunity gaps, and helping build communities where all can thrive. WestEd staff conduct and apply research, provide technical assistance, and support professional learning. We work with early learning educators, classroom teachers, local and state leaders, and policymakers at all levels of government. More information about WestEd is available at WestEd.org.