

Learning From Young People About How Safe and Supportive Conditions at Home Can Inform School Climate

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INTRODUCTION

With most K–12 students having transitioned back into the classroom after a period of distance learning prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic, many educators are considering how to redefine traditional models of teaching and learning, including how they might strengthen school climate conditions so that all learners feel safe and supported.

One important component of this shift is to listen to students, considering them as both experts of their own experiences and essential partners in their own education—a concept known as *student voice*. By initiating conversations with students about their experiences and centering their voices in decision-making, educators can support students developmentally by expressing care, offering meaningful participation in school, and helping them develop confidence and a sense of purpose and belonging in their education.¹ In addition, attending to student voice can help educators to better understand how learning strategies are evolving, how to be more supportive of students, and how to create the conditions needed to positively impact school climate—defined as the school conditions that influence student learning, including engagement, safety, and environment.²

1 Mitra, D. (2008). *Student voice in school reform: Building youth-adult partnerships that strengthen schools and empower youth*. State University of New York Press; Fletcher, A. (2005). *Meaningful student involvement: Guide to students as partners in school change* (2nd ed.). SoundOut. <https://soundoutorg.files.wordpress.com/2020/08/d45dc-msiguide.pdf>; and Soohoo, S. (1993). Students as partners in research and restructuring schools. *The Educational Forum*, 57(4), 386–393.

2 National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments. (n.d.). *School climate improvement*. <https://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/school-climate-improvement>

Student voice “refers to the expression and communication of ideas, beliefs, perspectives, values, and cultural backgrounds of individual or groups of students about issues that concern them in relation to their education, including but not limited to interests, desires, choices, aspirations, and solutions. Student voice creates opportunities for adults and students to collaborate and co-determine the content and process of learning, as well as indicators of success and how they are measured.”³

Contrary to the reigning deficit-based narrative about student experiences during the pandemic—that students suffered while learning from home—many students actually thrived in their safe, responsive home environments. Meanwhile, some aspects of a school environment may feel safe and supportive for some but unwelcoming or even harmful for others. To derive strengths-based insights about how educators can learn from supportive home conditions to strengthen school climates, the national Center to Improve Social and Emotional Learning and School Safety (CISELSS) at WestEd convened five students from Education for Change Public Schools in Oakland, California, for a virtual focus group in fall 2021, and Education for Change conducted informal follow-up interviews with nine students to learn more about their experiences. The resulting video and this accompanying inquiry guide can help educators partner with students to create safer, more supportive learning environments in the classroom by removing assumptions about what student experiences were like at home and inviting candid feedback and input from students about both home and school learning conditions. What follows are a description of how CISELSS conducted its focus group, some of the school climate ideas that emerged, and other ways that educators might center student voice in improving school climate.

CONDUCTING A STRENGTHS-BASED FOCUS GROUP WITH STUDENTS

Staff from CISELSS spoke with five students spanning elementary, middle, and high school from Education for Change Public Schools in Oakland, California, in a virtual focus group. Staff members from Education for Change also interviewed nine students to learn more about their experiences learning from home.

For the focus group, CISELSS staff invited students to share their honest reflections about how they experienced learning from home during the pandemic, including how their home environments have been more responsive than their school environments to their needs as learners. Rather than emphasizing what *did not* work while students were learning from home, we designed our inquiry to hear from students about what was *positive* about learning from home and how their experiences could inspire efforts to improve school climate.

3 Pate, C. M., Glymph, A., Joiner, T., & Bhagwandeem, R. (in press). Students as co-creators of educational environments. In S. W. Evans, J. S. Owens, C. P. Bradshaw, & M. D. Weist (Eds.), *Handbook of school mental health – Innovations in science and practice* (3rd ed.). Springer.

Staff asked the following questions about both the challenges and the joys of learning from home to inform how school climate could be strengthened:

- **How would you describe your experience learning from home last year?** Asking students this open-ended question is a great way to begin the dialogue and allows for a range of responses. It is framed neutrally, opening the door for students to share both positive and negative experiences. It also sets a student-centered tone for the conversation and creates a jumping-off point for deeper questions.
- **What did you miss about your school and being in person with your teacher(s) and other students? What didn't you miss? Why?** As educators begin to think about how to reshape learning environments, this question helps to identify some of the strengths and challenges of the existing school climate as seen through the eyes of students.
- **What did you like about online teaching and learning from home? What didn't you like? Why?** The third question parallels the second but focuses on the experience of learning from home. This question is especially helpful because it invites students to think about their instructional setting and can generate ideas that educators might replicate in the classroom.
- **What made you feel safe, supported, and connected when learning from home?** This question invites students to think about what made learning from home work, including physical spaces and relationships. This question helps elicit ideas for ways that students' families and home environments might inform the design of their in-school learning while also identifying strategies that educators can use to help students cope with frustration and challenges during the learning process when in school.
- **What are one or two things that you want teachers to know about your experiences learning from home?** This concluding question provides students with an opportunity to speak directly to teachers about their experiences and ideas. Students can be clear and intentional in sharing with educators some specific ways that their school climates might be improved.

"My favorite snacks are things that keep me happy because my mom knows they help me focus."

Axel, 3rd grade

FIVE SCHOOL CLIMATE IDEAS THAT EMERGED FROM STUDENTS' INSIGHTS

The students from Education for Change Public Schools provided valuable perspectives on how educators can strengthen school climates to be more responsive to the safety, health, and well-being of the young people they serve. The following are five school climate ideas that emerged from the students' insights:

- 1. Invest in family–school partnerships.**⁴ Families are critical to the well-being of young people. Explore ways to incorporate access to families during the school day and create opportunities for student–family–educator partnerships to improve school climate. According to survey developer Panorama Education, “when families are meaningfully and continuously engaged in their children’s learning and development, it has a positive impact on their child’s health, academic, and wellbeing outcomes.”⁵ In addition, “students who feel supported by their parents [and caregivers] are less likely to experience emotional distress, practice unhealthy eating behaviors, consider or attempt suicide, or disengage from school and learning.”⁶

Several students from Education for Change Public Schools shared how their family members were instrumental in creating a safe and supportive learning environment at home, including Ashley, who was in 11th grade and concerned about preparing for life after high school. “I just talked to my mom about how I was feeling,” said Ashley. “She just listened to me and offered her support silently and sometimes gave me advice.” As students return to campus, it is important to think about ways to partner with families on student learning, schoolwide events, school improvement, and governance. It is also important for students, families, and educators to co-create strategies for improving school climate.

- 2. Include opportunities for mini-breaks during lessons.** Incorporating short breaks like drawing, listening to music, playing games, stretching, or going outside during lessons makes it easier for students to learn and digest new information while also allowing space for creative ideas to develop and grow. These breaks also reduce the length of lessons, which can increase focus and engagement⁷ once students return to learning after the break.⁸

4 National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments. (n.d.). *Family-school-community partnerships*. <https://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/training-technical-assistance/education-level/early-learning/family-school-community-partnerships>

5 Woolf, N. (n.d.). Family engagement in schools: A comprehensive guide. *Panorama Education*. <https://www.panoramaed.com/blog/family-engagement-comprehensive-guide>

6 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2012). *Parent engagement: Strategies for involving parents in school health*. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/protective/pdf/parent_engagement_strategies.pdf

7 Godwin, K. E., Almeda, M. V., Seltman, H., Kai, S., Skerbetz, M. D., Baker, R. S., & Fisher, A. V. (2016). Off-task behavior in elementary school children. *Learning and Instruction, 44*, 128–143. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.learninstruc.2016.04.003>

8 Müller, C., Otto, B., Sawitzki, V., Kanagalingam, P., Scherer, J.-S., & Lindberg, S. (2021). Short breaks at school: Effects of a physical activity and a mindfulness intervention on children’s attention, reading comprehension, and self-esteem. *Trends in Neuroscience and Education, 25*, 100160. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2211949321000120>

Students of all ages from Education for Change Public Schools indicated how important it was for them to take such breaks during learning periods. “I would love it if we could draw more and play board games too since I would do that at home a lot when I took breaks,” said 3rd grade student Gretchel. “It would be better to at least have a social block during the day where we can all go outside and either play, relax, have convos, or just be on our phones,” suggested 7th grade student Jakaylah.

- 3. Encourage activities that support positive peer relationships.** Whether through direct personal connections or through clubs and sports, peer relationships are an important part of student well-being. Transforming Education has written that “fostering positive relationships among classroom peers is important for creating a classroom environment conducive to social-emotional development and academic learning” and that “positive peer relationships are associated with better school engagement, including increased attendance and classroom participation.”⁹

Students from Education for Change shared how their relationships with peers contributed to their well-being during the pandemic and distance learning. “Me and my friend would have two-hour Zoom meetings just to talk and help out each other,” recalled 7th grade student Itzel. “I know that I was going through a lot of feelings during the pandemic, like a lot of times I was feeling upset. My friend was there, and she was more than happy to talk to me about it.” Other students suggested more unstructured time with friends could make school feel more comforting. “Being able to see my friends at school outside of class, like a longer recess or opportunities for clubs, is what I would love more of,” suggested 5th grade student Enrique.

- 4. Promote student agency by supporting students to decide about the pace of their work and how they best complete it, whether independently or collaboratively.** According to the authors of *Street Data: A Next-Generation Model for Equity, Pedagogy, and School Transformation*, “agency is the idea that people have the capacity to take action, craft and carry out plans, and make informed decisions about a growing base of knowledge.”¹⁰

Several students from Education for Change shared how having the flexibility to complete assignments on their own schedule helped them manage home and school life. For example, 5th grade student Emily appreciated having more time to revisit work as needed. “When the homework was due, it was due the next day, and if I didn’t finish it that day, I could just go back and work on it.” In addition, 7th grade student Itzel suggested that educators give students who are ready and willing the ability to work on their own rather than with peers. “I genuinely work better

9 Cervantes, D. J., & Gutierrez, A. S. (2019). *Stories from the field: Fostering positive peer relationships*. Transforming Education. <https://transformingeducation.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/StoriesfromtheField-Relationships-Brief-2-vF.pdf>

10 Safir, S., & Dugan, J. (2021). *Street data: A next-generation model for equity, pedagogy, and school transformation*. Corwin. See pages 100–102.

independently, so maybe [educators could] ask students ‘do you feel you can handle this independently?’ and then let them go to a different space.” Classmate Natalia, also a 7th grade student, added that the volume of a full class can be more distracting than the quiet of a student’s own home and suggested that “a period in the day where we can pick an area to gather ourselves or to do an assignment” might help provide comfort and focus.

- 5. Increase access to digital learning, which feels natural to students and also helps them organize information and complete their assignments.** While the benefits of digital learning are nuanced, research shows that technology can sometimes enhance student learning experiences.¹¹

Several Education for Change students shared how digital learning had benefited them. For example, students shared how having all their learning materials available and compiled online helped make learning more accessible than “digging through my backpack and mountains of paper,” as 7th grade student Itzel put it. “Since we used Google Classroom, I could look at all the work there. It was really organized and straightforward,” agreed 11th grade student Ashley.

PROMISING PRACTICES FOR ENGAGING STUDENT VOICE TO INFORM SCHOOL CLIMATE

Student voice can take many forms, ranging from adult-run activities, such as soliciting student feedback on a lesson, to adult-supported activities, such as training students to research a problem that affects them through youth participatory action research, to more student-led forms of action, such as student advisory groups and student organizing.¹² All of these forms of student voice involve “taking notice and acting on what students have to say about school from their point of view.”¹³ The following are some promising practices for engaging student voice to inform school climate:

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- 11 J-PAL Evidence Review. (2019). *Will technology transform education for the better?* Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab. <https://www.povertyactionlab.org/sites/default/files/documents/education-technology-evidence-review.pdf>
 - 12 Holquist, S. (2019, October 23). Consider student voices: Striving to understand student experiences to support learning and growth. *REL Pacific*. <https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/pacific/blogs/blog19-consider-student-voices.asp>; Regional Educational Laboratory Pacific. (n.d.). *Including voice in education: Empowering student voice in school design*. https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/infographics/pdf/REL_PA_Including_Student_Voice_in_Education.pdf
 - 13 Harris, J., Davidson, L., Hayes, B., Humphreys, K., LaMarca, P., Berliner, B., Poynor, L., & Van Houten, L. (2014). *Speak out, listen up! Tools for using student perspectives and local data for school improvement* (REL 2014–035). U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory West. https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/west/pdf/rel_2014035.pdf

- **Create safe and supportive spaces for sharing.** Identify a time and space that will help students feel safe and supported as they share their experiences. This includes being mindful of who is invited to join the conversation, taking into consideration whether students will feel comfortable with other adults or peers in the room. In addition, obtain consent from students for recording what they share (through such means as note-taking or video or audio recording). Finally, be transparent with students about how you will use their responses, and ensure confidentiality if they prefer not to have their responses connected with any personally identifying information.
- **Remove previous assumptions about student experiences with school climate.** Get “out of your own head” and move away from any biases, perceptions, and ideas you may already have about student experiences. Seek to truly understand rather than just to confirm your own ideas and assumptions. Empathize with students from a place of respect and curiosity, and create space for genuine learning.¹⁴
- **Listen with intention.** Focus on what the young person is sharing with you. Employ active listening skills to help you focus intently on what the student says, how they say it, and the emotions and energy they bring to what they share. Constructivist listening approaches and empathy protocols can provide helpful guidance for how to be an active listener, including how to hold space for reflection and the release of emotion and how to ask questions that elicit stories and feelings.¹⁵
- **Engage and support students as leaders and co-creators.** Engage students as leaders and co-creators of their own learning experiences, and support them with access to any tools, information, or skill-building that might help them develop as leaders and decision-makers.¹⁶ The youth-powered organization Californians for Justice describes leading together with students as occurring only when all of these conditions are met: “Black, Indigenous, youth of color, and underrepresented, intersectional youth have significant or full leadership and decision-making power. They collaborate with adults as equals. Training, supports, and financial resources are provided for youth to lead meaningfully.”¹⁷

14 Anaisie, T., Cary, V., Clifford, D., Malarkey, T., & Wise, S. (2021). *Liberatory Design*. <https://www.liberatorydesign.com/>

15 National Equity Project. (n.d.). *Constructivist listening*. <https://www.nationalequityproject.org/frameworks/constructivist-listening>; High Tech High Graduate School of Education. (n.d.). *Empathy interviews: Learn about the problem from a user’s perspective*. <https://hthgse.edu/resources/empathy-interviews/>

16 Regional Educational Laboratory Pacific. (n.d.). *Including voice in education: Empowering student voice in school design*. https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/infographics/pdf/REL_PA_Including_Student_Voice_in_Education.pdf

17 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/>

- **Co-create an action plan with students for improving school climate.** Work alongside students to co-create and co-implement a shared action plan for improving school climate, one in which actions are led by students and efforts are grounded in youth participatory action research. The more input and decision-making power that students have, the better: “incorporating youth into the design, implementation, analysis, and/or dissemination stages of research can increase the accuracy and validity of research findings,” notes the Regional Educational Laboratory Pacific.¹⁸

STUDENT VOICE FOR TRANSFORMATIONAL CHANGE IN SCHOOLS

The ways in which students navigate traditional learning environments are being challenged and redefined, and students’ way of understanding and relating to the world is changing. “Young people, particularly those most routinely marginalized by the education system, are stepping up, at school board meetings and in the streets, to demand that this distinct moment for education marks a pivotal shift for the way we think about learning,” explain the leaders of the national Student Voice campaign.¹⁹ This shift can be accelerated and its results strengthened by listening deeply to students about their education experiences and by partnering with them in creating school environments that are safer, healthier, more supportive, and more just.

18 Regional Educational Laboratory Pacific. (n.d.). *Including youth voice in education: Partnering with youth to conduct research*. https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/infographics/pdf/REL_PA_Including_Youth_Voice_in_Education_Partnering_With_Youth_to_Conduct_Research.pdf

19 Student Voice. (n.d.). *A roadmap to authentically engage youth voice in the U.S. Department of Education*. https://uploads-ssl.webflow.com/5b7baf6ce413596290921486/5fd3c02f183ddd441da7682c_Student%20Voice_Youth%20Engagement%20Report_ED.pdf



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