

Visioning for the Future of Education: Listening to Youth

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Reimagining education is a critical visioning feat. It is critical to follow an inclusive process that elevates the voices of multiple stakeholders in our schools. One group that should not be missed is the students themselves. Empowering our youth authenticates our work. Listening to students provides us with relevant information about what needs to stay, what needs to go and which innovative possibilities should be explored (Mason, Liabenow & Patschke, 2020).

To help plan for the future, the Coalition for the Future of Education (CFE) used a visioning process with a group of over 25 educators and youth to develop a vision for how they might learn from our experiences during COVID to create a better, more meaningful future for students. This visioning process began with a series of three online sessions and morphed into monthly online discussions (Mason et al., 2020). From that process they developed a vision for the world and a vision for education. In addition, youth listening tours were launched to specifically understand the perspective of those under 24 years of age in regard to our educational system. Our visions for the world and education follow:

Vision for the World

A world that leans in with heart and compassion for self, others, and our environment, where people and institutions are dedicated to expanding conscious acts of caring, building resiliency and advancing equity and justice.

Vision for Education

An educational system that serves as the foundation for our humanity; it is flexible and empowering, where there is room for adventure, students drive their own learning, learning is celebrated, and communities support their individual and collective self-care, resiliency and well-being.

Youth Listening Tours

These intentional groups included a series of online discussions with several groups of diverse 12-20 middle school, high school and college-aged youth (Becker & Chen, 2021).

Key Takeaways:

- Youth valued being asked their opinions and would like to be more involved in planning for and designing their futures, including their course of studies, requirements and instructional preferences.
- While many students struggled with online learning, some students thrived. These students appreciated the flexible schedule afforded to them as they worked from home; some students also learned a lot about self-motivation. With practice, they gained new skills that will serve them a lifetime.
- Many students experienced a profound trauma last year, missed their social interactions with peers and teachers and also found it hard to stay focused with virtual learning.
- When considering education in the future, youth want greater use of hands-on learning and more mindfulness to help alleviate their stress and anxiety and create a greater sense of peace, calm and well-being.

- Students realized the value of the current focus on equity and diversity and are looking forward to a future where more educators “look at them” and can relate to them.

Examples of Elevating Youth Voice

To focus on youth voice, Dr. Patschke wrote about the importance of youth engagement, vulnerability and courage, saying, “Our youth are courageously creating their own journeys each day” (Brown, 2018; Patschke, 2021a). Infusing the ideas and voice of our youth into our future planning ensures a value-added approach to doing what’s right for next generations.

Dr. Patschke (2021b) interviewed several students who participated in the youth listening tours on the topic of what’s needed to be courageous in today’s schools. Here are some of the highlights from those interviews:

Courage. From Mehir Badlani, a High School Junior in Pennsylvania:

We had a discussion in class one time about why some of my peers are hesitant about turning on their camera, and they expressed it feels like being stared at by everyone else in the classroom all the time and that makes them uncomfortable. Some students are more comfortable than others. With students both in the building and online, students in both settings have to advocate for themselves; that takes courage. As students, we utilize courage in almost everything we do. Every time someone asks a question, they have to overcome their fear of embarrassment and judgment.

Advice on Anxiety. From Kaya Payton, a High School Junior in New York:

Anxiety is one of the most common mental health challenges today. In this day and age, dealing with COVID, anxiety in schools is more prevalent than ever before... easier. With COVID, there is even more pressure put on students due to the way we are learning. Not going to school makes it more difficult to learn and there are just so many assignments that have certain due dates. The pile up of all assignments can be very stressful for students to handle.

Large and Small Leaps of Courage. From Audrey Choi, a High School Freshman in Pennsylvania:

Courage can be found all around you. It keeps you going. Courage helps you to step out of your comfort zone; it helps you to push for what is right, or to watch that scary movie you have been wanting to watch. It is never the same for everyone, but it helps us all to simply keep

moving forward to pursue our goals in life no matter what those may be.

Courage Building Strategy. From Julia Murphy, College Senior, Rhode Island:

A strategy that I have found effective when I feel like I’m behind the curve or not where I want to be is maintaining a focus on the things that I am doing right and well, no matter how big or small they may be. Celebrating life’s daily achievements, such as sending the email that’s been on your to-do list, prioritizing time for self-care, or even just making it through a busy day, really helps you feel accomplished and helps you remember that you’re doing your best on any given day. When we celebrate the little things, the big things start to feel much more attainable.

Considerations When Hosting a Youth Listening Tour

What’s your “why?”

Know what you’re going to ask and why. Are you seeking general information about reimagining how we do school or are you specifically seeking feedback on one or two elements?

Choose your space.

You can select a physical location and have participants join you in person. Yet, please consider the value of meeting virtually. No travel requirements open the possibility of easily gathering a mix of voices from a variety of experiences. The time commitment is much smaller from participants and facilitators, and with

the use of breakout rooms, students can work in small teams to generate their ideas and explore their contributions in a focus group type format.

Timing Matters.

No matter their ages, youth are busy. Our suggestion is to keep the tours at about 75 minutes. This provides participants plenty of time to share their thoughts and ideas while being concise.

Participants & Facilitators.

We suggest framing the process around 20 youth and five adult facilitators. This will allow small groups to work in groups of four or five. We also have found success in pulling the voices from the small breakout sessions into the whole group thinking to extend discussion in a larger space.

Sample Questions.

- If you could wave a wand and create the perfect educational experience, name the top three things that would be a part of the system.
- What’s not working for most youth that we need to change?

“**Students realized the value of the current focus on equity and diversity and are looking forward to a future where more educators ‘look at them’ and can relate to them.”**

Continued from previous page

- What needs to be created, duplicated or emphasized to improve education in the future?
- What have been the most impactful experiences about school that helped you become successful?
- What leadership growth opportunities do you “wish” you had available to you in school?

A Vision for The Future

Many school leaders feel the weight of decisions that are being made right now. Many of us are uneasy about what lies ahead. We are concerned about student learning, and also about their health and safety, including their mental

health and well-being. Visioning is future planning. When we include the voice of our youth their experiences will be enhanced by opportunities, they have to voice their preferences and concerns. We need to listen to youth, learn from them, and welcome them to the table as partners move us forward (Becker & Chen, 2021).

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Developing Protocols for Students with Disabilities During Active School Shooter Drills: What Principals Need to Know

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is neither prudent nor legal. The Americans with Disabilities Act (1990) clearly states that excluding or denying people with disabilities from emergency sheltering and crisis response because of a specific disability is not legal according to Chapter 7 Addendum 2 of the act. Administrators should remember to communicate with families, use the IEP process to develop specific procedures in safety plans, allow students with disabilities opportunities to practice

those safety plans, include psychologists and mental health experts in the district crisis planning team and make sure preparedness drills are developmentally appropriate. Doing these things can help to make schools a safer and more supportive environment for all children...including children with disabilities.

For further information, you may contact Dr. Isherwood at robert.isherwood@sru.edu

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