Centering Student Voices to Transform Educational Systems

Krystal Johnson

At Arts Education Partnership, we've learned that student perspective is pivotal when making decisions that affect their learning experience. Talking about, reporting on or making decisions about a population of people without firsthand accounts from said population can lead to inadequate support and compromised data about successful practices. We asked students to describe their aspirations for arts education and what is important to them as they experience policy and classroom shifts — such as learning part time at home, shorter or longer class time and number of students within the classroom — because of COVID-19 and recent social movements over inequity. We received suggestions to elevate student leadership, and the role of families and community involvement in learning spaces.

FROM STUDENTS:

The shift from competition to collaboration is because of the pandemic and can be attributed to necessity. **Art is ubiquitous**. Nothing you learn goes to waste, and it can be integrated into other subjects. Environmental justice is a part of my future — art is a part of making our voices and opinions heard. Art is a fantastic form of showing not only inequities and experiences but also conveying what we believe we can do to solve those inequities.

The pandemic has highlighted disruptions in learning because of forced distance; and social movements have brought attention to inequalities in educational spaces. As states have begun to innovate, there have been shifts in student supports for learning, such as wellness within and outside of the traditional classroom; this includes special and juvenile justice educational spaces. Throughout this report, you will find considerations on how arts education can be a driver for systems change in traditional and non-traditional learning spaces. These ideas are inspired by a group of students who are in high school, and undergraduate and graduate programs.

Meet Students Where They Are

FROM STUDENTS:

Education is very heteronormative in culture. A lot of art that we see and experience doesn't showcase learning opportunities for queer identity. Theatre, for instance. Many stories and characters only showcase heterosexuality and cisgender people. It disables students — and the general population — from understanding or learning about queer culture; especially students who are learning about themselves. Experiences hold weight and are important to bring into the conversation.

‖|‖| FROM STUDENTS:

Social justice and the arts are rebranding, renaming and redoing mission statements to be more inclusive of Black, Indigenous and people of color populations. Young people are starting to question these policies and see them as a Band-Aid solution. It isn't that we want to eliminate our history; we want to amend it so that it reflects our current day and life. It can be exciting to see representation, but when it is forced and inaccurate it leads one to question whether representation is wanted. People express their artistic nature in different ways, but **teachers will miss out on so much if they don't meet children where they are in their expression and identity**.

Transferrable Skillsets

Lessons that cater to students' environments and social identities support young people in both arts and non-arts roles outside of learning spaces. Deeper learning that includes self-expression through engagement, sharing of experiences with peers, self-exploration and ownership of actions supports student understanding of self and the environments in which they navigate. Arts-integration methods improve both academic and personal outcomes for students.

The incorporation of healing practices in the classroom has allowed students experiencing the trauma of the pandemic and school shootings to develop skillsets and tools that build resiliency. Mental health supports, and social and emotional competencies assist students with self-esteem, relationship-building, self-management, social awareness and responsible decision-making. Educational institutions that prioritize transferrable skillsets provide students with tools they can use in their communities and the workforce.

Family and Community

Honoring students who come to learning spaces with different familial, cultural and community backgrounds requires authentic inclusion within their learning experiences. Authentic inclusion involves not only teaching those different cultural backgrounds but also creating a welcoming environment for others to bring cultural practices to the space. Inviting family and community into learning spaces to share their cultural practice adds additional relevancy and evidence by bringing in outside perspectives to students who may not fully understand or share the culture being taught by educators through text. As students learn about themselves, they will witness how aspects of their current life coincide with their learning.

Cultural experiences are not the only ones shared in the classroom. Welcoming students' experiences related to income and racial backgrounds creates belonging in the classroom. It is important to have opportunities for self-expression when lessons that involve or raise conversations around these experiences are being taught. Relationships with the community and resources that help address these topics are beneficial in and out of school time. The arts have tools to honor and create a safe space for self-expression and understanding.

POTENTIAL EXPERIENCES

The Hewlett Foundation offers ideas of what one might see or feel while this is implemented with integrity, including:

- Staff having conversations with caregivers about how things are going with students.

- Check-in questions that invite students to share what they are bringing into the space on a specific day.

- Space for families and caregivers, culture bearers and community leaders to connect, learn and share their expertise.

- Staff and students paying attention to speaking order, such as inviting Black, Indigenous and speakers of color voices to speak first.

- Students creating artwork that articulates a vision of what the world looks and feels like, with and without being repressed.

- Students empathizing with one another around shared trauma.

- Students readily asking for what they need and sharing honestly about what's going on with them.

- Conflicts being resolved through restorative justice practices.

Create Flexible Learning Environments

FROM STUDENTS:

We shouldn't face issues in schools where the inclusion of social and emotional learning curriculum is getting blocked. We have fewer speech and performance opportunities than written elements in assignments. The schooling system as it is caters to a neurotypical frame rather than to neurodivergent thinkers.

Many young playwrights, poets and writers are producing amazing work but updated material is not being used. [Rather than being competitive], learning should be community-centric, value-based and **[create] more movement to fund collaborative projects with other organizations**.

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Adequate Funding Support

State policymakers can investigate inequalities in the state's school funding formula, including gaps in per-student costs between schools. They can partner with district leaders, educators and community stakeholders to create a plan that ensures there is adequate funding to meet the learning, social and emotional, trauma and healing, and nonacademic needs of every student. Generating a budget that supports the creation and growth programs that identify, scale and sustain equitable funding practices can advance high-quality learning experiences for all students. States can partner with a diverse group of stakeholders — which may include teachers and teaching artists that represent the students served — in the initial steps to identify and address funding barriers to implementing effective teaching and learning models.

Strategies to improve funding systems can focus on:

- State and local income relevancy and sustainability.
- Equitable and flexible distribution of state and local education funding to target resources where they are needed the most, such as materials.
- Wellness supports and technology.
- Flexible incentives to continue equitable access to high-quality learning experiences and instruction, such as educator supports.

Creating adequate funding support around the student includes community resources; as a student's mind must be in a space to receive learning for it to be effective. Additional funding supports may aid in accessing the materials, technology, specialized therapists, teaching artists and educators who could be of assistance. In addition, professional development funding for therapists, teaching artists and educators can affect how students are able to receive and retain their learning. This necessary funding also extends to support to specialized instruction for English learners, students learning with disabilities and students learning while being held in a detention facility.

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Relevant Teaching and Learning

Over the past few years, institutions have been forced to adapt learning strategies from in-person to distance learning because of health concerns around COVID-19. This forced adaptability showcased many gaps in the educational system. States had to collaborate and work more intimately with families and communities to ensure instruction could be accessed and retained by students. With more data on the barriers students faced during this time, there is a need to continue to build on those relationships and expand student learning. States can design preparation programs for teachers and administrators on how to create engaging and effective instruction, as well as on the implementation of social and emotional, and restorative justice learning programs. States could include indicators of learning and progress using competency-based assessments measuring learning and accomplishments, such as civic engagement in authentic ways.

School leaders can also implement practices that create understanding of how to work with families and community organizations to create a shared developmentally supportive approach. These practices can come in the form of:

- Curriculum, assessment and instruction for deeper learning that focuses on students' prior knowledge and experience.Integrating their cultural and linguistic knowledge into the experience.

- Supporting collaboration and inquiry with direct instruction; provides opportunities for authentic, formative assessment that informs reflection and revision of work.

- Fostering awareness, understanding and strategic learning that supports student agency, independence, resourcefulness and resilience.

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POTENTIAL EXPERIENCES

The Hewlett Foundation offers ideas of what one might see or feel when this is implemented with integrity, including:

- Teaching artists who reflect participants' cultural backgrounds and lived experiences.

- Staff who continually evolve organizational structures and practices to align with deepening commitments to racial equity and social justice.

- Staff receiving professional development around healing-centered or trauma-informed care and articulating how their teaching supports social and emotional learning.

- Staff checking in with young people who are experiencing a difficult or traumatic situation and connecting them to supports they may need.

- Staff who are doing work on their own mental and emotional well-being as part of their development as mentors.

- Influential program evaluation guided by questions of interest to staff and students.

- A racial equity framework created by the learning institution, in collaboration with its community and, as a living practice within the educational space.

- Students accessing and using high-quality equipment, materials, and technology to share their stories and artwork digitally.

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Share Power in Learning and Policymaking Spaces

FROM STUDENTS:

If we would incorporate artistic voices and opportunities to speak and express through different artistic mediums, **there would be more voices heard and more authenticity**. There is a narrow view of what the arts disciplines are. There are many art forms that deserve the same platform and respect as the widely acknowledged ones. Many kids have TikTok. Their videos are amazing, with editing and comedy, but [they don't receive] the same respect from outside [the platform] as they [do] on Tik Tok. This is an expression. It's art! A lot of courses are catered to the professor. It takes humility to bring in artists outside of their own work and research. But when they make you buy their book, they're focusing on their voice instead of uplifting different experiences. Systems of the future should adapt to increase diversity in the arts through language, sexual orientation and more.

Collaboration Across Multiple Levels

Inclusivity in decision-making that will affect all members of the community is needed to accurately assess upward growth. Students provide a unique perspective when it comes to learning experiences. Beginning in the classroom, teachers can create a mutual and collaborative learning space that gives students agency and leadership. Creating curriculum that supports cultural inclusion promotes belonging that can foster achievement and positive relations within groups. Educators can collaborate with teaching artists to create flexible curriculum that support these goals. Developing these relationships and leadership opportunities gives students the confidence to share their lived experiences with larger and more diverse audiences.

Learning institutions and state governing agencies can expand student learning through trainings and apprenticeships that assist students who want to have more leadership opportunities within the community. Creating intentional spaces for students to understand how decisions are made through policy or investments can guide students in how to tailor their experiences to better support their communities. States can advance their vision for student success by convening stakeholders — including educators, students, families and community partners — to create a local vision for student success that aligns with the state's vision while incorporating important local values and expectations for postsecondary and workforce success.

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Work in Action

Here are a few state policies with collaboration across multiple levels to support shared empowerment.

North Dakota S.B. 2186 — North Dakota passed a bill in which the state superintendent is to engage a variety of stakeholders, including administrators, educators, the governor, the state teacher's union, and the state chamber of commerce. With this legislation, the superintendent of public instruction may approve an application from any public or nonpublic school for a one-year pilot program to improve student educational performance.

Oregon H.B. 2590 — Oregon passed a bill to create a taskforce on Student Success for Underrepresented Students in Higher Education. The goal of the taskforce is to develop student success policy and funding proposals for the 2023 regular session. To meet this goal, the task force shall visit postsecondary education institutions to meet with prospective, current and former students from populations that are underrepresented in the student bodies of these institutions. The populations consulted will include students from rural communities or low-income families; who have experience with disability, undocumented status or the foster care system; who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, two-spirit, intersex, asexual, nonbinary or other historically marginalized gender identity or sexual orientation. The taskforce will also meet with faculty, staff and community partners who support underrepresented students through academic and student service programming.

Washington S.B. 5793 — Washington passed a bill to provide stipends to low-income or underrepresented members of communities as they serve on state boards, commission councils and other similar entities. Stipend members must have lived experience relevant to the work of the taskforce to offer their perspectives and expertise.

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POTENTIAL EXPERIENCES

The Hewlett Foundation offers ideas of what one might see or feel when this is implemented with integrity, including:

- Students and staff sharing stories that demonstrate the impact of their work, while ensuring that students maintain agency over their own stories.

- Students sharing their expertise with community members by giving their perspectives on community issues or providing creative services to community businesses.

- Students developing bonds with one another and with mentors that endure beyond a program.

- Older students and alumni mentoring younger students.

- Alumni returning as teaching artists.

- Teaching artists talking about mentorship as an exchange and reflecting on what they've learned from students.

- Pathways to pre-professional and professional work, which includes apprenticeships and entrepreneurial practices in which students create work for paying clients.

- Paid student leadership roles in the community, and pathways for leadership development through learning institutions.

- Curriculum and training for students and staff around sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression and anti-racism.

- Exhibitions, performances, books, media and other culminating projects that present students' work to public audiences.

- Communications, social media and distribution strategies that amplify student voices.

Final Thoughts

The recent unrest in response to the pandemic and inequitable social practices has led states to rethink their approaches to educational progress. Arts Education Partnership has learned that including the voices of people who are directly affected by policy and funding actions in their communities can provide valuable perspective as to what is needed to support equitable growth. In educational spaces, uplifting student voice and leadership through arts education instruction can provide students with the transferable skillsets to express, advocate and have ownership over themselves and their actions. Educational institutions collaborating with families and communities to create safe learning spaces for students can open the door to students feeling as though their voice and perspective are valued.

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About the Author

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As a policy analyst for the Arts Education Partnership, Krystal conducts research on pressing arts education policy issues, contributes to AEP's publications and provides support for AEP convenings. Krystal comes to Education Commission of the States with experience in education, legislative tracking and management. Krystal is dedicated to helping kids gain access to learning opportunities that match their learning styles; and she hopes to advance equity through her work researching and convening leaders to address pressing arts education policy issues. Contact Krystal at kjohnson@ecs.org.

Acknowledgments