



Photo: CREC Impact Academy

# Designing Schools with and for Students

*Lessons Learned from the Engage New England Initiative*

# Introduction

*Engage New England: Doing high school differently* is an initiative funded by the Barr Foundation to support educators in building innovative, student-centered school models that address both the academic and developmental needs of high school students who are off track to graduate. Each grantee received technical assistance for school design and planning, and most received continued support for piloting and early implementation. The Engage New England (ENE) initiative began in 2017 and includes three grantee cohorts of new or redesigned schools. SRI Education has evaluated the initiative from the outset.

The initiative aims to create schools shaped by and for students by involving students in school design and ongoing continuous improvement efforts. When school design teams intentionally include student voice in a way that represents the full diversity of students, they can better ensure that education is relevant to students' lives, culturally responsive to all students, and empowering for students. In this way, student voice is an important mechanism for promoting equity and success for all students.<sup>1</sup>

The degree of student voice lies on a continuum. It includes students voicing their concerns or opinions (e.g., via schoolwide surveys) on one end and collaborating alongside adults and building capacity for leadership on the other end.<sup>2,3</sup> The ENE initiative intended for the school design process to be truly student-centered in which student voice was captured through student design opportunities at various points along the continuum. For example,

## Lessons Learned: Designing Schools with and for Students



### Lay the Foundation (p. 7)

- Learn about your students—their assets, challenges, and goals—through systematic research
- Prepare staff to value the power of student voice in school design



### Take Intentional Steps to Engage Students in Planning and Design (p. 11)

- Recruit student designers who reflect the diversity of your student population
- Structure the design process so that it is accessible to your students
- Create clear and meaningful roles for your student designers to give them space to contribute
- Help students develop skills and knowledge to fully engage with the design process
- Demonstrate to student designers—and their peers—how their input is being used

grantees were expected to conduct initial research into what students needed from school by soliciting input from the larger school community. Grantees were also to offer authentic and substantive opportunities for a smaller group of students to co-plan and co-design the schools as members of the design teams.

This research brief identifies promising strategies for embracing student voice in school design based on the experience of the ENE grantees. Successfully engaging students in decision-making and school design is not as simple as inviting them to attend staff meetings. As ENE grantees learned, meaningfully engaging students requires planning, scaffolding, and sustained attention to both representation and accessibility for the most historically underserved youth. The lessons ENE grantees learned from engaging in a structured, student-centered design process can help other schools to include student voice in school design and they may also be applied more broadly to ongoing continuous efforts. The lessons also may be useful for supporting the engagement of all participants in school design work, adults, and students alike. These lessons learned are presented and described in greater depth throughout the brief.

*Designing Schools with and for Students: Lessons Learned from the Engage New England Initiative* is the first of a series of research briefs resulting from SRI Education’s evaluation of the ENE initiative. Subsequent releases will address the implementation of core components of the initiative, the student experience in ENE schools, planning year supports, and student outcomes such as high school graduation and successful transition to postsecondary education or training.



Photo: MAP Academy

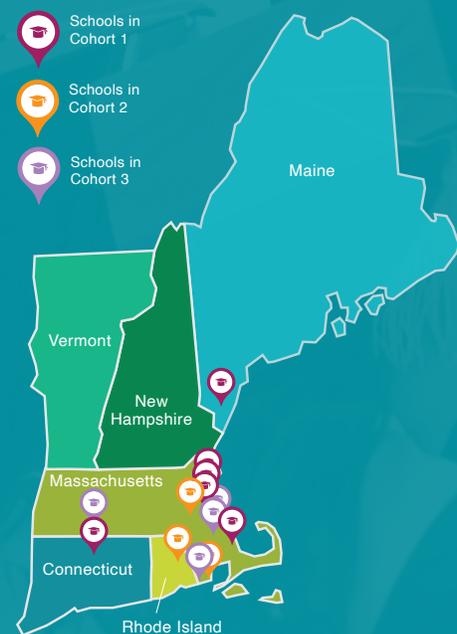
# Engage New England: Doing high school differently

In 2017, the Barr Foundation launched Engage New England (ENE), an initiative intended to support the design and implementation of excellent high school options for students who are off track to graduate from high school. With planning and implementation support, grantees developed innovative models for either new or redesigned schools to build the skills and competencies students need to be successful in and after high school. Each new or redesigned school was to be anchored in positive youth development (PYD), an approach that emphasizes caring, supportive, and trusting relationships; high expectations; opportunities for student voice, choice, and contributions; engaging learning experiences; and consistency.<sup>4</sup> The ENE initiative supports school leaders to ground PYD in both core instructional practices and student support structures. The initiative's goal is to empower students to take ownership of their path to graduation and a postsecondary plan by developing rigorous and relevant learning experiences and effective and transparent academic systems, such as competency-based learning and academic case conferencing.

Barr invested in three cohorts of grantees across New England, with the first cohort funded in 2017–18. A total of 18 grantees received planning grants, and 13 continued with ongoing support for the additional planning, piloting, or launching of the new or redesigned schools.

Each grantee receives technical assistance from Springpoint, a national organization that supports innovative school model design and implementation. Springpoint provides grantees with customized supports, including individual coaching and research visits, network-wide convenings and master classes on topics essential in developing strong school models, and study tours of exemplary school models. Springpoint's planning year supports began with a focus on whole-school design and came to deeply focus on helping grantees develop a strong instructional core, an intensive advisory model, and a competency-based learning system, three primary needs identified across all cohorts.

SRI Education is conducting a rigorous, multimethod evaluation of the initiative, beginning with grantees' planning year and continuing through implementation. The evaluation includes interviews with school and district staff, student focus groups, staff and student surveys, and an analysis of students' high school and early postsecondary outcomes. This brief draws from interviews with school and district staff and student focus groups conducted during each grantee's planning year to identify lessons learned for fostering student voice in school design.



## Context

Research has shown that students become increasingly disengaged in school as they move through the grades, with students most likely to fall off track in grade 9.<sup>5,6,7</sup> Students typically identified as off track have academic performance and behaviors that result in credits lower than what is necessary to graduate in 4 years of high school.<sup>8,9,10</sup> Although the national graduation rate has improved in recent years (85% in 2018), the graduation rates of low-income, Black, Hispanic, and English learner students are still significantly lower than their peers'.<sup>11</sup> Importantly, as of 2018, one in nine young people between the ages of 16 and 24 years were neither working nor in school, suggesting that more than 10% of young people are failing to make a successful transition into a sustaining career.<sup>12</sup> High schools serving youth who are off track to graduate are in the vanguard of addressing this crisis as this often represents the last opportunity for educators to re-engage students before they disconnect from the educational system. To do so, schools must be innovative and avoid replicating the same conditions in prior educational settings that may have led students to get off track from graduating. The ENE initiative posits that infusing student voice into the fabric of schooling—from initial design to day-to-day instruction—will help educators create programs that meet students' needs, while also engaging and empowering students to take ownership of their own learning.

This vision is supported by research on incorporating student voice in school decision-making, which suggests that designing schools with students improves schools by ensuring they are responsive to the diversity of students' cultural backgrounds, values, and needs, by generating new or different approaches to teaching and learning, and providing input on the strengths or weaknesses of school programs.<sup>13,14,15,16</sup> Further, these design opportunities can increase student agency, sense of belonging, and engagement in school, and ultimately lead to improved academic outcomes, including graduation.<sup>17</sup>

“It’s been a game changer. We learned so many things that are necessary and required in the real world, we haven’t experienced before...The reason to think, the way to act, taking responsibility and failing forward. Not being scared to lift your voices up and when [you] make a mistake, learn from it and learn to move forward from that mistake.

—Student designer



Photo: CREC Impact Academy

The ENE initiative supported grantees as they engaged students in the initial planning and design of their school model (the design phase) and as they built ongoing structures for including student voice into their core instructional and advisory systems (the implementation phase). This brief focuses on the lessons learned from engaging students in the design phase. Each of the grantees used different strategies to learn about and engage their students, and this brief identifies the common facilitators and challenges that emerged across the grantees.

Integrating the student perspective into any school design or decision-making processes must involve leaders and participants combatting traditional school norms, structures, and roles; adult misconceptions about students' ability to make informed contributions; and students' own discomfort and hesitation in sharing thoughts and ideas.<sup>18</sup> With support from Springpoint, ENE grantees tackled these challenges through intentional pre-planning designed to lay the foundation for a successful school design followed by deliberate strategies for including students in the design process itself.



Photo: CREC Impact Academy

# Lessons Learned

The lessons learned about incorporating student voice into school design were informed by the 18 grantees that received planning grants. The first set of lessons describes the preliminary work needed to prepare school design teams to successfully incorporate student voice, followed by strategies for intentionally engaging and codesigning with students.



## Lay the Foundation

The experience of ENE grantees points to two fundamental activities that set the stage for successfully engaging students in school design: first, gaining a deep understanding of students' assets, challenges, and goals; and second, taking steps to help school staff understand the value of student voice.

A critical first step to student-centered design work is understanding what students need and want from school. Springpoint guided ENE grantees to better understand their students through research activities, such as analysis of student record data, student surveys, and student focus groups. These efforts gave students multiple opportunities to share their views and experiences and offered design teams new insights into their students; they also developed staff's capacity to analyze and use data so they could continue gathering and using information on their students over time. A second crucial step to a successful student-centered design process is creating a design culture that is conducive to student participation. In some cases, building this culture may necessitate shifting staff mindsets concerning the role of students.

### Learn about your students—their assets, challenges, and goals—through systematic research

A foundational activity for a student-centered design process is gathering information about students from students.<sup>19,20</sup> In listening to students' perspectives on their own schooling experiences, stakeholders can gather unique knowledge about students' needs and assets and may dispel preexisting assumptions about students' experiences.<sup>21</sup> Notably, engaging students in data collection efforts may also contribute to students feeling heard and included in their school and mitigate feelings of anonymity and powerlessness.<sup>22,23</sup>

Springpoint encouraged grantees to gather new and timely quantitative and qualitative data about their students. Design teams analyzed existing extant data—including students' credit attainment, course completion, grade point average, graduation rates and disciplinary and attendance records—to identify gaps in students' educational experiences, such as areas where students were disengaging or not making progress, and ways to bridge those gaps.

Design teams also spent considerable time collecting data directly from students, using a variety of strategies to learn about students' perspectives on school climate, school practices, and students' career interests and educational goals. The strategies they used included the following:

- student surveys and classroom exit tickets
- interviews and focus groups with current students, students who had dropped out, and students who had recently graduated
- observations and shadowing of students during the school day
- structured gatherings and meetings
- home visits

The grantees opening new schools did not have an existing student body; they collected data from local students who had similar backgrounds and academic histories as their target population. One grantee asked a community-based organization to recommend English learner students who are new to the country or whose parents do not speak English. Others identified students at the local high school that represented the most likely alternative option for their target students.

Because grantees serve a student population with a high incidence of adverse childhood experiences, staff shared that it was important to be mindful of what students were being asked to disclose and to help students understand that the information they shared would be used to improve their educational experiences.

Through this systematic inquiry, school staff found they could still be surprised by what they learned about their students. Teachers and school leaders reported that they gained a deeper understanding and a fresh perspective on their students from the results of their data collection efforts. One design team member said, “I’ve been here for 5 years, and I am really close to students, but the survey opened my eyes to the way they were thinking.” Several participants described interview data as being particularly insightful, with one leader explaining:

“...it really wasn’t until we put kids into a room, got them to feel comfortable and safe to answer tough questions that I started hearing about how difficult school is for them and the range of competing priorities they have—and then even once they get here, not feeling welcome, not feeling respected by their teachers, and it was heart-wrenching.”

Research activities that are tied to a defined area of focus and clear goals can provide the foundation for a continuous improvement process. Design teams can plan for a multiyear

## Spotlight on Scrums

A scrum is a unique example of a structured meeting a grantee used to gather regular student input and feedback. A scrum is a process through which teams can co-design and iterate on a problem of practice. One grantee’s design team held scrums throughout the planning year for students, teachers, parents, and other community members to solicit a wide range of perspectives and eventually to provide input on design deliverables. At the first scrum, for example, members of the design team asked students which opportunities they thought should be available to students and their thoughts on academic competencies.

The design lead noted that presenting the opportunity as an informal invitation rather than a formal event was successful in encouraging student attendance and incorporating student voice into the design process.

In addition to facilitating discussion during the initial design phase, scrums can be a good forum for schools to receive feedback from the broader community once implementation has begun.

inquiry cycle in which grantees iteratively collect and assess data, even after a designated design phase ends. For example, some ENE grantees realized after they had engaged in their preplanning research that it would have been helpful to conduct interviews or focus groups with students who had stopped attending school.

It is important to note that data collection and analysis can be time-consuming and burdensome on participants. In some cases, ENE grantees gathered more data than they could analyze and translate into action, or students were asked to complete multiple surveys and interviews, which led to student fatigue and questions about the quality of the data. These challenges underscore the importance of defining a clear research plan and focused research agenda in advance to avoid information overload and student fatigue. Grantees' collective experiences and Springpoint resources offer guidance and considerations for research planning activities.

## Developing a Research Plan

A clear research plan and vision for how design teams will use data can streamline data collections so that data analysis is meaningful, manageable, and actionable.

### Identify Research Questions

Start with clear, targeted research questions to gather information on students, the school environment, and the broader community.

- What do you already know?
- What do you need to know?



### Select Methodologies

Consider the data and methodologies that will help answer the research questions.

- What data do you already collect that can address the research questions?
- Are data collection activities culturally and linguistically responsive?

### Create a Work Plan

Include a timeline to specify when you will collect and analyze data.

- Who is responsible for each task?
- How will you track when data were collected and who they were collected from?



### Analyze Data

Identify themes and patterns. Consider how you will use the findings to inform next steps.

- How will you summarize the data?
- What resources or expertise do you need to analyze the data?

## Prepare staff to value the power of student voice in school design

Student-centered design requires students to have a productive and meaningful role in the design process. To do this successfully, school staff must shift from traditional ways of thinking about school and students' roles in it.<sup>24,25,26,27</sup> Although many ENE schools came to the initiative with a student-centered orientation, the student-centered design required school staff to re-examine and deepen how they include student perspectives in decision-making. As one student reflected, "Teachers are used to certain things" and part of the design process involved "trying to get teachers outside of their comfort zone."

During the planning year, Springpoint engaged school design teams in professional development sessions focused on PYD and the incorporation of student voice. As a key activity for building a common vision of excellence among ENE school staff, Springpoint led grantees on study tours of schools they identified as having high-quality PYD practices. These study tours allowed ENE school staff to see the PYD principles in action and witness the kind of innovative approaches that are possible. Further, hearing from students themselves through student panels and other opportunities to speak with students during these tours was a particularly powerful way of demonstrating the value of student voice to staff. A counselor who attended a study tour explained how influential it was in shifting her perspective: "It was like almost mind-altering for me when coming back here and talking about it with other teachers and saying, this is what we need to do. Because if you don't, you can hear it, but if you don't see it, it's just a totally different thing."

“To actually be student-centered means you have to give up power. I mean, if I'm going to be a staff-centered school, as a leader, I have to give up that power and that decision-making to the staff. So that same release has to happen from all adults to the students. That I think has just been an incredibly hard thing to do, especially when you've been so indoctrinated in a way of receiving information through...the traditional school model.

—Design lead

These activities helped shift staff perspectives on what is possible and how student voices can be valuable as they embarked on the process of school design.



## Take Deliberate Steps to Engage Students in Planning and Design

Once the foundation for student-centered design has been established through collecting student data and preparing adults to embrace student voice, school staff can begin intentionally designing the school model alongside students. The experience of ENE grantees suggests that the school design process is most effective when led by a strategic group of individuals, including and especially students (called student designers), who collectively represent the needed expertise and experience and bring a range of perspectives to the design process. As one student succinctly said, “If you don’t ask students, you don’t know what they want or need.”

Including students on the design team is an important signal that student voice matters and provides critical information about the student experience throughout the planning process. The majority of ENE grantees included at least one student on the design team. However, to engage students in the design process, design teams must recruit and support students who are representative of the school’s diversity, ensure they can attend design meetings, collaborate with them on meaningful tasks, and reinforce continued student participation by communicating how their input is used.

### Positive Youth Development Resources

To build staff understanding of PYD, Springpoint recommends training offered by the [Youth Development Institute](#) and organizing visits to schools that have enacted a strong PYD culture.

- [How Students Thrive: Positive Youth Development in Practice](#)
- [Designing with Diverse Communities: Recommended Readings & Resources](#)
- [How to Plan Great Learning Tours for School Designers](#)
- [Learning from Great Practice: Schools to Visit in 2019](#)

### Recruit student designers who reflect the diversity of your student population

Student designers serve as the voice of the larger study body and should reflect the demographics and grade ranges within the school, including diverse student subgroups. The Center for American Progress found that “efforts to incorporate student voice [in education] are stronger when they include...intentional efforts to incorporate multiple student voices, especially those that have been historically marginalized.”<sup>28</sup> Most ENE grantees aimed to recruit student designers who were representative of their diverse student populations, including students of color, English Learners, students who are immigrants, and a balance of male and female students.

Grantees used a variety of strategies to recruit students for the design teams. Some grantees had an open call for all interested students to apply while others asked for nominations of strong student candidates from district and school staff. The demands of the application and selection processes varied, including interviews and essays about designing a school, and grantees needed to balance making the process accessible enough that it did not pose a barrier for students interested in participating and rigorous enough to ensure motivation and commitment.

Several grantees starting new schools recruited student designers who represented the target student population. One grantee creating a program for young men of color, for example, strategically invited young men of color to join the design team. Another grantee starting a new school in a city with a large recent immigrant population recruited students representing this community. The design leader said she looked for students who could speak to specific English Learner student perspectives, such as those whose parents do not speak English at all and students who were new to the country. To recruit students, the design leader asked local community-based organizations serving populations with demographics similar to the school's target population to identify potential student designers. The team ultimately selected four students, including one who had initially dropped out of a different high school program, two whose parents were immigrants, and one who was learning English.



Photo: Chelsea Opportunity Academy

Students offered various reasons for choosing to participate on the design teams, but they commonly described wanting to help improve school for younger students who are similar to them. One student shared, “I think it’s a good opportunity to make choices and decide to make positive decisions for younger students.” Similarly, another student said, “I want to see the school better themselves [sic] for the upcoming students. Students [at this school] are delinquents, do bad stuff. I was doing the same stuff as them. The teachers in here never gave up on me, and without them and all the mistakes I’ve made, I wouldn’t be the same person I was today.”

A few of the grantees struggled to recruit students to participate on the design team, often due to other responsibilities the students had outside of school or anxiety about what participation would entail. In two cases, students were reluctant to join because of the travel to technical assistance convenings that were part of the grant. One design leader said, “It’s hard to get students to commit, some had anxiety about traveling, not knowing the full expectations of what students were going to do, nervous to take a risk.”

## Structure and schedule design meetings to be accessible to your students

To ensure equitable and representative student participation in design meetings, design teams must ensure students can attend them. At the ENE sites, student designers were expected to commit significant time to the design work (for example, at one grantee design teams met for 2 hours every week). Grantees used two different strategies to encourage student designers' attendance at design meetings: providing stipends so students who may have had to miss or forgo afterschool jobs to be on the design team could afford to participate, or building in regular time during the school day for design meetings to accommodate students with afterschool work or family obligations.

To compensate students for their time and ensure more consistent participation, two grantees provided stipends to their student designers for serving on the design team. Another grantee used the ENE grant to pay its student designer—a recent graduate—to work for 20–25 hours a week on tasks related to redesigning the school.

Providing dedicated time and space during the school day was another way grantees tried to support more student participation, particularly when stipends were not possible. One grantee created a class during the school day specifically for students interested in helping with the school design process. During the class, students discussed features they would like to see at their school, researched these features, and discussed the design plans until they came to an agreement on which features to move forward with. Other grantees reflected retrospectively that they wish they had considered providing time and space during the school day for design work. One noted that they could have engaged students more consistently in the process if they had created a period during the school day for student designers and other interested students to work closely with a teacher on the design team to talk about the different elements of designing a school.

“... every Wednesday after school, we partake for 3–4 hours. The teachers asked the students what you want in a high school... then we keep gathering that information. We're not done, but each time we have a meeting we come to a better tomorrow. I feel like cool, next year I'm going to get these things I asked for from this meeting, and I think what I've asked for could help many students.

—Student designer

## Create clear and meaningful roles for your student designers to give them space to contribute

Students, like adult design team members, need clear guidance about how they are expected to contribute to the design process. At the same time, students also need to feel empowered to generate their own insights and perspectives in the design work.<sup>29</sup> In leading student voice activities, it is important that adults balance supporting students and giving them space to take on meaningful roles.<sup>30</sup>

Ideally, student contributions should be substantive and impact the design process. Several grantees engaged their student

designers in creating and revising the design artifacts, such as the school’s mission statement and core values. A few grantees tasked students with significant aspects of school design. At one such grantee, the design lead supported students to participate in selecting the school’s competencies and developing the rubrics for these competencies. At another, student designers were charged with helping put together a rudimentary model for the new advisory period and giving feedback on potential school features introduced during the Springpoint technical assistance convenings.



Photo: Phoenix Charter Academy

Student designers also played a vital liaison role between their peers and the design team. For example, student designers at one grantee helped design and administer a student survey and interview other students to learn about what they wanted in a school. One student described administering surveys to his fellow students, “Usually we go into class and do them right then and there. ... I think it’s better a student is doing it than a teacher. I tread lightly. I don’t want them to feel forced either.” At another grantee, student designers debriefed the rest of the staff and students on the design process and several technical assistance events and activities. Enlisting students to lead these activities can help empower students to take ownership of their educational experiences.<sup>31</sup>

Student designers who were clear about their role and were asked to make significant contributions reported having a greater commitment to the school’s design process than those who did not. For instance, one student designer shared that participating in the design team helped him feel like he was able to improve the school for future students. In the absence of clear and meaningful roles, however, student designers can struggle to understand their purpose in the design work. One student designer said he felt like he was just “floating for a while” and thought “if I was more informed it would have been a lot easier.”

## Help students develop skills and knowledge to fully engage with the design process

To contribute meaningfully, students must understand the concepts they are being asked to weigh in on. The ENE initiative involved complex design components, such as competencies and rubrics and technical language that were often unfamiliar to students. Design teams must consider the prior knowledge and experiences of student designers and scaffold their understanding accordingly before they can expect students to contribute comfortably and meaningfully.

One way the initiative tried to build students' understanding of design was to invite them to attend the convenings where design teams visited other schools of excellence. During those visits, students were able to witness various design components in action and speak to students at those schools. Student designers who attended these school visits saw what school could look like and learned about design features they would like to see at their school. For example, one student shared an approach he observed that he thought would be helpful at his school:

When one is in high school, they think high school is high school, but you could give it an elementary school vibe, all students in one classroom, one teacher for the whole duration they're in high school. The teacher is a generalist and will have students until they graduate. We develop a relationship over time and help each other out, a pact of solidarity. ... The student itself [sic] might not have the best home relationship or living situation, so to have a positive association of an environment, a place to feel welcomed and loved or be listened to. A lot of kids need that nowadays.

### Promising Strategies for Scaffolding Student Designers

To design a new school “for the students, by the students,” one design lead structured the design process to ensure that student designers understood their role and the design work they were being asked to complete.

The design team included five student designers, and the design lead prepared students so they could actively contribute. She met with students weekly before the larger design team meetings to provide “professional development” on the topic they would be discussing in the design meeting, such as positive youth development. For example, before the design team worked on developing competency rubrics, the design lead showed student designers how to read and create rubrics. She also talked with the student designers about how to ask questions and provide feedback during meetings.

As a result of this scaffolding, student designers felt prepared and were active participants in the meetings. A student said, “I feel like we have enough knowledge because before we have to start building curriculum, ...we went through rigorous workshops where [the design lead] would show us all the skills we would need to be able to complete or do the curriculum, which is why I felt ready to do it, and why it was more easy to do.” More specifically, students recommended renaming the original four-point scale competency rubric to beginner, emerging, proficient, and master to make it more meaningful to students, like a video game where one adapts to certain challenges in order to make it to the next level. By facilitating deeper understanding of these design elements, the design lead enabled students to provide more thoughtful input on the design plans.

At least one grantee invested a significant amount of time discussing the design artifacts and the primary components of school design with students to help scaffold student designers' understanding of the design work. One new adult member of the design team noted how this process supported students' engagement:

The thing that struck almost from the start...is how much the students had already [internalized] the whole inquiry process—they not only had adopted language, but they knew it well enough and know how it gets implemented. Their first thought when we sit down and look at something is 'Okay, we need to sit down and look at norms.' These kids understand the first step is developing norms.

This support from the design leader helped students feel prepared to participate in monthly design team meetings and it made them feel comfortable asking other team members for help. One student said, "We definitely have the support. We can ask [the design leader] any questions, or the team for feedback, any type of help, any clarification that we may need..."



Photo: Phoenix Charter Academy

When students did not have that support, they struggled to engage in the design process. Design work is challenging for everyone, and even more so for students who likely have never encountered this type of work. For most of the grantees, students had not engaged in a design process before, were new to design elements within the ENE initiative, like competencies, and had never been asked to think deeply about what they would like their school to look like. As one student designer described, "A big obstacle in being a student designer is that we never learned how to do what we're doing in this space. We never learned how to think critically. We never stepped outside of the box they've put us in." Moreover, the language used during design team meetings and technical assistance convenings and on design documents was sometimes full of jargon and unfamiliar. A student explained that the design team work sometimes felt inaccessible to him:

I look at [the work they give us] and I don't know what half of it means. It's difficult because I don't want to ask my teachers to break it down for me because if I don't understand it then I don't understand the point of being on the design team.

To allow students to productively participate on teams, school design teams should establish processes to help scaffold materials and content for students and establish norms at the outset of the design process for how the group will work together. Articulating norms and ensuring everyone understands the objectives is important for any design process, but it is especially crucial when seeking to include the voices of those who may not feel as comfortable contributing, such as students. Attending early to building staff understanding about the value of student voice, as discussed previously, can help teams commit to the norms necessary for creating a culture that is welcoming of questions and conducive to student participation.

### **Demonstrate to student designers—and their peers—how their input is being used**

Finally, design teams should make their use of student feedback transparent so that students know school leaders are actively addressing their concerns and are authentic in their efforts to include student perspectives.<sup>32</sup> Design teams may face constraints to incorporating all student ideas, and it is equally as important to share why ideas could not be used as it is to demonstrate how ideas are implemented.

Demonstrating to students how their input is used is key to sustaining their participation in the process. A student designer reflected, “A lot of students ... dropped out of the design team. ... That means the design team meetings are not engaging enough for students to give their time. Which I think is an issue that can be solved. You can make them more engaging by instead of talking, we can do — actually act on what we talk about in these meetings.”



Photo: Phoenix Charter Academy

Students should see the impact of their contributions in a timely manner. This follow-through shows students that school staff care about their input in an authentic way and encourages continued student participation. Indeed, in some schools, students felt their voice and recommendations had been taken seriously by school leaders and used in school plans. One student cited an example of when she suggested setting up a recruitment table at the local mall to attract new students, and the design leads ran with the idea and pulled a recruitment event together there. Two other students saw how their feedback influenced a hiring decision after they helped interview teacher candidates. Another student shared that the school incorporated student feedback quickly, explaining, “We see cases where we’ve spoken in one meeting and in the next they’re already adapted into what we’re doing.” At such schools, students felt heard and were empowered to have a say in their education. As one student designer described, his “mind was blown for ten minutes straight” that “students can be part of decisions.” Another shared, “I appreciate that the teachers would want to validate my opinion. They’re like, ‘What do you think?’ You care about what I think? I got a lot to say then.”

# Conclusion

Effectively incorporating student voice in design requires a student-centered approach. This process involves deeply understanding the school's student population, creating a climate in which student voices are heard and valued, supporting students to participate in substantive ways, and demonstrating how students' contributions are used. Embracing student voice into school design helps create schools that celebrate students' assets and provide equitable and relevant learning experiences. It also has corollary benefits for the participants of the design process, including helping school staff learn more about their students and empowering students to share their ideas, learn new skills, and own their education. Future briefs will explore the student experience in ENE schools and student outcomes.



Photo: Boston Day and Evening Academy

# Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy. (2019). *Student voice: How young people can shape the future of education*. Author.
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