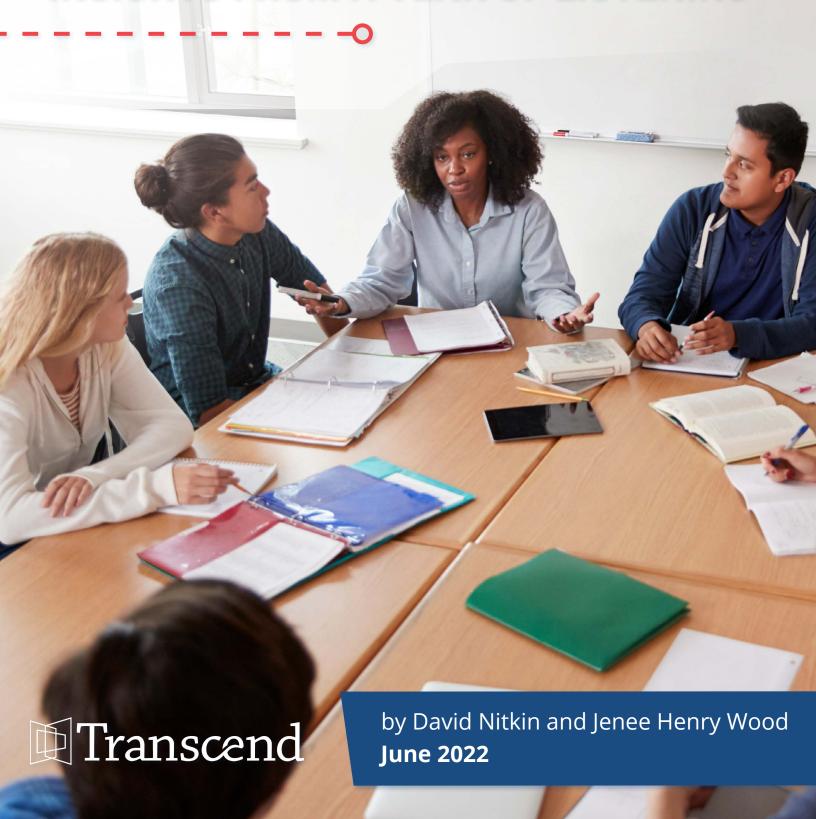
Conversations with Kids:

INSIGHTS FROM A YEAR OF LISTENING



About the Authors

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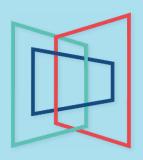
Hello! I'm Jenee Henry Wood and I lead learning for Transcend where I work to surface and share insights from our work in school communities across the country. I'm a former middle school social studies special educator where I co-taught in inclusion, resource, and self-contained classrooms. I also previously led knowledge and learning for a national education nonprofit.



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Transcend is a national nonprofit organization focused on innovation in school design. We support communities to create and spread extraordinary, equitable learning environments. To do this, we partner directly with communities, create resources for schools and systems, and share what we learn with leaders across the field.

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Executive Summary

The American education system is ready for reinvention. Not just adjustments to existing structures like curricula, assessments, or class sizes, but a fundamental rethinking of how, when, where, and for what purpose young people engage in learning. In his first year in office, Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona called for an innovation imperative, declaring that "this is our moment to truly reimagine education" and that "[we aren't] going to solve tomorrow's problems with our school and district design of yesterday."

Secretary Cardona <u>has also highlighted</u> perhaps our most underutilized asset in improving education: the wisdom and leadership of young people. From <u>Little Miss Flint (Mari Copeny)</u> to <u>Malala Yousafzai</u> and <u>Greta Thunberg</u>, it's increasingly clear that young

people see, understand, and dream in ways that can truly change the world. What if we sought and listened to THEIR wisdom on what they love about school and how they would change it? How could their voices help us reimagine school to be more joyful, challenging, relevant, and empowering?

In the fall of 2021, we at Transcend shared a set of discussion and survey tools based on the idea that educational redesign should start by talking to those for whom school matters most—young people themselves. Over the last year, we partnered with hundreds of communities across the country to support them in listening to more than 20,000 young people. Although it's impossible to fully summarize the diversity of what we and our partner communities learned together, six key themes emerged:

- **2.** Young people report that they learn most in school when their experiences feel highly relevant, rigorous, and customized.
- **3.** Many young people report that their best experiences in school happen outside of core academic—and these experiences are inequitably distributed.
- **4.** Many young people of all backgrounds are thinking about, talking about, and taking action to address social inequities—sometimes more than adults realize.
- **5.** Adults often report that listening to young people is dramatically helpful and increased their conviction in the necessity of rethinking the design of school.
 - **6.** When educators and kids talk together, it's possible to co-design experiences that make dramatic shifts in experiences. Deep listening is catalytic!

Youth activist <u>Natasha Mwansa</u> challenged adults to partner with young people in efforts to improve the world, highlighting the power that is unlocked by working together across generations. "[Adults] have a lot of experience, but we have ideas, we have energy, and we have solutions for the now

problems and the ones that are coming up...So we need to collaborate." Over the past year, we and our partners have sought to do just that and emerged even more convinced that meeting the needs of all young people will require fundamentally redesigning school with young people's voices at the forefront.

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How We Listerred

In October 2021, we shared <u>Conversations with Kids: Walking the Road to Reinvention</u>, a set of tools designed to help adults better understand how kids experience school. These tools used the lens of the <u>Leaps for 21st Century</u>, <u>Equitable Learning</u>, a research-backed framework designed with deep input from a diverse group of stakeholders from across the field. The Leaps describe ten essential shifts in young people's educational experiences that are consistent across the most effective learning environments regardless of sector, geography, or governance, and that science tells us are essential to unlock the infinite potential of every child.

10 LEAPS FOR 21ST CENTURY, EQUITABLE LEARNING

Unequal Expectations & Opportunities	High Expectations with Unlimited Opportunities
Narrow Focus	Whole-Child Focus
Rote Activities	Rigorous Learning
Irrelevance	Relevance
Assimilation & Marginalization ▶	Affirmation of Self & Others
Reinforcement of the Status Quo >	Social Consciousness & Action
Isolation	Connection & Community
Inflexible Systems	Customization
Passive Compliance	Active Self-Direction
Siloed Schooling	Anytime, Anywhere Learning

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The Conversations with Kids resources include a conversation guide to facilitate discussion with one student or a small group of students, a psychometrically-validated Leaps Student Voice Survey, and a reflection guide to help communities make meaning of what they hear. Over the last eight months, communities across the country used these resources to speak directly to young people about their experiences in school. From large urban districts with hundreds of thousands of students to rural communities where the superintendent sometimes doubles as the bus driver, we've supported adults to conduct

hundreds of focus groups and interviews and gathered survey responses from over 20,000 students.

Working in partnership with communities, we triangulated these quantitative and qualitative data, utilizing a mixed-methods approach to better understand how young people are experiencing school. While every community is different, we noticed several important themes consistent across many of our conversations. In the section below, we describe those themes and why they think they matter, including by directly sharing the words of students themselves.¹

ABOUT THE LEAPS STUDENT VOICE SURVEY

The Leaps Student Voice Survey is designed to help communities understand the experiences of learners through the lens of the Leaps for 21st Century, Equitable Learning. These experiences are important both as leading indicators of learning outcomes and as important ends in their own right. The Leaps Student Voice Survey builds upon and extends beyond currently available surveys in several important ways:

To **focus specifically on the quality of experiences** young people are having in school. We prioritized experiences because they are near-term predictors of outcomes (typically lagging indicators), because they can be measured with a relatively high degree of validity², and because the quality of experiences is valued by families and young people to a degree that existing systems don't consistently reflect.

To **avoid assumptions embedded in the traditional, standardized system of school**, such as single-teacher classrooms, A-F grading systems, and age-grade cohorts.

To **prioritize customizability to the unique contexts of communities**. For example, our survey allows communities to disaggregate responses by any element of students' identities, not just federal census categories.

The survey was built in partnership with outside psychometricians. They have gathered significant evidence of its validity and reliability across diverse settings and student groups, giving us a high degree of confidence in the accuracy of its results. Read the Technical Report.

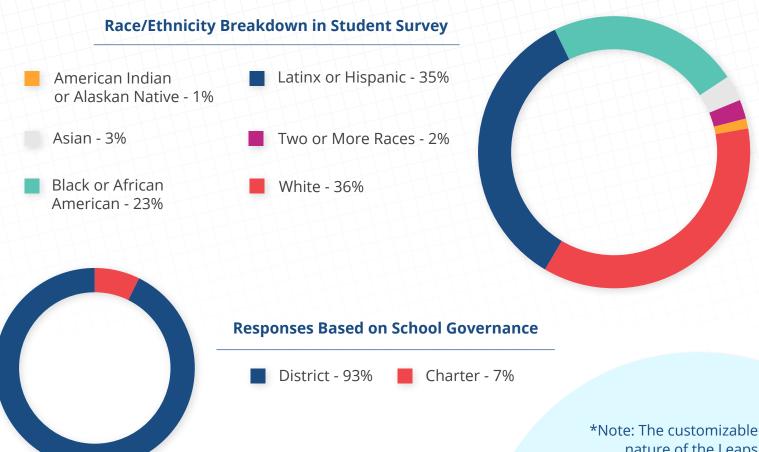
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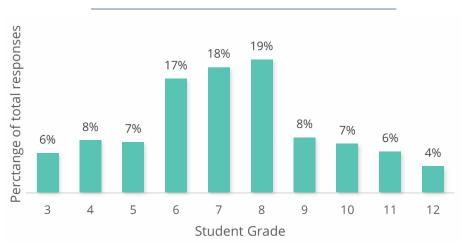
¹ Conversations with Kids generated many more interesting data points than we can describe in a brief article, and we plan to continue partnering with communities to elevate even more insights from young people in the future. Accordingly, this paper should be understood as only one small part of a long-term, field-wide effort to elevate the voices of young people in service of redesigning school.

² AERA, APA, & NCME. (2014)

DEMOGRAPHICS OF STUDENTS COMPLETING THE Leaps Student Voice Survey³



Percentage of Responses by Grade



*Note: The customizable nature of the Leaps Student Voice Survey allows communities to disaggregate students' responses by any factor, including nuanced indicators that are uniquely matched to their local context. For clarity in this national data summary, we have chosen to utilize census descriptors, with the understanding that these categories, while useful in some regards, are also a reductive mechanism for communicating the rich complexity of human identity.

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³ The racial/ethnic composition of our sample was roughly equivalent to the demographics of students nationwide, with an oversampling of students of color

What We Heard

1. Most young people say that their experiences in school feel irrelevant and offer few opportunities for agency and choice.

We asked students about the degree to which they were experiencing each of the <u>Ten Leaps</u>. Among those, students gave the lowest ratings to questions about whether their experiences felt relevant and offered them meaningful choices about what and how they learned. The survey questions related to relevance paint a picture of learning experiences that

are often disconnected from students' interests, passions, and real-life needs; only about a third of students agreed they get to learn about things they're interested in (35%) or that what they learn is connected to life outside the classroom (31%). In the words of one student. "From the courses to the way they are taught, there is a huge disconnect to what many of us need as we join the workforce of tomorrow. A majority of my educational experiences have left me yearning for an application of content I simply could not find. There isn't that kind of connection to the real world, leading to many

students becoming disenchanted with education."

Students also expressed that they often lacked the opportunity to make meaningful choices about their learning experiences. Only about a third of survey respondents agreed that they have a say about what happens to them in school (29%) or that they get to choose how to do their work (31%). The result is too often a feeling that young people are spending time in activities that don't access their passions. One student described their frustration with the mandatory assigned texts in their English class relative to those

offered in another class by their same school, "In my AP English Literature course, we were reading books like Othello and Frankenstein and Shakespeare, but nothing that I really related to. The curriculum was already set. Nobody in my class actually read Frankenstein — it was all SparkNotes. None of us were interested... And so we were like, 'What are other

books we would actually read?' My friend who is in regular English, she gets to write a social justice research paper, and I'm like, 'Why am I not in that class?' I want to do those interesting things, stuff that I feel is helpful and beneficial to me."

- Only 31% say that what they learn is connected to life outside the classroom
- Only 35% say they get to learn about things they're interested in
- Only 29% say they have a say about what happens to them
- Only 31% say they can choose how to do their work

"There isn't that kind of connection to the real world, leading to many students becoming disenchanted with education."

- High school student, North Carolina

It's also worth noting that approximately onethird of students did report that they were having positive experiences and that we saw more variation in experiences within schools than across schools. In other words, in every single community that we talked with, some students reported having relevant experiences and meaningful opportunities to make choices about their learning. Our community partners told us that identifying the moments, places, and people connected to these positive experiences was in itself a powerful reward for directly speaking to students.

2. Young people report that they learn most in school when their experiences feel highly relevant, rigorous, and customized.

WHEN STUDENTS REPORTED THAT THEY....



Were held to High **Expectations with Unlimited Opportunities**



Engaged in Rigorous **Learning** and critical thinking



Saw school as Relevant to their needs and interested



Experienced Customization of the focus, pace, sequence, and supports for learning

THEY WERE... 67%

More likely to report that they learned a lot in school 4

A wide body of research demonstrates that people are most likely to learn when they care deeply about a topic and have choices in how they explore it. These kinds of experiences tap into young people's intrinsic motivation - the innate curiosity and desire to grow that can help them thrive as lifelong learners long after they've finished their formal K-12 education.

The connection between learning outcomes and learning experiences isn't just grounded in research we also heard it directly from students themselves. Young people who reported on the Leaps Student Voice Survey that their experiences in school were aligned with the vision described by the Leaps were significantly more likely to report that they learned a lot in school. They were especially likely to report learning when their experiences were relevant to their interest and goals, demanded rigorous critical thinking, allowed them to engage in their own way and at their own pace, and held them to high expectations with multiple opportunities to succeed.

These trends also emerged in our partners' conversations with young people. Students described that they learn most when their experiences are meaningfully connected to their interests and skills, and they have opportunities to grapple with topics that matter to them. One school leader explained, "In my conversations, the meaningful activities that stuck out for kids were science activities, math projects, and social studies projects—places where students had the freedom to choose what they could work on." A student also emphasized that having opportunities to wrestle with questions and problem-solve, rather than memorizing rote facts, increases their enjoyment and skill-building: "I like when teachers take the time to help us learn and lead us through the steps to learn something instead of giving us all the answers. If I don't know the math [my math teacher] will ask me questions or tell me to do certain steps to get to the answer."

⁴ 97% of students who reported positive overall experiences for relevance, rigor, customization, and high expectations said they felt like they learned a lot in school compared to 58% of students who did not report positive experiences on all four

⁵ Charlot, Leck, & Saxberg (2020); Lin-Siegler, Dweck, & Cohen (2016); Zimmerman, (2008)

3. Many young people report that their best experiences in school happen outside of core academics —and these experiences are inequitably distributed.

Where are young people most likely to engage in highquality experiences? According to them, the answer is occasionally during core academics but much more frequently in extracurriculars, clubs, or electives. As one educator summarized after his interviews, "When I asked where kids felt challenged and most engaged, almost every kid tied it to outside of school—Model UN, swimming, debate, PE. My takeaway is that there is a lot of learning happening during these moments, and it isn't all non-academic, but it is outside of the typical academic times. Why aren't we leveraging that knowledge to make classrooms more meaningful?" A student in a different community shared a similar reflection: "The activities that I engage in outside of school are profoundly instrumental to my educational experience because they are typically where I intentionally place myself when the school system fails to provide me with the knowledge and experiences that would benefit me culturally...for me, my work with outside organizations feels more purposeful and intentional compared to school, where everything is structured and it's a one-size-fits-all formula."

Our findings align with other research, such as Jal Mehta and Sarah Fine's *In Search of Deeper Learning*. Drawing on hundreds of hours of observations and interviews at thirty different schools, Mehta and Fine suggest that deeper learning is most likely to be found "in the periphery"—in clubs, extracurriculars, and electives "such as theater, music, debate, newspaper, athletics, dance, and Model United Nations... which students tell us have the depth, authenticity, and creative ethos that their core disciplinary classes tend to lack. These extracurricular spaces are not only more fun and engaging, but also are actually more consistent with what we know makes for good platforms for learning." ⁶

⁶ Mehta & Fine, 2019





However, we also know that access to extracurricular programs isn't equitably distributed. Instead, it reflects the broader structural inequalities in American society. Research shows that since the 1970s, upper-middle-class students have become increasingly active in school clubs and sports teams, while participation among lower-income families has decreased.⁷ This gap has expanded in parallel with rising income inequality nationwide and also reflects the introduction of "pay to play" programs. The adults we partnered with heard many of these same trends from their own students. According to one, "I heard different responses based on demographics. Students I spoke to from predominantly white campuses said they had opportunities to make the world a better place and had great experiences outside of school. Students from lower socio-economic status schools didn't have opportunities to make connections outside of school."

⁷ Snellman, Silva, Frederick, & Putnam, 2015

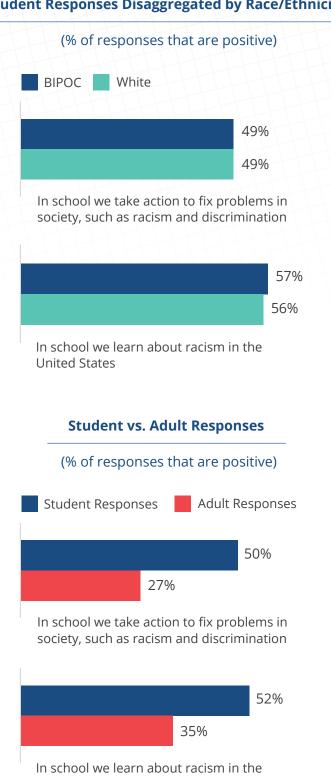
4. Many young people of all backgrounds are thinking about, talking about, and taking action to address social inequities—sometimes more than adults realize.

In today's political climate, the idea of students learning about structural inequalities and racism when they're in school has become a hot-button topic. But when we listened directly to kids, we found that issues of race and equity were often top of mind for them. According to one student, "I was really excited to take history courses, especially American history, as it's a direct product of the social injustices we experience in our everyday lives. My school has less than five percent Black and Latinx students, so I wanted to see how the teachers were adapting to being empathetic to them and to presenting American history in a way that's fair to groups that aren't really represented in the usual stories." Another student, when asked about the learning experiences that they found most valuable, named that "YVote, a nonprofit that fuels youth civic engagement, has been a program that not only exposed me to the root causes of issues such as criminal and environmental justice, but also equipped me with the tools and resources needed to combat these issues civically."

We saw no relationship between the race or ethnicity of students and their responses to questions related to social consciousness & action; white students and students of color were equally likely to report that they learned about racism and took action to fix problems in society. While these data are only one window into a very complex issue, they nevertheless offer an encouraging view of a new generation that shares a desire to work toward a more just world.

In fact, we found that adults were often surprised by how much young people said they were learning about and taking action to rectify social injustices. In a subset of our community partners, adults also took the Leaps Student Voice Survey as a mechanism for predicting what they thought students would say. While only about a third (35%) of adults predicted that students would say they learned in school about racism in the United States, over half (52%) of students said that they actually did. Even more strikingly, while only about a quarter (27%) of adults predicted that students would say they took action to fix problems in society such as racism and discrimination, half (50%) of students said they did.

Student Responses Disaggregated by Race/Ethnicity



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United States

5. Adults often report that listening to young people was dramatically helpful and increased their conviction in the necessity of rethinking the design of school.

In some cases, what adults heard from students surprised them. In others, it confirmed what they previously suspected but could not yet fully articulate. Either way, the information they learned from students deepened their conviction to design the kinds of experiences that will allow all young people to thrive. According to one educator, "After we put out the Transcend survey, we learned that 70% of our learners came back and said school wasn't meaningful, authentic, or relevant. Now, our big 'why' is how do we create experiences for our learners where they feel like what they are getting immersed in is relevant and authentic and meaningful. Without that, they are really just warming a seat, checking the boxes, and playing the game of school. We need more meaningful experiences so they can get the skills they need to be successful in whatever path they take in this complex world."

In many cases, the power of speaking to students came in seeing how misaligned the students' priorities were with the experiences that school was creating for them. One district leader shared, "When I asked teachers what matters most, they pointed to academics like high school AP classes. One teacher talked about how the Spring is all about college and GPA targets and pressing for instruction wherever possible. When I asked the kids what mattered to them most, they talked about making sure their friends weren't bullied or cleaning up the playground because they care about recycling. Neither [student] mentioned [the state assessment], but the teachers did." Another shared about the impact of their conversations, reporting, "We are starting to ask, what do our learners say? Before, there were times when we would just rubber-stamp something and maybe go to learners after. Now, we're getting learners on the front side of that. It's changing our behavior, and it's changing how we go about making decisions in our district."



"We are taking what we learned ... into our work around developing the vision of a classroom."

- Dr. Jesús Rodriguez, Deputy Chief Academic Officer, Dallas ISD

> Watch Dr. Jesús Rodriguez of Dallas ISD share about the impact of his team's conversations with students and staff

6. When educators and kids talk together, it's possible to co-design experiences that make dramatic shifts in experiences. Deep listening is catalytic!

For many of the communities we worked with, their conversations with young people not only deepened their conviction in the need to redesign school, but also catalyzed specific changes that immediately began having a positive impact on learning experiences. One example comes from Northern Cass, a rural district in North Dakota that set out to reimagine their learning model through a community-driven process. The first step in their journey was to deeply understand their current model, who it was (and wasn't) working for, and how young people were experiencing school. To do this, they led interviews and focus groups, administered the Leaps Student Voice Survey, and observed classrooms firsthand.

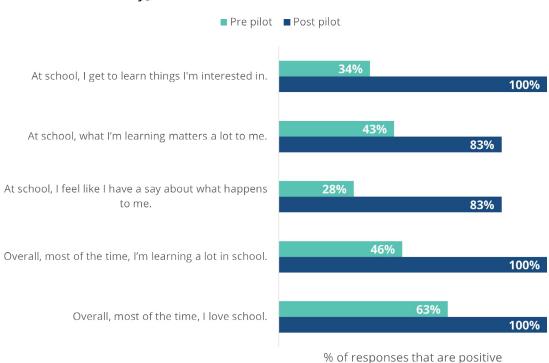
As they gathered these qualitative and quantitative data, they shared them back directly with their students to be transparent about what they were hearing. They then invited students to come to school on a day off to create a case for change that drew on data from their and their classmates' perspectives. Students presented their case for change directly to their community, arguing "School is acting as a choke point for our dreams and is limiting our potential to explore our passions. According to a recent schoolwide survey [the Leaps Student Voice Survey],

75% of learners feel what we learn in school cannot be connected to life outside the classroom. We aren't taught to see ourselves as the catalyst to make change. The current system was made for a past generation, and it hasn't evolved to accommodate us... We need you to form a partnership with our school to create opportunities to define and explore our passions - to help us become the leaders and problem-solvers of the future... Together we will change our school, to renew the relevance of education in pursuit of our dreams. This is our chance to set sail. Will you join us?"

The community answered the students' call. Together they began to rethink some of the hundred-year-old assumptions about how school should be structured, including scheduling, what content should be learned, and the role of the teacher. They then designed and piloted a new studio-based approach to learning that was designed to increase learner agency and provide more relevant learning activities. At the conclusion of their two-month pilot, they gave the Leaps Student Voice Survey again, and saw that it had produced a dramatic change in the quality of student experiences.

This community's work to reinvent school had and continues to have a profound impact on young people; not just making their experiences feel more relevant, but also making them feel like they had a voice, like they were learning a great deal, and like they loved school. And talking directly to students was the foundational step that made it all possible.

Change in Leaps Student Voice Survey responses from Pre Pilot to Post Pilot





Where We Go Next Together

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Many millions of adults—likely including you, the reader of this paper—are focused on improving the quality of education in this country. We have a HUGE and essential resource to help us accomplish that goal: students themselves! In the conversations our partner communities have had with students, young people shared powerful insights about the kinds of educational experiences they need and how we can create them. They also challenged all of us to raise our aspirations from improving schools to fundamentally transforming them.

Students are experts in their own experiences. Not only do they have valuable insights on how school is (or isn't) working for them, they also have ideas for what would make it better. They tell us that they want experiences that prioritize having choice, being held to high expectations, and engaging in learning that is connected to their passions and communities. And they tell us what research on the science of learning has already demonstrated: that these kinds of experiences are associated with improved academic and life outcomes.

It's now our collective responsibility to truly listen to young people and give them a seat at the table in planning the future of American education. That also means taking them seriously when they say that the current design of school isn't working and being willing to take bold and transformational steps to design a new approach to school that will lead to the experiences and outcomes they deserve.

Transcend's Conversations with Kids tools are freely available for any community (you can access them here or contact us here to discuss how they can be customized for your community), but what matters most isn't the particular tool you pick. What matters is investing the time to hear directly from young people and committing to redesign together towards an equitable, 21st Century education system that prepares all young people to thrive. If these findings have provoked you or deepened your existing convictions, a first step you can take is to use these reflection guides to begin a conversation within your community about how you might elevate student voice in service of redesign.

Most importantly, take the time to listen students like Ali Khatib, who just graduated from Salisbury High School in North Carolina, "As we consider what learning can look like for my generation and those to come, I hope more schools will take the time to walk a mile in the shoes of their students and redesign the school day with them in mind...To be better, schools must ask the right questions of their community and make changes based on the responses. This starts with listening to us."

PLAY

Listen to high school student Ali Khatib share his point of view on the purpose of education

Now What?

If this piece has inspired you, provoked you, or just made you curious, where can you go from here? Here are a few resources:

Continue this conversation with like-minded education leaders from across the country by joining the Transcend Design Community:

The <u>Transcend Design Community (TDC)</u> is a free, vibrant network of leaders, educators, and designers of innovative schools and learning

environments, along with talented individuals and organizations who support them.



If you are interested in exploring ways Transcend can support your school's design journey, please email us at:

hello@transcendeducation.org

Deepen your exploration of school design and reinvention:

- Invite young people to take the Leaps Student Voice Survey by emailing us at hello@transcendeducation.org
- Bring these <u>reflection guides</u> to your community to catalyze a conversation about the role of young people's voices in your work
- Use this **conversation guide** to plan interviews or focus groups with young people in your life
- Get to know <u>contemporary</u> <u>trends</u> that have implications for school design
- Engage with our science of learning and development resources that introduce the four key factors that impact learning
- Learn more about the Leaps and see how school communities across the country are creating experiences aligned with them
- <u>Sign up for our newsletter</u> to get the latest resources as they come out

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