

A Guide for Making Learning Student-Centered: Start by Listening to our Students

As educators, we have spent the last 18 months creating new ways to connect with our students and support their well-being, growth, and development as they faced multiple traumas. From the shift to remote learning, to the racial justice uprisings of Summer 2020, to the increase in violence against members of the AAPI community, our students have had to process these world events from behind their computer screens. Looking forward, we realize that the multiple disruptions to our education system are also an opportunity for us to transform our schools. Our education system was not working for all our students before the pandemic. We need to reimagine a system that truly puts students and their needs at the core of every decision. But what does that look like? We wanted to ask our students what student-centered learning looks and feels like.

We are a group of Teach Plus California Policy Fellows and classroom teachers with more than 70 years of experience among us. In Spring of 2021, we conducted surveys of our elementary, middle, and high school students to gather their insights about what student-centered learning means to them. Today more than ever, our students need opportunities to think through their feelings, apply their knowledge, and share their experiences. The process of listening to our students was a powerful one for us and them, and their responses generated some common themes:

1. **Make Learning Fun:** Students learn best when classroom instruction is motivating and engaging.
2. **Make Learning Empowering:** Students feel empowered when schools intentionally create space for developing student knowledge, ability, and confidence towards self advocacy.
3. **Make Learning Real:** Students learn best when the classroom material is relevant and culturally sustaining.
4. **Make Learning Human:** Students feel cared for and flourish when schools honor the individual by deliberately creating an environment that promotes a healthy balance of mental, emotional, and academic growth.

Make Learning Fun: Students learn best when classroom instruction is motivating and engaging.

When students are excited to learn, they want to be a part of the classroom. How do you make learning fun? Find out what students are interested in and what motivates them.

Recommendations

1. Create classroom tasks that are relatable and student-centered. Start your planning by getting to know what students like and want to learn. Begin the year with a ["Getting to Know You"](#) activity, or a [student survey](#) so you can find out more about each student.



2. Focus lesson plans on increasing active participation, collaboration, and time DOING the learning, especially with learners who may struggle in school. When students work together, it can increase excitement for the task. Classroom instruction should include joy and laughter, with students talking about their [joy in learning](#).
3. Engage learners in using and applying concepts and skills rather than just studying about them. Designing lessons and activities around making a difference in the world, for example, has a more lasting impact and motivates students more than just learning about the world. Students are more intrinsically motivated when their interests are centered, and they are able to work together toward a common goal.



Dr. Debi Bober—5th grade teacher, Cubberley Elementary School

When I asked my 5th grade students in January, 2021, "What do you miss about school," most of their answers included the word 'friend'." "My friends, face-to-face conversations, seeing my friends, my teacher, seeing my friends five days a week, I miss my best friend." Thirty-three students with the exact same need: they needed each other. To counteract my students' feelings of loneliness, we produced some music videos together.

I also noticed that kids were oversleeping because they weren't sleeping at night and that they weren't getting outside, limiting exercise. Many weren't eating a healthy breakfast or lunch. So, we studied nutrition and produced a [Healthy Snack Montage](#).

We used every Friday to do something non-academic and fun, like an indoor Scavenger Hunt. I gave time for my students to create short videos to highlight something they felt good about or something they had practiced and learned on their own, such as "How to Make a Smoothie", "How to Paint a Sunset", and "How to Play with a Cat."

Make Learning Empowering: Students feel empowered when schools intentionally create space for developing student knowledge, ability, and confidence towards self advocacy.

Empowered learning provides students with an experience that honors the interests, assets, and passions of the individual and collective student community while serving as a catalyst for human flourishing in meaningfulness, purpose, and personal mission. Our students can be advocates, activists, and changemakers in their communities.

Recommendations

1. Center scholar feedback when developing curriculum. Elevate student voice in the journey of learning. Support students with ongoing dialogue, [reflective activities](#), and awareness lessons embedded within their instructional year in order to learn about each other on a deep level. This will allow you to craft student-centered experiences where students can learn to self-advocate, like in [Socratic Seminars](#).

2. Honor student values and teach to student interests. Students are empowered when their interests and passions are heard and represented in the classroom curriculum. [Learn about the students](#) in order to better design relevant lessons that will help them flourish as humans in meaningful ways that can contribute to their own personal life missions.
3. Maximize the potential of all students. Students should feel [empowered to do more](#), to speak for themselves, to ask questions, and to seek support. This gives students greater confidence in their learning.

Make Learning Real: Students learn best when the classroom material is relevant and culturally sustaining.

Dialogue with students helps to identify curriculum most connected to student life and social issues, as well as academics. Teaching and learning happens within our larger societal context and students should feel connected to and engaged with their communities.

Recommendations

1. Co-create experiential learning opportunities with students to engage them in relevant and [culturally responsive curriculum](#). By opening up multiple means of engagement, students can bridge their current understanding of themselves with a new curriculum.
2. Seek out continual growth opportunities and [sustainable training in social justice](#) and culturally responsive teaching that connects to the lives of the student population you teach. Seek out opportunities and create space to engage with your colleagues on issues of social justice and cultural responsiveness.
3. Utilize updated materials and best teaching practices for supporting all learners. Students should have [access to current events](#) and topics that impact their communities.

Amber Riehman—Social Science Teacher, El Cajon Valley High School

Recently, I adapted a lesson from Teaching Tolerance called Countering Islamophobia. In this lesson, we looked at the experiences of people stereotyped based on their religion, race, and gender. When discussing these scenarios, my students began to tell their own stories of feeling marginalized, belittled, and stereotyped. To sum up our unit, I invited them to create an ad campaign that identified a specific stereotype, discuss how the stereotype may affect how one sees their identity, and demonstrate how they could change peoples' perspectives.

The results were amazing. Their campaigns illustrated various racial, religious, and gender stereotypes from their perspective. For example, Veronica's ad campaign, titled "Asians Aren't Viruses," highlighted recent discrimination towards Asian-Americans because of fear surrounding the coronavirus. She wrote, "We must respect their culture and not point fingers when it's a global pandemic affecting everyone." In his ad campaign addressing stereotypes about young black men, David wrote, "These stereotypes affect us because now people have this preconceived notion that being Black means something dangerous and that leads to innocent people being persecuted or even dying."



Make Learning Human: Students feel cared for and flourish when schools honor the individual by deliberately creating an environment that promotes a healthy balance of mental, emotional, and academic growth.

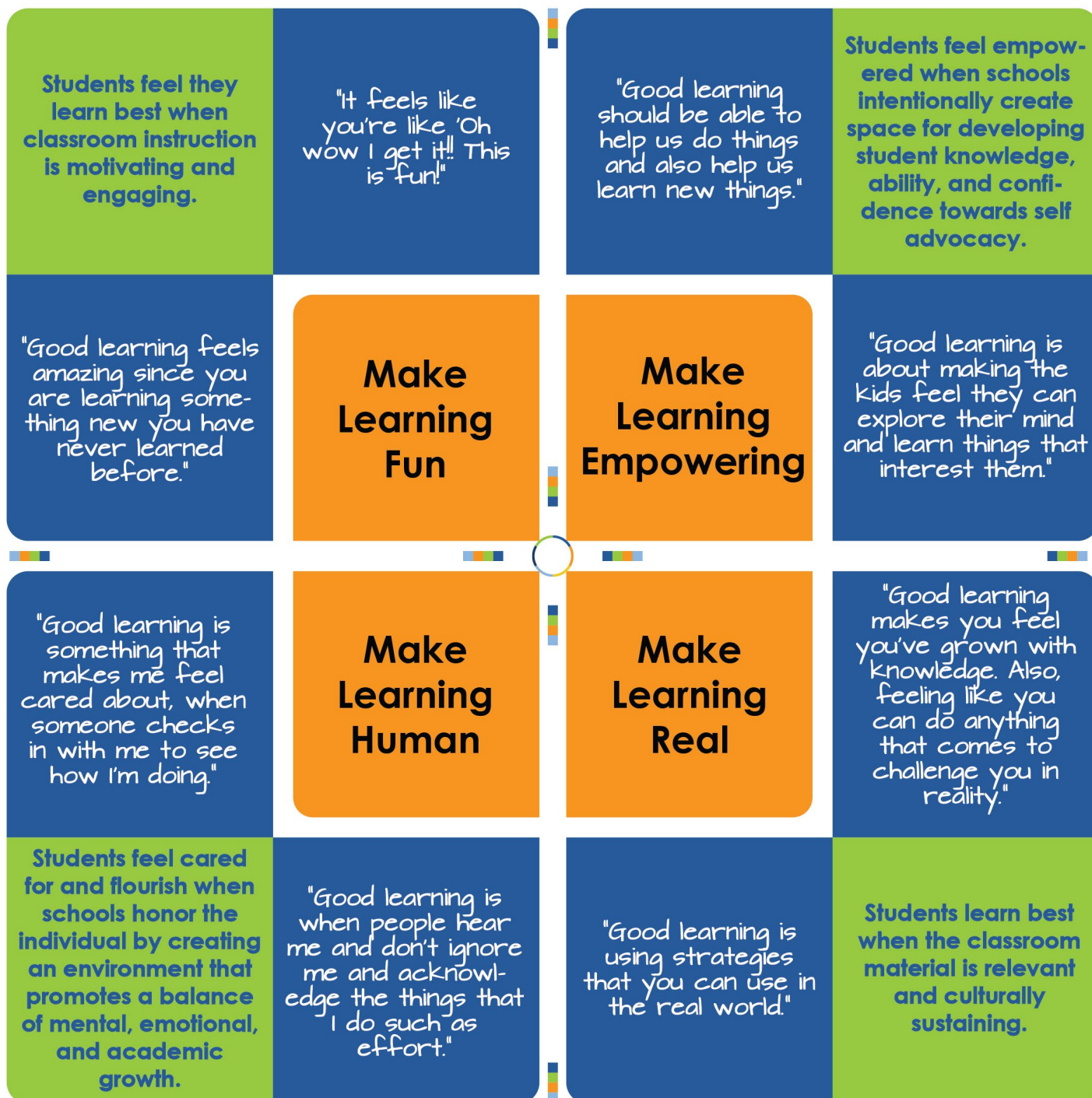
Students feel valued and culturally affirmed when their care and well-being are embedded in the learning experience. This experience must be structured around research-based practices for maintaining an appropriate balance between work, rest, health, and leisure while utilizing scientific evidence for best practices to learn and teach well.

Recommendations

1. Believe in and commit to [empathy-driven practices](#) informed by student input through dialogue, surveys, [interviews](#), and observations. Create safe relationships that honor open communication between students and staff and make students feel valued when they engage with the learning experience.
2. Utilize [whole-student](#) and science-based practices (e.g. [brain-based learning](#)) necessary for [everyone](#) to [learn](#) and [teach](#) well.
3. Acknowledge the connection between [teacher wellness](#) and [humane student-learning environments](#) by allowing for flexibility and an emphasis on healthy work-life balance in school policies, including schedule, pacing/lesson plans, curriculum maps, syllabi, mission/vision, and professional learning community time.

CONCLUSION

Teaching during the pandemic, we have learned to really listen to our students. Listen not just to what they say verbally, but also to what they say in their movement, level of engagement, body language, and tone. Our students have a lot to say even when they are not speaking. Especially in this moment, we have an opportunity to reimagine what school looks like going forward beyond just addressing the lost instructional time and the COVID-19 trauma. In order for this to happen, we as educators have a responsibility to really listen to our students, leverage their strengths and insights, and look at them as partners in creating learning experiences.



RESOURCES

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4. Codesigning Schools Toolkit. (The Teachers Guild and School Retool, 2020). <https://www.codesigningschools.com/toolkit-phase-three>
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6. Empathy Interview Guide (The Teachers Guild). http://9de85015abbf33ddd90e-1f69badc2e0d0c2f55d8bfc02212a52e.r82.cf5.rackcdn.com/Empathy_Interview_Guide_R1.pdf
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16. [humane student learning environments](#)

Our Survey Questions:

1. What is good learning?
2. What does good learning feel like?
3. Tell about a moment when you felt proud of your learning.
4. What makes you feel cared about?
5. Tell about a moment when you felt frustrated with learning.
6. Describe learning that makes you feel engaged.
7. If I said our next lesson is student centered, what would that look like?

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