

Feature 10: Shared Decision-Making and Leadership

“If you have an authoritarian, hierarchical school structure, the teacher becomes the information dispenser in the classroom. If kids are going to collaborate in classrooms, then teachers have to collaborate in decision-making.”

—Former New York City principal¹⁴⁶

What Students Need

Redesigning a school to reflect the features of successful schools described in this publication is a challenging process that requires the buy-in of the entire school community. Ongoing success of a redesigned school also depends on staff, students, and family members all understanding and supporting the community’s vision. This requires shared decision-making and leadership.

Research indicates that teacher participation in school decision-making is associated with greater retention for teachers and improved academic achievement for students.¹⁴⁷ There is also evidence that involvement of families and community members along with faculty also strengthens school climate and outcomes.¹⁴⁸ Authentic shared decision-making and leadership at the school level models the collaborative work that effective teachers expect from their students and enables schools to make significant improvements in their practices with the full endorsement and engagement of all members of the school community.

Moreover, at a moment in history when authoritarianism is on the rise, it is important for schools to model effective democratic processes, so young people grow up understanding the value of democracy, even when it is challenging to implement. Educator Deborah Meier reminds educators to remember the larger purpose of public schools:

How can we hope to educate for democracy if children and the adults in their lives never have the opportunity to observe or practice it? And if such an education doesn’t take place in our public schools, then where will it happen?¹⁴⁹

Key Practices

Shared Norms and Values

The first key element of an effective shared governance system is the development of **communitywide norms and values** that guide the work of teachers, parents, and students in making decisions. Working through these values is worth the time it takes to develop a strong consensus about what matters to members of the school community and what the goals for student learning and joint work will be. Students participate in developing and interpreting these norms and can rely on them to shape their daily experiences in school. (See [Feature 2: Safe, Inclusive School Climate](#).) Teachers can use these shared norms and values as touchstones when hiring colleagues, developing evaluation systems, engaging in peer review, making curriculum or professional development decisions, and setting standards for assessing student and teacher work.

These common values provide essential coherence to the educational program, as well as an important form of accountability, because educators, parents, or students can raise concerns when practices do not adhere to the norms.

Shared norms and values, when enacted in the context of **collaborative decision-making**, are the foundation for relational trust, which studies have found is essential for school improvement. A set of studies on 200 Chicago schools over a period of 7 years found, for example, that collaborative structures and activities were key to nurturing relational trust among teachers as well as between educators, parents, and community members.¹⁵⁰ As a part of this research, scholars found that partnerships among teachers, parents, and community members were important in providing the social resources needed to improve school conditions that influence student learning, including the learning climate and ambitious instruction. Chicago schools that were strong in these essential supports were at least 10 times more likely than schools weak in such supports to show substantial gains in both reading and math.

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Principals at effective schools are committed to enabling everyone to uphold the community's values and goals, but they do not try to take on this role alone; they reach out to others with expertise who can take the lead in many areas of the school's functioning. They follow the advice of community organizer Marshall Ganz, who says that leadership is "accepting responsibility to create conditions that enable others to achieve shared purpose in the face of uncertainty."¹⁵¹ A principal who knows how to enable others to lead can create the space for teachers, parents, and students to create a common vision for where the school is going, and teachers can then make decisions that lead to student success. The ownership that results from this kind of shared governance is critical if innovations are to last.

Where schoolwide decisions are concerned, many successful schools create **faculty committees** that interview and hire staff, plan and implement professional development, and manage other functions that cut across teaching teams. These smaller groups of staff work on specific issues, soliciting input from families, students, or community partners where appropriate, and bringing the issues back to the whole staff when policy decisions must be made. This whole-school decision-making gives all staff members the chance to participate in the final decisions and maintains the coherence and unity of purpose in the work of the school. At some schools, committees and work groups have changing memberships to reduce territoriality and create opportunities for people to develop shared perspectives and learn from one another. In addition, all participants in the governance process receive leadership training so that decision-making is collaborative and skillfully executed.

Student involvement in governance is also common at successful schools, including universal participation in setting classroom and school norms and values, as well as representative participation on the kinds of committees previously described. This is especially true for hiring committees, where the presence of students not only leads to more informed decisions but also communicates an important value to prospective teachers. In addition, student groups regularly discuss schoolwide issues of concern and make recommendations; at the secondary school level, their purview is not just dances

and assemblies but also substantive teaching and learning decisions. Small learning communities or advisories sometimes elect representatives to schoolwide bodies to create more authentic representation. Through these activities, students develop new skills and learn to be responsible members of a democratic community.

Caregivers also are invited to participate in the governance process, and while many working parents may not have time for committee meetings that are not directly related to their child's education, it is essential for schools to cultivate **parent leaders** who can thoughtfully represent diverse parent voices in the decision-making process. Successful secondary schools have parent leaders who participate in school governance, hiring, and other areas, such as staff development and other activities that guide the life of the school.

In Practice: Shared Decision-Making

At Felicitas & Gonzalo Mendez High School (Mendez) in Los Angeles, the COVID-19 crisis provided an opportunity to put student and parent involvement in decision-making to the test. During the summer of 2020, Mendez administrators created opportunities for families, staff, and students to connect, reflect, and think together about how to plan for the coming year. When students said that the regular six-course semester schedule was overwhelming given the pandemic conditions, the local school leadership committee sought community input and decided to switch to a quarter system that would give students fewer classes at a time, with more time for in-depth study and support on fewer topics at once. When parents said that distance learning was difficult because siblings were often sharing a single mobile device and they did not have enough desks or chairs, Mendez staff provided each student with a laptop or tablet and allowed them to borrow furniture from the school. Mendez students were better able to weather the challenges of the pandemic because they and their parents had a voice in the school's decision-making processes.

Source: Thompson, C. (2021). *Felicitas & Gonzalo Mendez High School: A community school that honors its neighborhood's legacy of educational justice*. Learning Policy Institute.

Agency and Voice

Within the frameworks established by shared values and school-level decision-making systems, effective schools place day-to-day decision-making authority as close as possible to the classroom, so decisions are made by those who best know the students and their needs. Just as many businesses today have clear standards and goals but allow work teams to have considerable flexibility as to how they reach those goals, well-structured schools establish academic standards and shared values, then give teaching teams the responsibility of making decisions and hold them accountable for student performance.

Faculty teams can design productive approaches to instruction. For example, at International High School at LaGuardia Community College in New York City, a team of four subject-area teachers (e.g., math, science, English language arts, and social studies) might share a group of 100 students with whom they loop for 2 years. Sometimes this team also includes a dedicated counselor. The educators have the authority to create their own curriculum units and daily schedules, and they have access to a budget

to support their work. In exchange, they are collectively responsible for the academic success of their students, as measured through the school's performance assessment system. This localized decision-making structure allows teachers to respond quickly and flexibly to changes in students' needs.

Eric Nadelstern, a former principal in New York City who launched this design, believes that there is a direct relationship between how adults in a school relate to one another and how they relate to their students. He explains, "If you have an authoritarian, hierarchical school structure, the teacher becomes the information dispenser in the classroom. If kids are going to collaborate in classrooms, then teachers have to collaborate in decision-making."¹⁵² Students also need to be able to make meaningful decisions. While staff play a critical role in establishing a supportive climate, the culture of a secondary school is at its heart a culture of the young people who make up most of the community. In effective high schools, students have a voice in every classroom, helping to shape the social and academic culture with the guidance and support of their adult mentors. Schools can seek to cultivate meaningful **student voice and leadership** by engaging students in curriculum design (see "[In Practice: Student Voice and Agency in Curriculum Design](#)"). Schools also can hold regular community meetings, either by grade level or within cohorts, where students can build connections, raise issues that matter to them, and work to solve problems facing the community. In addition, schools can offer students leadership opportunities, such as the chance to be peer conflict mediators and student leaders who host visitors or lead new student orientations and are tasked with the job of teaching newcomers about the school's values and approach to maintaining a safe and inclusive culture. A school's climate is truly safe and inclusive only when the culture is "owned" by the students themselves.

In Practice: Student Voice and Agency in Curriculum Design

Vista High School, a large comprehensive high school near San Diego, CA, has been redesigned into four small learning communities as part of its effort to cultivate a personalized and self-directed learning environment with a focus on students' social-emotional growth. Recently, 10th-grade teachers collaborated with their students to imagine what a cocreated semester might look like. The English language arts and world history teachers laid out the standards and non-negotiables, and the students added their thoughts and ideas as to how they might demonstrate their understanding. They put the characters of history and literary works on trial. To support teachers in shifting from the school's former traditional style of classroom organization, the school's leaders developed a cohort of **peer-to-peer coaches** who collaborate with teachers as thought partners to develop new ideas for building student voice into learning experiences.

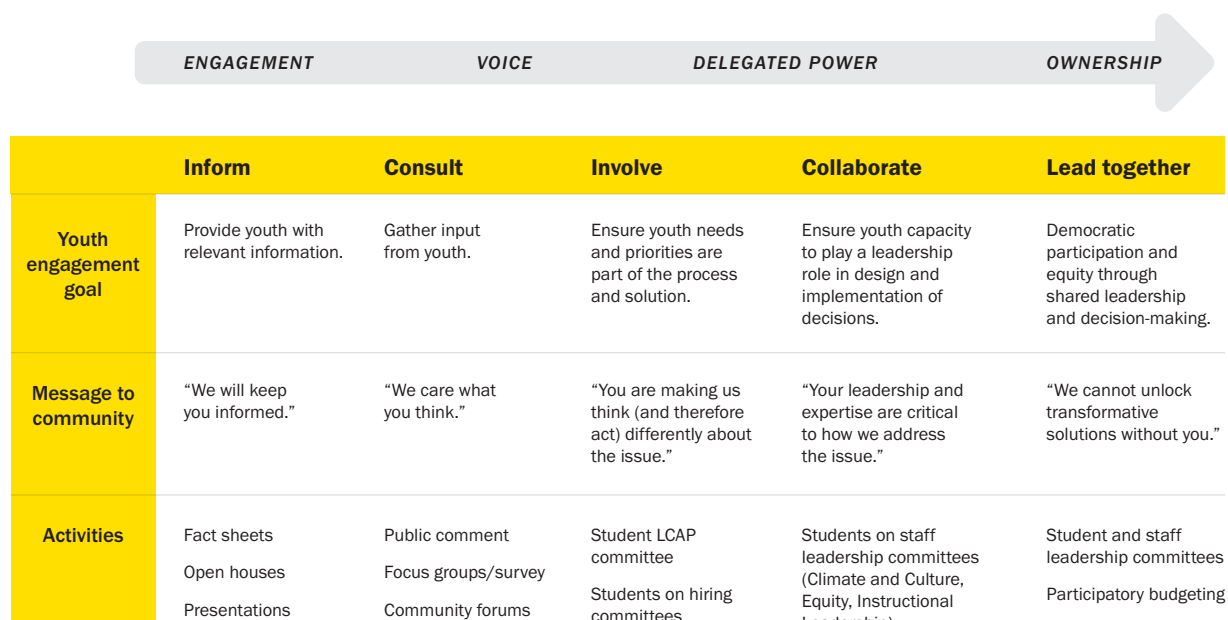
Students also have opportunities to direct their own learning as they experience the ideas they are studying. In one 10th-grade English class, teacher Stuart Easton engages students in grappling with *Lord of the Flies* by first leading discussions about the book's major themes—the collapse of society, the struggle for humanity in the face of chaos, the capacity for evil in all people. And then he leaves the room for a few days. To promote **student-driven, inquiry-based learning**, Easton directs the students to create their own society, as if they were on a deserted island like the characters in the novel. When he conducted the lesson, his students decided to form committees, elect leaders, and build a mini-society. Despite some initial chaos, and unlike the book, students organized themselves productively. "We got to make our own story, based on what we learned, and apply it to real life," said Deelilah Aivao, a 10th-grader in Easton's class. "We had power over the outcome of the project. ... It

gave us the opportunity to do something on our own rather than being forced to do it.” And what did students learn? A lesson that some people take a lifetime to grasp: “We learned that being stubborn can affect not only yourself but others too,” she said. “I absolutely loved this book.”

Source: Adapted from “The True Meaning of ‘Lord of the Flies’? Ask These 10th Graders” by XQ.

Traditional secondary schools often have elected student leaders but may lack opportunities for the majority of students to engage in shaping and supporting the school culture. Some districts have begun using tools to explore and assess the scope and depth of student agency and leadership in local secondary schools. For example, in Long Beach Unified School District some professional development opportunities—often cofacilitated by students, practitioners, and community organizers—have featured the Student Voice Continuum tool (see Figure 13), which helps practitioners consider how schools commonly seek to engage youth and the degree to which approaches may empower student agency. The continuum helps practitioners envision how they can shift from top-down approaches to those that more deeply engage students as partners in learning with valuable and necessary expertise. Moreover, it draws important attention to the democratic participation of youth of color to address issues of racial equity within school settings.

Figure 13. Student Voice Continuum



Note: The Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP) is a 3-year plan that districts develop in collaboration with their constituents. The LCAP describes district goals, priorities, and expenditures and articulates how they work to support student success.

Source: Adapted from González, R. (2019). *The spectrum of community engagement to ownership*. Movement Strategy Center.

Equity design teams established at Long Beach Unified secondary schools gather administrators, parents, students, and educators to identify site-based equity dilemmas. To do this, they collectively gather and analyze “street data”—stories and observations from families and students—that inform school leaders

and educators about the student experience at their school and proposed changes to address these needs. Design teams like these create a culture of collaboration in decision-making spaces and facilitate the authentic exchange of perspectives and expertise between youth and adults. Moreover, they can be made more inclusive and participatory through processes that support rotating membership and by ensuring that students from varied racial and ethnic backgrounds and with varied levels of academic performance—and their families—are represented, as well as students with particular educational needs (see “[In Practice: Space for Student Advocacy](#)”).¹⁵³

In Practice: Space for Student Advocacy

Schools and districts can tap students’ knowledge and perspectives in program design and problem-solving that address their particular needs. For example, Kern High School District in Kern County, CA, offers Youth Empowering Success (YES!) clubs for groups of high school and middle school students in foster care. These clubs, which meet periodically with the assistance of a counselor or social worker, serve both as support groups for students in foster care and as forums in which the students can receive particular support or attend presentations by educators and other professionals on topics selected by the students.

By creating spaces for students in foster care to elevate and advocate for themselves, the clubs represent a powerful model of student engagement. YES! clubs can also involve field trips or other special events to help students in foster care participate in the community. The activities culminate with an annual conference attended by a range of interest holders involved in the support of students in foster care: foster parents and staff from foster family agencies, child welfare agencies, probation offices, juvenile courts, and other community organizations. Conference speakers include both adults and students in foster care, allowing for a two-way exchange of information, giving voice to students in foster care and their needs while providing a forum for connecting the broad array of agencies and organizations involved in providing that support. In this way, the YES! conference serves as a youth-led joint professional development opportunity for system providers.

Source: Burns, D., Espinoza, D., Adams, J., & Ondrasek, N. (2022). *California students in foster care: Challenges and promising practices*. Learning Policy Institute.

Not only do these opportunities for students create a more positive school climate, but they are essential for young people’s growth and development. In too many secondary schools, young people are only asked to follow directions and are never expected to help shape the school experience or make decisions. Adolescents’ opportunities for agency enable them to learn and grow into healthy adults. Research also suggests that choice and agency in secondary school classrooms helps maintain engagement in academics.¹⁵⁴

When a secondary school undertakes a school redesign effort, an important starting point is a robust needs assessment that is driven by families, including parents or guardians and the students themselves. This offers an opportunity to reinvent the school into a more humane and inclusive environment where all young people can thrive. While educators have expertise about teaching, families and students are the experts on their hopes and dreams and should be the ultimate drivers of the school’s vision and values.

Social Justice Humanitas: A Democratic Approach to Schooling



Photo provided by Social Justice Humanitas Academy.

[Social Justice Humanitas Academy](#) (SJ Humanitas) was designed by teachers and envisioned as a student-centered learning environment that functions as a true community school. The school has been guided by its commitment to shared leadership, accountability, and decision-making to ensure those individuals who are closest to students make school and policy decisions. SJ Humanitas was organized and approved as an [LAUSD Pilot School](#)—an innovative reform model that advances democracy by emphasizing self-governance and leadership. Pilot Schools are autonomous schools that were established in 2007 when a memorandum of understanding was ratified by LAUSD and United Teachers Los Angeles providing autonomies over five distinct areas: (1) budget; (2) curriculum, instruction, and assessment; (3) governance; (4) school calendar; and (5) staffing. Site-based autonomies across these areas were meant to integrate to impact the schools' ability to innovate, provide equitable services for their students and families, personalize learning, and improve student outcomes through a collaborative network of interest holders. As of July 2020, there were 44 Pilot Schools that served K–12 students from every local district in Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD).

To govern their autonomous sites, Pilot Schools have a **school-based governance structure** that allows a group of school interest holders (which can consist of the principal, teachers, other school personnel, parents, community members, and students) to set and maintain the school's vision and goals and make decisions about the school's budget, principal selection and evaluation, and programming, while ensuring that the school complies with federal and state legal requirements. This decision-making body, called a Governing School Council, also has the responsibility of establishing bylaws and school policies and approving the annual Elect-to-Work Agreement, which allows Pilot Schools to revisit their mission and vision and the teacher responsibilities required to fulfill shared goals. Through site-based decision-making, Pilot Schools can address students' needs through unique school designs.

SJ Humanitas's commitment to shared decision-making as an LAUSD Pilot School means that the voices of students, families, and community members are heard. Within classrooms, teachers work to creatively engage students and provide opportunities for them to direct their learning through

approaches such as **project-based learning**. Youth forums like the school's Student Steering Committee provide every student with the opportunity to take part in educational planning and decision-making by sharing their feelings and opinions about their learning and the learning environment on a biannual basis. Further, students, parents, and community members participate in governance structures like the **Governing School Council**. As members of the council, students, parents, and community representatives assist in shaping school policy and take part in staff hiring and budget decisions.

Student voice is also heard regularly in "council," which is implemented as a component of the school's advisories and is defined by the school as "the practice of listening and speaking from the heart." Council is a practice of many ancient and Indigenous cultures all over the world. Participants sit in a circle, where everyone's voice and humanity are recognized. It is an egalitarian and democratic way to build community, connect with others, and practice attentive listening, which shapes many other settings for decision-making throughout the school.

Since its opening, SJ Humanitas has also served as a community hub—bringing together the resources and strengths of all interest holders to serve and support the whole community. Recognizing that both the assets and challenges facing the community penetrate the walls of the school, SJ Humanitas has forged strong partnerships with local agencies and organizations that aim to further strengthen and empower the community. According to one staff member, the capacity to both serve as a resource to the community and view the community as a resource is what makes SJ Humanitas a community school:

I think what makes us a community school is ... acknowledging that the things that happen outside of our doors will also happen inside of our doors. ... We have a responsibility to interact with the world outside of the campus. Being not only a resource for the entire community and for the families that are here, but also looking to them as a resource because we know that the best knowledge and the best practices that will help a community solve its issues are probably also in the community.

SJ Humanitas also works to connect students to community organizations to engender greater **community connections**, feelings of belonging, and support. Teachers develop partnerships with organizations that enrich their curriculum and encourage students to address issues in their community. For example, SJ Humanitas teachers have partnered with Action Civics LA, a nonprofit youth leadership organization that supports students' involvement with their communities and participation in the democratic process. Students are challenged to create a plan to better their community and are invited to present their projects at City Hall. Past projects have addressed gun violence, homelessness, and immigration policies—issues that impact their community.

Through the Mikva Challenge—a national effort to develop empowered, informed, and active citizens by engaging young people in an action civics curriculum—students develop relationships with leaders in the community and participate in civic processes alongside teachers and other adults. These partnerships highlight SJ Humanitas's commitment to serve as a social, educational, and enrichment hub by tapping into and building a shared sense of social responsibility across the region to assist the school in meeting the needs of the whole child.

Sources: Saunders, M., Martínez, L., Flook, L., & Hernández, L. E. (2021). *Social Justice Humanitas Academy: A community school approach to whole child education*. Learning Policy Institute; Ways of Council. (2020). *What is council practice?*

Additional Resources

- [3 Ways Administrators Can Include Teachers in Decision-Making](#), Miriam Plotinsky, Edutopia: This article describes approaches and structures that schools can incorporate to enable educators to participate in decisions that concern them most.
- [Educating for What? The Struggle for Democracy in Education](#), Deborah Meier: This article describes the purpose of education in a democracy and explains how practices such as Habits of Mind and Heart can help educate young people to be full participants in a democracy.
- [LAUSD Pilot Schools](#): This website describes the Los Angeles Pilot Schools, a network of public schools that have autonomy over budget, staffing, governance, curriculum and assessment, and the school calendar. These autonomies allow them to operate with greater flexibility in order to best meet their students' needs and to establish systems for shared leadership and decision-making.
- [Social Justice Humanitas Academy: A Community School Approach to Whole Child Education](#), Marisa Saunders, Lorea Martínez, Lisa Flook, and Laura E. Hernández, Learning Policy Institute: This report looks at Social Justice Humanitas Academy, a community school that advances student learning and development through its mission to support students on their journeys toward self-actualization, social justice, and postsecondary success. Driven by its structures and vision for teacher and community leadership, it maintains a supportive and inclusive learning environment, engages students in social and emotional development and student-centered pedagogical strategies, and provides access to integrated systems of supports.
- [Start With Diverse Shared Decision-Making Teams](#), California Partnership for the Future of Learning: This web page showcases how select schools have developed and maintained shared decision-making processes that incorporate the voices and perspectives of diverse actors to drive equity and change.
- [Striving for Relationship-Centered Schools: Insights From a Community-Based Transformation Campaign](#), Laura E. Hernández and Eddie Rivero, Learning Policy Institute: This report illustrates how select California districts and schools have sought to transform secondary schools by engaging youth as partners in driving change. Its findings on the systems and processes implemented in the Long Beach Unified School District especially demonstrate how students can be meaningfully engaged in decision-making, shared learning, and strategic planning.
- [The Transformative Power of Listening](#), Shane Safir, Jossey-Bass: This excerpt from Shane Safir's book *The Listening Leader* provides a framework for how school principals can effectively lead school change through shared governance.