



Creating “Good” Schools Observation and Discussion Tool

*Helping Young People and Adults
Have Conversations about
What Makes a “Good” Youth-Centered School*

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The Forum for Youth Investment (the Forum) is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization dedicated to helping communities and the nation make sure all young people are **ready by 21 — ready for work, college and life.**™ The Forum provides youth and adult leaders with the information, technical assistance, training, network support and partnership opportunities needed to increase the quality and quantity of youth investment and youth involvement.



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Creating “Good” Schools: Observation and Discussion Tool

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Introduction

Ask a high school student what makes them want to go to school, and you might hear, “good friends, good teachers, good classes and good facilities.” Ask them what makes a school “good” and you will likely hear a variety of answers, from “cool teachers I can talk to” and “interesting classes that will help me get a good career,” to “safety” and “a computer in my classroom.”

So, what makes a good school? How do you know when you are in one? For the purposes of this tool, a good school is one that takes young people and their development seriously in all of its efforts. For many, the charge of improving high schools brings to mind specific reform models or specific structural changes such as small schools, student advisories or block scheduling. But when you ask students what makes a school good, they tend to point to basic aspects of what we would call a “youth-centered learning environment” — beliefs, structures, policies and practices that make students feel valued, challenged, connected and supported.

Many of the reform models and strategies currently influencing high schools around the country include efforts to increase youth voice, choice, challenge and connection to school and community and demonstrate attention to young people’s needs as learners and as human beings. As strategies like these become the benchmarks of cutting edge school reform, we want to ensure that they are not perceived as a menu of items from which schools and districts mix and match, but rather as core strategies that matter, are interconnected and play out not only in school practices and policies, but also in structures and beliefs.

But what does “youth-centered” really mean and, more importantly, what does it look like? Based on opportunities over the past several years to participate in and facilitate conversations with young people, researchers, educators and advocates, and to review the literature on successful high schools, we have identified five critical elements of a youth-centered approach:

- 1. Climate.** Improving learning in high schools requires not only improving the quality of curriculum and instruction, but also creating a culture and environment that is safe and welcoming to all students. Creating a community where youth and adults communicate respectfully and fairly with one another and value one another’s voices; where teachers know students by name; and where students feel pride and a sense of belonging.
- 2. Instruction and Curriculum.** Improving learning in high schools requires that all students learn challenging content that is related to real life experiences, and that teachers structure curriculum activity to encourage student participation, conversation and leadership.
- 3. Connections.** Improving learning in high schools requires that learning includes experiences outside the classroom; through activities such as internships, job shadowing and service learning; and that there is a strong connection between the school, families and the community.
- 4. Outcomes.** Improvements in learning are inevitably linked to improvements in other outcomes — young people’s talents and contributions beyond the classroom are supported and valued, and they are provided multiple opportunities to develop social, emotional and vocational skills.
- 5. Engagement.** Improving learning in high schools requires youth engagement — youth voice and participation are valued and encouraged both inside and outside the classroom and young people have multiple opportunities to lead and be engaged in their school’s transformation.

Together, these elements constitute a broad, but coherent approach to thinking about youth-centered high school transformation. While the elements are best understood as a package rather than in isolation, each can also be broken down further in order to create a more detailed picture of youth-centered learning environments. *Creating “Good” Schools: Observation and Discussion Tool* aims to do just that.

Purpose of the Observation Tool

The goal of this tool is to help young people and adults have conversations about what makes a school “good” for students. This is often a difficult conversation to have, as many times young people and adults have different ways of expressing what “good” is. This document has been created with this in mind, and our hope is to make it easier for young people and adults to develop a common language of what “good” is in order to have conversations about how to improve their own schools.

To do this, we have taken what we have learned from research and what young people have told us is important to them in their schools and adapted these ideas to create a document that gives concrete examples of what a “good” youth-centered school looks like. The examples were developed with the help of youth and adults who have been working on improving high schools and are designed to help youth and adults look at what is happening inside a school and decide if, and how it helps and supports students. By using these examples, teams of youth and adults can look closely at what is actually happening inside of schools and begin to identify areas of strength and areas that need further work.

Creating “Good” Schools: Observation and Discussion Tool was designed to provide educators, young people, administrators, policy makers, parents, community members and other stake holders with a common lens for doing this kind of reflection in a thorough and thoughtful way. It can also be useful in assessing the range of reform models and change strategies underway in a district or school at any given time. Here are a few points to keep in mind before you begin:

- **This tool uses a student-centered framework** that places students and their experiences, interests, needs and contributions at the center of what is being observed.
- **This tool is specifically designed to be used by young people and adults**, preferably working together. Therefore, it can help assure that student observations and opinions get integrated into what is learned through a site visit or an assessment of their own school. In this way, the tool can lay the foundation for the ongoing involvement of young people in the planning or assessment process.
- **This tool aims to cover all aspects of the school environment**, including all of the nonclassroom spaces in a school that are critical to establishing a learning environment that is safe, engaging, respectful and affirming of the experiences and contributions of young people.

This tool has two specific purposes: It can be used for *self assessment* — for groups of students, teachers, administrators, community members and other stake holders to reflect on their own school(s). Alternatively, it can be used as a guide or *protocol for conducting site visits* to other schools, an increasingly popular strategy among educators involved in change efforts. When looking at a school other than their own, youth-adult teams can get to know one another and work together in a neutral environment. Once they have looked at another school together, youth and adults can begin to have conversations about what approach seems to work and what does not. After agreeing on some common principles, youth and adults can then compare the school they visited to their own school and shift the discussion to focus on what they can do to improve their own school.

Knowing what to look for and what questions to ask will help you decide if what you are seeing is indeed evidence of a youth-centered approach. For example, while it is fairly simple to observe whether or not there are computers in a classroom, this alone does not tell you very much. If, however, you observe a lesson where students are using computers to find sources and identify a person in their community to interview for a research project, then you are witnessing an instructional approach that emphasizes relevance, contribution and engagement; involves specific computer skills that are valuable from a career development perspective; and is helping students make connections to the community outside of school. Similarly, figuring out whether a school is safe for all students may require observing several spaces in the school (a hallway, classroom, the entrance to the gym, the cafeteria) and doing so at different times of day.

This tool helps people collect data about the school they are observing using two different methods. First, it provides specific, observable elements of youth-centered learning environments (things you can actually see) with example indicators that describe what they might look like when present or absent, allowing observers to not only note their presence or absence but also to lightly assess their implementation. In addition, it includes discussion questions that help get at those elements of the youth-centered approach that are not easily observable.

Potential Uses of the Tool

The Challenge and the Charge

The challenges facing districts, schools and their partners engaged in high school reform are extremely complex and involve transforming not just the role of young people but the entire high school enterprise. Creating pathways for and maintaining a focus on youth engagement in the context of this multi-faceted process is a difficult charge. And, while adults often seek the input of students they often struggle to find authentic ways to engage students in the change process. Too often efforts to engage young people are “add-on” activities, disconnected from the larger reform structures and processes.

In an effort to integrate the engagement of young people in the redesign and continual improvement process of schools, the *Observation and Discussion Tool* was designed build the capacity of young people to have conversations with adults about what they need in a successful school. It can be used as a starting point for engaging young people in discussions about the reform and redesign as of their high schools. While we hope this tool will serve many, we encourage schools to use it as a working draft. The language may not reflect the reality of all schools. Please feel free to change the language to make it work for your schools/districts needs.

This tool can be used in a variety of ways. Below you will find some ideas about how to use it, but there are many potential applications. Use it in a way that works for you.

Discuss Youth-Centered Learning Environments

(see Appendix 1: Discussion Outline for Youth-Centered Learning Environments, page 33)

The goal of the tool is to help youth and adults have conversations about what makes a school “good” for students. In order to do this, youth and adults need to agree on what “good” looks like. The tool is a place to start this conversation. While the content might appear complicated — when put in context with a discussion of youth-centered learning environments it can be a powerful framework with which to view or assess schools. The bulk of the text in the tool includes examples of what youth-centered schools look like. We suggest introducing the resource by having a group discussion, talking through these examples and practicing using the tool. Participants should be prepared to use the abridged tool as their guide when walking around a school. (see Appendix 7: Observation and Discussion Tool: Abridged, page 43)

Begin With the Self Assessment

(see Appendix 2: Self-Assessment and Discussion Outline, page 35)

The one-page self assessment will help youth and adults begin to assess where they think their own school/district is in respecting youth voice and supporting meaningful youth engagement/involvement in the reform and life of the school. After completing the self assessment participants should be able to begin to identify the strengths and weaknesses of their school/district, which can help prioritize areas to focus on.

Introduce the Tool

(see pages 5–32)

Before using the tool, youth and adults should walk through it together, go over the examples and discuss the questions. Familiarizing themselves with the concepts in the tool will help build the capacity of youth and adults working together to develop a common language and understanding of what constitutes a youth-centered school. This is a good opportunity for team members to change the language if they want to, or to add questions or comments of their own.

Visit a School or Walk Around Your Own School

(see Appendix 3: Preparing for a Visit to Another School, page 38

and Appendix 4: Preparing for a Self Assessment of Your Home School, page 39)

The tool or the abridged tool (with preparation) can be used as a guide to visit another school, walk around your own school or sit in on a class.

Debriefing on a Visit or “Walk Around”

(See Appendix 5: Debriefing the Site Visit, page 40)

Once the tool has been used to either visit another school or walk through your own school you can sit down with your team and compare notes. By sharing promising practices, successes and challenges you can begin to assess your own school’s strengths and weakness and begin to think about an action plan.

Decide on Next Steps

(See Appendix 6: Suggestions for Next Steps, page 42)

After your discussion you should decide what to do next. There are many ways to move forward.

Overview of the Tool

The tool you are about to use is designed to be used both when visiting another school and as an assessment of your own school. There are five sections to the tool. In each section, we will ask you to do three things:

- 1. Observe:** Tell us what you see.
- 2. Find Evidence:** Record examples of what you see.
- 3. Ask Questions:** Dig deeper. Some things in a school are easier to see than others, that is why we include a section of suggested questions. We suggest that you ask questions to teachers, students, administrators and parents (if possible) as different stake holders often have different opinions.

The five sections of the tool are divided into the five themes of the youth-centered approach we described in the introduction. By looking at a school through all five of these lenses you should be able to collect some information that will help you understand what a youth-centered learning environment looks like. The five lenses are:

- 1. Climate/Culture;**
- 2. Inside the Classroom;**
- 3. Connections;**
- 4. Outcomes; and**
- 5. Youth Engagement.**

How the Tool Works

As we said earlier, this tool is meant to serve as a guide to help students and adults begin to see real opportunities to improve their school community. This is what this resource will allow you to do:

1. Observe the Space/Activity: What Do You See?

Try to familiarize yourself with the tool. As you walk through different spaces in the school entrance/walkways/hallways/classrooms/offices/cafeteria, begin by “observing.” What do you see, both in the physical environ-

ment and in the interactions between young people and young people and adults? We divided the tool into spaces/activities around the school that you can observe, and give you examples of what those spaces/activities might look like.

2. Collect Evidence and Assess: Give Examples of What It Looks Like

Once you have observed the space/activity, look at the statements in the tool, if necessary read through the examples that are provided. (Keep in mind that the school you are observing might look completely different than the examples given, the hope is that by giving examples you will have an idea of what to look for.) Based on what you see, decide which category this school falls into. Then mark an “X” in one of the boxes under “No,” “Somewhat” or “Yes” and write down what you see, your own “evidence” or examples.

Example: The entrance of the school is clean, open and inviting.

- **No:** The entrance is dirty, dark and unmarked. It looks like you're entering a prison.
- **Somewhat:** There is some trash or graffiti, but it seems out of place. The entrance is small and crowded.
- **Yes:** There is no trash or graffiti. The entrance is well marked and bright. There are trash cans outside the entrance.

3. Ask Questions: Dig a Little Deeper

Sometimes you might have to dig a little deeper to find out more about the things you can not see. As you walk around a school, there are some things you will not be able to observe, so you might need to ask questions to get more information. For example, it is really hard to see if students have a role in making decisions in a school if you do not sit in on some type of meeting (*see* Section 5: Youth Engagement, *page 30*), so you need to ask both youth and adults questions to figure out if this is really happening. (At the end of each section you will find a list of suggested questions that will help you collect this information.)

Climate: Entrance, Hallways and Community/Shared Spaces

Q: *What makes a school worth going to?*

A: *When the school makes students feel like they belong.¹*

"I go to a large high school with a large dropout rate. One of the biggest reasons kids drop out isn't academic, but because they don't feel part of the school as a whole. We all get sorted. The kids who are going to college go to one class, the kids who aren't go to the tech classes and the kids who don't belong anywhere get pushed aside. A school worth going to makes you feel like you have a name and aren't just a number. It helps each student feel equal to another."

— Student, Redesigning High Schools, What Kids Can Do

	No	Somewhat	Yes	Evidence
The entrance is clean, open and inviting	The entrance is dirty, dark and unmarked. It looks like you're entering a prison. There are no adults in sight.	There is some trash or "offensive graffiti" and tagging, but not much. The entrance is small and crowded. A security guard is the only adult in sight.	There is no trash, "offensive graffiti" or tagging. The entrance is well marked and bright. There are trash cans outside the entrance. There are adults present to welcome students.	
Main entrance				

	No	Somewhat	Yes	Evidence
The hallways/ walkways are clean, open and inviting	The hallway/walkways are dark, dirty and stuffy. Water fountains and lockers are broken. There is trash on the floor and there is "offensive graffiti" on the walls. Offices and bathrooms are not marked.	Hallways and walkways are bright and well-lit. There is some trash on the floors and half the bathrooms are locked.	The hallways/walkways are clean and brightly lit. They are decorated in bright colors with student-painted murals on the walls. Water fountains work and lockers are well maintained. Offices have clear signs and are accessible.	
Hallways/walkways				
Adults are visible	None are visible.	An adult passes by occasionally.	There are one or more adults at the entrance and in the halls/walkways/common spaces.	
Main entrance				
Hallways/walkways				

	No	Somewhat	Yes	Evidence
Adults and students are interacting/engaging with one another in positive ways	There are no visible interactions between adults and students.	Some adults are talking to students, helping them with what they need to do and where they need to go. Some adults say "hello" occasionally as a student walks by.	Adults and students are talking to one another. Adults are greeting students by name, asking them questions or planning things together. They are smiling and looking at each other in the eye.	
Main entrance				
Hallways/walkways				
Adults are modeling behavior they expect from students	There is no interaction between the adults who are visible; or adults are rude to each other.	Adults talk to one another occasionally, sometimes asking questions or telling each other what needs to be done.	Adults talk to one another in a friendly, respectful way. They ask each other questions and assist students through the entrance and hallways/walkways. Adults seem to know each other personally.	
Main entrance				
Hallways/walkways				

	No	Somewhat	Yes	Evidence
Students are interacting comfortably with all students	Students are in small groups and do not interact with those outside their group. Students ignore each other and just walk into the building without talking/saying "hello." Hostility or bullying may be seen.	Students are in groups of various sizes and ages, saying "hello" occasionally to those in other groups.	Diverse groups of students in various group sizes are talking to and greeting a variety of students by name. Students don't make fun of each other; they smile, look at each other in the eye, high five each other and are respectful of each other.	
Main entrance				
Hallways/walkways				
Students feel comfortable and safe	Students are yelling at each other or adults. No one is talking. Students ignore one another and adults. No one is wearing school colors or logos.	Students walk in groups. Some talk to adults, some don't. Some students are chattering and seem happy; others are quiet, alone and seem sad.	Different types of students are talking to one another. They are smiling and looking each other in the eye when talking. There are no metal detectors. Many students wear school colors or logos.	
Main entrance				
Hallways/walkways				

	No	Somewhat	Yes	Evidence
School/community Pride is evident	There are no visible posters on campus about upcoming events. The main entrance to the school is just a door with no sign over it. No trophy case or awards are anywhere in sight.	There is a banner in the main hall about the upcoming dance or other event and there is a trophy case close to the main entrance.	There are posters around the campus inviting students to events such as the football game, debate, school play and after-school activities. Hallways feature murals or "cool graffiti" painted by students reflecting the diversity of cultures and interests present in the school.	
Main entrance				
Hallways/walkways				

	No	Somewhat	Yes	Evidence
There is a strong sense of community and openness in the school	Teachers close their doors during breaks. Teachers are not in the hallways during class changes talking to students. Adults and students do not speak to one another outside of class or in a friendly manner. There is no common space for students to hang out during breaks or between classes.	A few teachers stand in the hall between classes and talk with students. A few teachers leave their doors open between classes and during breaks for students to come in and talk to them.	There are many teachers in the hallways during class changes talking to students. Teachers leave their doors open during class changes and during breaks and talk with students as they walk out of their classrooms. There is a comfortable common space for students to hang out during breaks or between classes.	
Main entrance				
Hallways/walkways				

	No	Somewhat	Yes	Evidence
Students of different cultures, ethnicities, ages and genders hang out together and respect one another	Students sit/walk around together in separate groups, do not talk to one another and are disrespectful to one another.	Some students sit/walk around together in groups of mixed cultures, ethnicities, ages and genders and talk to one another occasionally.	Students of different cultures, ethnicities and genders often walk together through the halls and talk to and interact with one another in respectful ways.	
Main entrance				
Hallways/walkways				
Cafeteria/lunch room (or other community/ shared space)				

	No	Somewhat	Yes	Evidence
The cultural diversity of the school is celebrated and valued	Other than seeing students walking around the school, there would be no way to tell this is a culturally diverse school or that cultural diversity is celebrated, respected and valued.	There are visible posters and materials in hallways and on classroom doors that celebrate different types of cultures.	Hallways/walkways are lined with murals/student art that reflect the cultural diversity of the school. Posters around the school highlight unity month or an ethnic studies conference. There is a visible awareness and respect of the cultural diversity in the school.	
Main entrance				
Hallways/walkways				
Cafeteria/lunch room (or other community/ shared space)				
Bathrooms are clean and safe	Facilities are dirty and dark. Not all toilets and sinks are in working condition. Walls are covered in "offensive graffiti"/tagging.	Facilities are stocked with supplies, equipment works and walls have some "offensive graffiti"/tagging.	Facilities are bright, well-lit, well-maintained and free of "offensive graffiti," equipment works and supplies are stocked. They are clean and inviting.	
Bathrooms				

Suggested Discussion Questions For *Climate*

For Administrators

- How is the school made welcoming to youth? (At the beginning of the year, everyday, for students entering mid-year?)
- How do you create a climate in the school that engages students and respects their diversity?

For Teachers

- What do you do to try and develop relationships with young people at the school?
- How do you create a climate in the school that engages students and respects their diversity?

For Students

- Is this a school where students want to be? Why or why not?
- Do you feel safe here? Why or why not?
- Do you feel like you belong? Why or why not? What does the school do to make you feel this way?

For Parents

- Do you think your child feels welcome and safe at school? Why or why not?
- How does the school promote a positive climate/culture?

Inside the Classroom: Climate and Instruction/Curriculum

Q: *What improves student/teacher relationships?*

A: Being aware that first impressions matter.²

"I remember how on the first day of school, teachers stood at the entrances to greet students. And they kept it up in all kinds of weather."

—Student, *Redesigning High Schools*, What Kids Can Do

Physical Environment/Climate

	No	Somewhat	Yes	Evidence
The classroom is neat and welcoming	The classroom is cluttered and messy. Textbooks are old and torn up and desks are covered with writing/ "offensive graffiti."	The classroom is clean, but has little light or color. Desks are in fairly good condition.	The classroom is neat, bright and colorful. Textbooks are new and well organized. Desks are in good condition.	
It is clear what is being taught in the classroom	There is nothing on the walls to indicate what subject is being taught in this class. There are no books on the shelves.	A lesson plan for the day is on the chalkboard. Also, textbooks for that subject are on the bookshelves.	Posters about the subject are visible on the walls. On the board is a note welcoming students to the class, explaining their assignment for the day.	

	No	Somewhat	Yes	Evidence
Expectations, norms and/or standards are clear	There are no clear expectations, norms or standards posted in the classroom.	There is a small handwritten list on the bulletin board that says "Class Rules" or "Class Norms."	There is a clear poster titled "Class Norms and Expectations" hanging prominently in the classroom.	
A range of student work is visible and valued	There are no displays of student work on the walls or in the classroom.	There are a couple of essays with "A" grades hanging on the display.	There are several examples of different kinds of student work on display with comments from students about what they learned from the assignment. There is a section of the wall called "Student Picks" that displays work students chose to put up.	

	No	Somewhat	Yes	Evidence
Classroom set-up allows for interaction	Desks are arranged in rows, lecture style.	Desks are arranged in rows, but are moveable and can be rearranged.	Desks are arranged in small groups or in a circle.	
There is evidence of a "college prep" culture — useful information for college bound students is available	There are no materials or posters related to college visible in the classroom.	There is an announcement over the PA for SAT-prep classes after school and the teacher reminds students that it is free.	There are college displays on bulletin boards or a bookshelf labeled "Getting Ready for College." There is a poster on the wall listing college entrance requirements.	

	No	Somewhat	Yes	Evidence
There is a manageable student/teacher ratio	Classroom has over 30 students and one adult.	Classrooms have between 26 and 30 students with one adult.	Classrooms have less than 26 students or more than one adult.	
Classrooms, including Honor's and AP classes, are diverse (or represent the cultural/gender make-up of the school)	Classrooms are not mixed in terms of ethnicity and gender.	There is some diversity in terms of ethnicity and gender in the classroom.	The classes appear very mixed in terms of ethnicity and gender.	

Inside the Classroom: What Teachers Are Doing

Q: *What improves student-teacher relationships?*

A: When teachers open themselves to students and invite students to do the same.³

"Teachers need to put down the textbook they are trying so hard to follow and try to teach at a personal level. Not teacher to student, but person to person. Not just textbook teaching, but real teaching. You can still teach the curriculum, but at a personal level."

— Student, Redesigning High Schools, What Kids Can Do

	No	Somewhat	Yes	Evidence
Curriculum and/or classroom materials appear rigorous	Students look bored, are asleep, are talking to one another or are not asking questions. Students have outdated, old, beat-up textbooks. The assignment is fill-in-the-blank worksheets.	Some students look interested and ask questions. The material seems like standard grade-level work.	Students look interested and involved; they ask complex, challenging questions and make connections to their lives. Materials encourage students to think beyond the classroom (students have access to newspaper articles, Web-based resources, etc.).	
Curriculum and/or classroom materials appear culturally relevant and appropriate	Students look bored, are asleep, are talking to one another or are not asking questions. Students have outdated, old, beat-up textbooks. The assignment is fill-in-the-blank worksheets.	Some students look interested and ask questions. The material seems like standard grade-level work.	Students look interested and involved; they ask complex, challenging questions and make connections to their lives. Materials encourage students to think beyond the classroom (students have access to newspaper articles, Web-based resources, etc.).	

	No	Somewhat	Yes	Evidence
There is open communication between students and teachers	The teacher does all of the talking.	A few students ask questions. The teacher listens and is responsive.	The teacher listens to students and promotes communication between students. For example, students talk amongst themselves in small groups and report out to the class for a large group discussion.	
The teacher provides learning opportunities for students with various learning styles	The teacher stands in front of the class and lectures. The teacher asks students to read questions from a textbook and write answers on a worksheet.	The teacher has students work in groups and turn in a group assignment.	The teacher lectures, asks students to talk in groups about the lesson, asks groups to present what they learned and gives students the option to write an essay or do a presentation on what they've learned.	

	No	Somewhat	Yes	Evidence
The teacher actively reaches out to engage students who seem unengaged, are not participating or are preoccupied (teacher tries to help students who cannot focus)	The teacher ignores students who are not paying attention and continues with his/her lesson. The teacher reprimands a student who is not paying attention and tells them they will have to leave the class if they do not participate.	The teacher asks for the opinions of students who appear unengaged.	The teacher does not single out students who are not participating, but instead asks a question related to the lesson, asks students to discuss it in groups; then circulates, listening to discussions, asking previously unengaged students for their opinions on the subject.	
The teacher shares authority/leadership/teaching with students	The teacher is standing and lecturing or reading from a textbook.	The teacher walks around the classroom and listens to students discuss the topic in small groups.	The teacher allows a student to lead a discussion.	
The teacher relates learning to the life of the student (makes lessons real)	The teacher explains concepts or ideas without giving any real life examples or connecting the ideas to students' experiences.	The teacher gives an example of how an idea/concept might apply to a real-life situation.	The teacher asks students for examples of how a concept or idea might apply to or affect their lives.	

Inside the Classroom: What Students Are Doing

Q: *What improves student/teacher relationships?*

A: Trust and respect.⁴

"You have to put trust and respect at the top of the list. It's the foundation for everything that happens in a classroom.

It's a black and white thing: Either it's there or it isn't. It shows up in everything...the way a teacher calls on students, answers questions, gives feedback, grades.

It's also a two-way street between the students and the teacher. Trust has to flow both ways. Respect has to be mutual."

— Student, *Redesigning High Schools*, What Kids Can Do

	No	Somewhat	Yes	Evidence
Students have opportunities to play different roles in the classroom	Students sit and listen to the teacher; read textbooks; write answers to questions.	Students work in groups and individually to answer questions the teacher has given them.	Students are able to act as facilitators, lead classroom discussions, give presentations and have input in lesson plans and grading.	
Students feel comfortable sharing with their classmates as well as learning from one another	Students do not interact with one another in the classroom.	Students are paired to help one another with their individual assignments.	Students work in small groups on common problems and turn in group and individual assignments. Students show unity from group work.	

Suggested Discussion Questions for *Inside the Classroom*

For Administrators

- How do you help teachers be successful and engage all students?
- Do you have a way to hear from students about what they like/dislike in the classroom?
If so, how do you use this information?
- Is there a structure for assessing how well students are doing based on a range of indicators, including student work, active learning, group work, presentations and service-learning?

For Teachers

- How do you know when your students are learning? And how do you assess their learning?
- How often do you meet with other teachers? Which teachers do you meet with?
- How often do you talk about individual students and how they're doing? Effective instruction? Student work?
- How often and in what ways do you communicate with students about how they are doing?

For Students

- Describe the teacher you like the best. Describe the teacher you learn the most from. Are they different? If so, why?
- Have you ever been in a situation where you are learning from other students, not just from the teacher? If so, how did that happen? (Did the teacher's actions have anything to do with it?)
- Teachers are often told not to do all the talking, but instead to set up situations in which students are more active — group work, hands-on activities, discussions or seminars, projects and presentations. What are the activities that you like to do best? Do you have opportunities to participate in these activities in your classes?
- Describe a classroom in which you felt safe and comfortable speaking up or asking questions when you did not understand something. What made you feel that way?⁵
- How is your school work evaluated? (Do you have tests? Presentations? Group Work? Portfolios?) Do you agree with this type of assessment? Why or why not?

For Parents

- How do you know when your son or daughter is learning?
- What do you think makes a good teacher? How do you know if your son or daughter has a good teacher?

Connections

Q: *What makes a school worth going to?*

A: When a variety of activities gives students opportunities to shine and contribute outside the classroom.⁶

“People tend to forget that school is more than what happens in the classroom. It’s for the extracurricular, like sports, that some kids come to school at all. Sometimes it’s the only place they get to feel like they are good at something.”

—Student, Redesigning High Schools, What Kids Can Do

“An activity or club doesn’t need to be BIG; it just needs to get a group of kids involved. I know it sounds crazy, but at our school we started a cheese club this year. Sure, it’s about cheese, but it’s also about creating a small place where kids feel equal to each other, where people know their name, where no one is advanced or not advanced.”

—Student, Redesigning High Schools, What Kids Can Do

Tips for this Section: This is an area that might be difficult to observe so you might have to rely on asking some of the suggested questions below in order to find out what opportunities the school offers to connect students and the community. This might include a range of programs and activities, including internships, service-learning and the opening of school resources to the community.

	No	Somewhat	Yes	Evidence
Students have many chances to be connected to or involved in the community	There are no bulletin boards highlighting jobs, issues or other opportunities in the community; no posters or flyers calling for student volunteers or offering students opportunities to participate in a community event.	Several classrooms or hallways have flyers/bulletin boards that mention community-based activities or opportunities.	There are several areas for bulletin boards focusing on jobs, community service, volunteer or other opportunities in the community. Announcements are made about community events. Teachers tell students about opportunities to become involved in the community.	

	No	Somewhat	Yes	Evidence
There are many community programs/resources involved and connected to the school	There is no parent/community center, health center, gym or library that is open to the public before, during or after school. There are no volunteer opportunities for community members at the school. No continuing education classes or after-school programs are offered at this school that are open to the community.	Community members can volunteer to help with security at the school, to help keep it clean or to tutor in the after-school program.	The school opens its facilities to members of the community. There is a parent/community center, health center, gym or library that is open to the public before, during and after school. There is a volunteer coordinator and many opportunities for community members to volunteer or get involved.	
Parents/family members are actively and regularly involved in the school	No parent or family volunteers are visible at the school. There are no visible activities at the school open to parents/family members.	A parent is volunteering as a teacher's aide in their son or daughter's classroom.	Parent volunteers are visible, helping in different activities around the school (on school grounds as hall monitors, in the main office, library and in the classroom).	

	No	Somewhat	Yes	Evidence
Students and their families have access to a variety of school programs and facilities before and after school	There is no parent/community center, health center, computer center, youth center, gym or library that is open to the public before, during or after school.	There are a few continuing education or after-school programs open to the community. Only the library is open after school for students and their families.	There is a parent/community center, health center, youth center, gym or library that is open to students and their families before, during or after school. There are also several different after-school activities, including sports, tutoring, ESL classes and art classes.	

Suggested Discussion Questions for *Connections*

For Administrators

- Are parents involved in the school? If so, how?
- What do you do to connect community resources to the school and what opportunities do students have to connect to the larger community? (Service-learning, jobs, internships, job shadowing?)

For Teachers

- What do you do to involve parents/families in their child's education?
- How do you connect what you are teaching in the classroom to the community the students live in? (Service-learning, jobs, internships, job shadowing?)

For Students

- Do you have opportunities through school to get involved in your community? Do you participate? Why or why not?
- Do you have a chance to apply what you learn in school to your life outside school?
- Do your parents feel comfortable at your school? Why or why not?
What does the school do to make them feel this way?

For Parents

- What do you need in order to feel comfortable enough to go to your son or daughter's school and talk to his/her teacher?
- Do you feel welcome at your child's school? Why or why not? How does the school promote this climate/culture?

Outcomes

Q: *What makes a school worth going to?*

A: *When the school views and uses students as resources.⁷*

“There’s a lot that happens between students, especially in a big school, that can take down self-esteem instead of building it up — name calling, excluding, competition, stereotyping. Students bear some of the responsibility for this, but so do teachers. It’s up to the teachers and principal to set a tone of respect and model it.

They also need to set aside time for students to work out their conflicts through discussions or maybe special forums.”

— Student, Redesigning High Schools, What Kids Can Do

Tips for this Section: This is another area that might be difficult to observe so you might have to rely on asking some of the suggested questions below in order to find out how the school values and supports many different talents of the young. Remember that this section is about how young people are encouraged to work together, contribute to their school and community, and develop their talents beyond grades and the classroom.

	No	Somewhat	Yes	Evidence
The school offers support for students who are having a hard time at home, are sad, or just need someone to talk to	There is no counseling center for students. There are no posters about issues that tell students where to go for help.	Some classrooms contain posters telling students where to go for help with certain problems. A counselor is available to students twice a week, but students must be referred by teachers/ counselors to see the counselor.	Around the school are posters telling students where to go for help with certain problems. There is a walk-in confidential counseling center for students to go anytime they need to. Peer counseling and peer mediation are available. There is a youth center where students can ask for help and support.	

	No	Somewhat	Yes	Evidence
The school offers “non-academic” classes and activities during after-school hours	The school offers no extracurricular (after-school) activities.	The school offers a few extracurricular (after-school) activities, such as tutoring and several student clubs.	A range of activities (sports, art, drama, academic support, etc.) are available after school for students of all grades. There is a health center, youth center, gym or library that is open before, during or after school. There are posters around the school inviting students to after-school student clubs.	

Suggested Discussion Questions For *Outcomes*

For Administrators

- How does the school recognize talents of students beyond the classroom?
- How do you develop your staff to get to know students in your school?
- When there is conflict/tension among groups of students, how do you deal with this?
- What kinds of support do you offer individual students who are having difficulty inside and outside the classroom?

For Teachers

- What do you think is important for you to know about the students in your class?
- When there is conflict/tension among groups of students, how do you deal with this?
- How do you support students in ways you do not consider “academic?” What practices do you use to do this?
- What kinds of support do you offer individual students who are having difficulty inside and outside the classroom?

For Students

- In or out of school, have you ever felt that you were learning something and it was important to *you* to learn it, not just because you were supposed to? If so, what made those things so important? Have you ever had that feeling in a class?⁸
- Is there at least one adult at this school that you feel comfortable talking to about pretty much anything? If you do not mind sharing, who is that adult and why do you feel so comfortable with him/her?⁹
- When there is conflict/tension among groups of students how do people in the school help resolve them?
- Do you feel like adults in your school are interested in how you are doing and what your interests are?

For Parents

- Does the school support your child in ways you would consider beyond “academic?”
- Do you feel like adults in your child’s school are interested in how your child is doing socially? Emotionally? Physically?

Youth Engagement

Q: *What makes a school worth going to?*

A: When relationships among students are respectful and build self-esteem rather than diminishing it.¹⁰

“A good school sees students as resources. Take peer mediation: Kids need someone to talk to, even if they pretend otherwise. It doesn’t have to be an adult. In fact, it can be better when the help comes from another student. At my school, students are recruited and trained to counsel other students.”

— Student, Redesigning High Schools, What Kids Can Do

Tips for this Section: This is another area that might be difficult to observe so you might have to rely on asking some of the suggested questions below in order to find out what opportunities and supports the school offers for youth voice and participation in various aspects of school life — both inside and outside the classroom. Remember this section is about students having real opportunities to lead and have their voices heard.

	No	Somewhat	Yes	Evidence
Young people have meaningful leadership opportunities in the school	There is no evidence that students have meaningful opportunities to assume leadership roles during class or other activities.	Students can assume leadership roles in student council (posters for an upcoming election on the walls) or to start new clubs on campus (posters on walls/ announcements urging students to come to a meeting to ask the administration for a certain club).	Students have multiple opportunities to assume meaningful leadership roles. In the classroom, there is peer mentoring and students are leading discussions. Posters around the school indicate peer counseling is offered. Outside the classroom, posters around campus remind students about upcoming elections for a student representative to the school-based management team.	

	No	Somewhat	Yes	Evidence
Students' opinions are valued and considered inside and outside the classroom	There is no evidence that students' opinions are valued inside or outside the classroom.	In the classroom, students are encouraged to share their opinions. During lunch once a week, students can meet with the vice principal to discuss various issues on campus.	There are several white-boards in the hallways asking students for their opinions on various issues being discussed. There are suggestion boxes scattered throughout the school to solicit feedback from students on school climate, culture and activities.	

Suggested Discussion Questions for *Youth Engagement*

For Administrators

- As the principal, how do you find out about what students think of the school and what they are learning?
- Are there structures in the school that give students opportunities to be engaged as decision makers, contributors and leaders? If so, how?

For Teachers

- As a teacher, how do you find out about what students think of their classes and what they are learning?
- Are there structures in the school that give students opportunities to be engaged as decision makers, contributors and leaders? If so, how?
- Do you have a way to hear from students about what they like/dislike in the classroom?
If so, how do you use this information?

For Students

- Does your school value and respect youth culture? Please explain.
- Do you feel comfortable sharing your opinions with teachers and administrators? When you do share your opinions, do you feel they get heard and taken seriously?
- What opportunities do you have to become involved in making your school the kind of place you want to come to everyday?
- What opportunities do you have to become involved in leadership roles, in classes or in the school in general?
In youth-adult partnerships?

For Parents

- Does the school give students opportunities to be engaged as decision makers and leaders? If so, how?

Discussion Outline for Youth-Centered Learning Environments

The goal of the tool is to help youth and adults have conversations about what makes a school “good” for students. In order to do this, youth and adults need to agree on what good looks like. This tool serves as a place to start this conversation. While the tool might appear long and wordy — when put in context with a discussion of youth-centered learning environments it proves a powerful framework with which to view or assess schools. The bulk of the text in the tool is examples of what a youth-centered school might look like and, if introduced with a discussion and an examination of the examples, with some time to practice using the tool, participants should be prepared enough to use the abridged (much shorter) tool as their guide when walking around a school (*see Appendix 7: Observation and Discussion Tool: Abridged, page 43*).

Note to Facilitator: This activity is a short way to begin a discussion of youth-centered learning environments. It will help ground the conversation in what happens in schools on a daily basis.

Scenario:

Facilitator: When we asked high school students what makes them want to go to school, we heard:

“Good friends, good teachers, good classes and good facilities.”

When we asked them what makes a school “good” we heard a variety of answers.

Ask the first question:

What do you think makes a school “good” for students?

Directions: (*read the following directions to participants*)

- Take five minutes with your team to brainstorm your ideas.
- Do not discuss it — just throw out as many ideas as you can think of.
- Record your answers on the flip chart.
- In five minutes we will ask you to stop.

Ask the next question:

How do you know when you are in a good school?

Directions: (*read the following directions to participants*)

- Look at the list you created. Take five minutes to brainstorm.
- How do you know when you are in a good school? If you could not talk to anyone or ask any questions — What you would see? What would it look like?
- *For example:* If you have on your list that a school that is “good” for students would be a place where people are friendly and respectful — what would that look like? What would you see as you walked around the school? Record answers on the same flip-chart paper.
- When you are done:
 - Briefly read through your answers to make sure your team agrees.
 - Put a line through those you cannot agree on.

Discussion Questions:

How many people crossed out things on their list? Why or why not?

Was there a difference in what youth said and what adults said? Why or why not?

What does this tell us? Do we know what makes a school “good?” (Usually the answer is yes — we just might have different ways of describing it.)

Opportunity for Discussion: Youth-Centered Learning Environments

The lists that were generated usually fit into the categories of a youth-centered learning environment, reinforcing that we already have an idea of what makes a school “good” for students. But, is that school good all the time, or just sometimes? *Is it a youth-centered learning environment? What is a youth-centered learning environment?*

It is any place that learning happens for young people in certain ways — in this case it is a school. A school that:

- puts the needs, experiences and reality of young people in the middle, listening to and taking into considerations their needs, voices and ideas;
- engages and involves young people in all aspects of the learning environment — giving them multiple opportunities to lead and make decisions about school life and their learning experience;
- connects learning to the life of young people; and
- values young people as active contributors to their own learning and to the learning environment.

The Five Themes of a Youth-Centered Learning Environment

These five themes are a way for us to organize the information so when we sit down to talk about it we — youth and adults — are all on the same page (*see Purpose of the Tool page 2 for more details*). The five themes are:

1. **Climate/Culture**
2. **Instruction and Curriculum**
3. **Connections**
4. **Outcomes**
5. **Youth Engagement**

Why Is This Important?

A youth-centered learning environment will consistently meet the needs of young people while continuously engaging them in the creation and improvement of their opportunities for learning. This is important because it means the role of young people will be valued and continuous, giving them multiple opportunities to lead and be engaged in school life and decision making and their learning experience. This ensures that youth role is not an “add-on,” but integrated into the design and structure of the school.

Note to Facilitator: The self assessment is a way to get participants thinking concretely about how youth-centered their district/school is. It is also a way to introduce the Observation Tool, which is long and can seem overwhelming if not introduced carefully. The Observation Tool (*see pages 5–32*) is a guide that participants can use to walk around a school to help them gauge what constitutes a youth-centered learning environment by giving them concrete examples of what it looks like inside of schools.

Step 1: Individuals Complete a Self Assessment

The one-page self assessment will help you think about where your own school/district is respecting youth culture and supporting meaningful youth engagement/involvement in the reform and life of the school. Once you have completed the self assessment you will be able to decide what areas you want to focus on when you either visit another school or walk around your own school. *The self assessment is divided into five categories — these are the same five categories of a youth-centered learning environment.*

Directions:

- Each person should fill out the self assessment individually.
- Put an “**X**” in the column that you feel best represents your district/school. You can choose from “**No**,” “**Somewhat**” and “**Yes**.”
- If you have evidence to support your assessment please add it in the evidence column.
- Move through each statement quickly — react on a gut level.
- *Remember:* There are no right or wrong answers!

Step 2: Discuss: Youth and Adult Pair-and-Share

Once self assessments are completed break into youth-adult pairs and answer the following questions:

- Are there areas of similarity, difference, both?
- What strikes you? Which areas interested you most?
- If there is time, you can do a quick share-out to the large group.

Step 3: Preparing to Use the Tool

Note to Facilitator: One way to make sure that everyone feels comfortable using this tool is to recommend that each participant focus only on two sections. Here is what you might say:

- The tool you are looking at is what we are going to use on the walk around the school. It may look a bit daunting because of its length, but looks can be deceiving. Once you look through it you will see that most of it is examples for you to think about. (You will have time to do that later.)
- You have just completed the self-assessment grid — which is formatted much the same way as the *Observation Tool*, so you are already a little familiar with how the tool works.
- Based on your self assessment conversations — which of the five areas of the tool (climate, instruction/curriculum, connections, outcomes and engagement) interests you most?
- Then, as a team decide how to divide the tool for when you walk around the school so that all five areas are covered. *Please Note:* Everyone should visit a classroom, so each person should fill out a classroom section and then choose one other section to fill out.

Youth-Centered Learning Environment: Self-Assessment Tool

Overview of the Self-Assessment Tool

The purpose of this self-assessment tool is to:

- gain an overall picture of your teams' progress to date in several areas that are critical for successful high school reform;
- identify areas of strength and those needing further development; and
- prioritize the areas needing further development.

The tool consists of five sections. Each section corresponds with the Forum's *New Directions in School Reform: Youth-Focused Strategies versus Youth-Centered Reform*.¹¹ Each section outlines a necessary element or process in planning and implementing high school reform. These five sections also correspond with the Observation and Discussion Tool. They are:

1. **Climate.** Improving learning in high schools requires not only improving the quality of curriculum and instruction, but also creating a culture and environment that is safe and welcoming to all students. *Goals:* Creating a community where youth and adults communicate respectfully and fairly with one another and value one another's voices; where teachers know students by name; and where students feel pride and a sense of belonging.
2. **Instruction and Curriculum.** Improving learning in high schools requires that all students learn challenging content that is related to real-life experiences — and that teacher's structure curriculum activity to encourage student participation, conversation and leadership.
3. **Connections.** Improving learning in high schools requires that learning includes experiences outside the classroom through activities such as internships, job shadowing and service learning; and that there is a strong connection between the school, families and the community.
4. **Outcomes.** Improvements in learning are inevitably linked to improvements in other outcomes — young people's talents and contributions beyond the classroom are supported and valued, and they are provided multiple opportunities to develop social, emotional and vocational skills
5. **Engagement.** Improving learning in high schools requires youth engage-

ment — youth voice and participation are valued and encouraged both inside and outside the classroom, and young people have multiple opportunities to lead and be engaged in their school's transformation.

Directions for using this self-assessment tool:

- Each person should fill out the self assessment individually.
- Put an “**X**” in the column that you feel best represents your district/school. You can choose from “**No**,” “**Somewhat**” and “**Yes**.”
- If you have evidence to support your assessment please add it in the evidence column.
- Move through each statement quickly — reacting on a gut level.
- Once each person has completed the full assessment tool, you can share and discuss answers and jointly decide on the level of your team's development overall for each category.
- You can then identify your team's particular strengths and the areas that need more development. Toward the end of your discussion choose the one or two priority areas that you want to work on as a group.
- **Remember: There are no right or wrong answers!**

We hope that this self-assessment will begin to help you to fully develop, implement and sustain effective high school reform.

Youth Centered Learning Environment: Self-Assessment Tool

School District: _____

Date: _____

Mark appropriate columns with an X

Climate	No	Somewhat	Yes	Evidence
<p>Our school/district creates high schools that are safe, respectful and personal, where all young people can learn.</p> <p>Our school/district values, supports and promotes strong, respectful youth-adult partnerships and fosters an environment where both groups can communicate openly.</p>				
Instruction and Curriculum	No	Somewhat	Yes	Evidence
<p>All students are given opportunities to learn challenging content that is related to real-life experiences.</p> <p>Curriculum activities are designed to encourage students to be active learners and create opportunities for student participation, conversation and leadership.</p>				
Connections	No	Somewhat	Yes	Evidence
<p>Our school/district reaches out to the community, families, business and other students to get their input and support in transforming our schools.</p> <p>There is widespread understanding and support of the need for high school reform in our community.</p>				
Outcomes	No	Somewhat	Yes	Evidence
<p>In addition to valuing academic achievement, our school/district values young people, their talents and their contribution outside the classroom.</p> <p>Our school/district supports young people both inside and outside the classroom, offering access to services that will help them emotionally, socially and vocationally.</p>				
Engagement	No	Somewhat	Yes	Evidence
<p>Our school/district engages young people both inside and outside the classroom and gives them multiple opportunities to lead and be engaged in school life and decision making.</p> <p>Our school/district values authentic youth voice and engages youth in selecting, planning and implementing plans to redesign our school/district.</p>				

You can use this resource in many ways, including visiting other schools. Listed below are tips for using the tool to examine what happens in other schools.

Visiting Another School: Preparing for a Site Visit

Site visits offer youth and adults a hands-on opportunity to see how other schools tackle the challenge of creating a youth-centered environment. Participants not only see concrete examples of what “good” schools look like but also have the opportunity to discuss with other youth and adults the challenges of doing this work.

Here are some important items to keep in mind as you begin this exercise:

1. It is important that both youth and adults understand why they are visiting another school.

Here are some examples of questions students might raise. These should be discussed before the visit:

- Why are we going to visit other schools — I thought the whole purpose was to fix our own school?
- Some of the stuff you’re talking about changing is stuff we really can’t change. How do we change what’s happening inside a classroom? — we can’t tell a teacher how to teach.
- What if I walk through a school and don’t see any of this stuff — then what do I do?
- The “yes” boxes in this thing can’t be real — schools like that don’t exist — at least not in cities.
- Others to add...

2. Review the tool and practice using it (see pages 5–32)

3. Decide what areas to focus on as you walk around the school

Consider these questions as you walk through the school:

- What strengths are in the school’s physical environment?
- What strengths are in adult-youth relationships?

- What strengths are in classrooms?
- What other strengths exist in the school community?
- What strengths exist in the way the schools engages young people and incorporates youth voice?

4. Be sure participants have a clear understanding of the instructions for the site visit, reminding them to:

- focus on what you can see;
- collect evidence; and
- ask questions to find out more.

5. After the Visit

After the site visit is completed, youth and adults should have an opportunity to discuss what they experienced and learned and also decide on next steps (see Appendix 5: Debriefing the Site Visit, page 40 and Appendix 6: Suggestions for Next Steps, page 42, for more details).

Preparing for a Self Assessment: A Walk Through Your Home School

This tool will also help youth and adults practically assess how youth-centered their school actually is, discovering strengths and weaknesses and begin discussions on what needs to be improved.

Here are some important items to keep in mind as you begin this exercise:

1. It is important that both youth and adults understand the goals of using this tool in their home school.

Here are some examples of questions students might raise. They should be discussed before the walk-through:

- Why are we doing this?
- What will be done with the information that is gathered?
- Won't teachers be upset if we decide that parts of the school need to be improved?
- Others to add...

2. Review the tool and practice using it (see pages 5–32).

3. Decide what areas to focus on as you walk around the school.

Consider these questions as you walk through the school:

- What strengths are in the school's physical environment?
- What strengths are in adult-youth relationships?
- What strengths are in classrooms?
- What other strengths exist in the school community?
- What strengths exist in the way the schools engages young people and incorporates youth voice?

4. Instructions for the “Walk-Through.”

- Go over the section of the tool you will use.
- Focus on what you can see.
- Collect evidence.
- Ask questions to find out more.

5. After the Visit.

After the site visit is completed, youth and adults should have an opportunity to discuss what they experienced and learned and also decide on next steps (see Appendix 5: Debriefing the Site Visit, page 40 and Appendix 6: Suggestions for Next Steps, page 42, for more details).

Site visits will undoubtedly give your group a lot to talk about. Once everyone has filled out the tool, students and adults should regroup and discuss it. Here are some suggestions for how to accomplish this:

Directions for the Facilitator: There are several ways you can debrief after the site visit — depending on the goals of your visit. Below you will find suggestions for two approaches. (The debrief should be facilitated by an external facilitator — if this is not possible perhaps a youth-adult team could facilitate the debrief.)

- If your goal is to begin a dialogue in your home school/district or to plan a new school — you might examine Activity A, listed below.
- If your goal is to identify priority focus areas in your school/district or city — you might examine Activity B, next page.

Activity A.

Goal: To begin a dialogue in your home school/district, or when planning a new school.

Part 1. Reflection. Share with each other the learnings and ideas you gathered during the site visit.

- Begin by sharing one thing you learned during the site visit. Remind participants that there are no wrong answers.

Part 2. Discuss the school using the tool. Talk about each section of the tool (or the sections that most interest you) and agree on an overall assessment for that section.

- To do this you will have to share and discuss the evidence you collected while walking around the school. Keep in mind that each person on your team might see or hear something differently, so you will need to discuss the evidence you each collected and come to a consensus on what you think is an accurate picture. Think of it as collecting pieces of a puzzle — you need to put all the pieces together to see the full picture.
- As a team, try to agree on an overall assessment for that section.

- Ask the following questions: What does all the evidence put together tell us? (About this school, about how students learn, about what works and what does not work for students.) What changes does this suggest? (Are there any changes the evidence suggests should happen?)

Directions for the Facilitator: Once you have decided on what the evidence tells you about the school you visited you can then begin to discuss your home school/district.

Part 2. Relate to what has been learned in your own school environment.

Relate the learnings to challenges/successes or strengths/weaknesses in your own school/district. Questions that might start this discussion include:

- Where are we as a school/district in each of these areas?
- What are our strengths and weaknesses?
- If you want to begin this dialogue in your own school/district ask: Based on what we learned today, how can we begin this dialogue at home? What areas do we want to focus on? How will we do that? How might this tool help us?
- If you are planning a new school, ask: Based on what we learned today, what areas do we want to focus on as we begin plans for a new school? What did we learn that we want to share with others? What do we still need to learn? Where do we start? How might this tool help us?

Part 3. Create an Action Plan. Decide how you will do this — create an action plan with time lines and responsibilities.

Activity B.

Goal: To identify priority focus areas for your school/district or city.

Part 1. Reflection (1 hour).

Individual: (15 minutes).

Directions for the Facilitator: Participants should take 15 minutes to either fill in or review the tool.

Directions:

- Make sure you have completed your designated section of the tool. (This includes making sure you have evidence to share.)
- Once the tool is complete, identify three or four things that really struck you during your visit: Things you learned, things that surprised you, things you liked or disliked and things that raised questions.
- Of the things that struck you what one or two things would you like to discuss?

Group: (25 minutes). **Directions for the Facilitator:** Divide participants into groups of two or three to discuss what they saw. (Youth are grouped separately from adults.)

Directions:

Using the tool as a guide, persons in small groups can begin sharing the three or four things that really struck them about the visit. After ten minutes, participants should be asked to record the answers to the following questions on flip-chart paper posted around the room:

- What is one thing you learned from (hosting) this site visit?
- What is one question raised from (hosting) this site visit?
- What is one thing you would like to discuss further?
- What was one thing that the site visit inspired you to think about applying back to your home school/community?

Report-Out (20 Minutes)

Part 2. Group Brainstorm and Discussion (1 hour).

Directions for the Facilitator: Record all group responses on a flip-chart in a way that everyone can see them (one for strengths, one for weaknesses). Here is what you might ask:

- Of the schools you visited today — what are the sources of the schools' strengths? Weaknesses? (Brainstorm.)
- Are they the same or different from your school? (This is more of a discussion.)

Directions for the Facilitator: The team should revisit the self assessment they completed before the site visit. Ask them to reflect: Are you thinking about the self assessment differently?

Processing site visits is a beginning step in identifying what the priorities are for your city team as they work toward developing an action agenda. Here is what you might ask:

- Based on what you learned today, which of these areas would you like to focus on in your school/district?
- More specifically: Are there strengths you wish to develop? Weaknesses you wish to tackle?
- What would you need to change in your school/district/city to bring these about?
- What information did you learn on your site visit that you need to share with others in your school/district/city?

Part 3. Begin Next Steps (30 minutes).

Directions for the Facilitator: Record this discussion on a flip-chart. Here are some talking points to help you lead the discussion:

- Referring to the list of strengths you would like to develop, weaknesses you want to tackle and changes that would be required, let's try to create a list of goals for your school/district/city.
- If there is time try to have the group come to consensus on the list of goals and which are most doable. (It might help to ask them to think about which goals would generate the most enthusiasm, energy and support.)
- Create an action plan and time line for the goals.

Suggestions for Next Steps

If you think this tool is useful and you would like to take it back to your own school and use it, below you will find a few suggestions of ways you can do that:

This Tool Was Designed for:

- Groups of young people.
- Mixed groups of teachers and students, parents and students, administrators, etc.

Uses for the Tool:

- To visit other schools in your home district and city;
- To assess the strengths and weaknesses of your school;
- To begin conversations with adults;
- To engage the school and community (parents, teachers, youth, community members and administrators) in a dialogue about what makes a school “good” for all students; and
- As a class project to assess how “youth-centered” your classroom or school is.

Other ideas or questions:

If you have other ideas or questions about this tool, please send them to Francine Joselowsky at:

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7064 Eastern Avenue, NW

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Observation and Discussion Tool: Abridged

Climate: Entrance, Hallways and Community/Shared Spaces Q: What makes a school worth going to? A: When the school makes students feel like they belong.¹²				
Mark appropriate columns with an X	No	Somewhat	Yes	Evidence
The entrance/hallways is clean, open and inviting				
Adults are visible				
<i>Main Entrance</i>				
<i>Hallways/Walkways</i>				
Adults and students are interacting/engaging with each other in positive ways				
<i>Hallways</i>				
<i>Walkways</i>				
Adults are modeling behavior they expect from students				
<i>Hallways</i>				
<i>Walkways</i>				

Mark appropriate columns with an X	No	Somewhat	Yes	Evidence
Students are interacting comfortably with all students				
<i>Main Entrance</i>				
<i>Hallways/walkways</i>				
Students feel comfortable and safe				
<i>Main Entrance</i>				
<i>Hallways/walkways</i>				
School/Community pride is evident				
<i>Main Entrance</i>				
<i>Hallways/walkways</i>				
There is a strong sense of community and openness in the school				
<i>Main Entrance</i>				
<i>Hallways/walkways</i>				

Mark appropriate columns with an X	No	Somewhat	Yes	Evidence
Students of different cultures, ethnicities, ages and genders hang out together and respect one another				
<i>Main Entrance</i>				
<i>Hallways/walkways</i>				
<i>Cafeteria/Lunch room (or other community/shared space)</i>				
The cultural diversity of the school is celebrated and valued				
<i>Main Entrance</i>				
<i>Hallways/walkways</i>				
<i>Cafeteria/Lunch room (or other community/shared space)</i>				
Bathrooms are clean and safe				

Suggested Discussion Questions For *Climate*

For Administrators

- How is the school made welcoming to youth? (At the beginning of the year, everyday, for students entering mid-year?)
- How do you create a climate in the school that engages students and respects their diversity?

For Teachers

- What do you do to try and develop relationships with young people at the school?
- How do you create a climate in the school that engages students and respects their diversity?

For Students

- Is this a school where students want to be? Why or why not?
- Do you feel safe here? Why or why not?
- Do you feel like you belong? Why or why not? What does the school do to make you feel this way?

For Parents

- Do you think your child feels welcome and safe at school? Why or why not?
- How does the school promote a positive climate/culture?

Inside the Classroom: Climate and Instruction/Curriculum

Q: *What improves student/teacher relationships?*

A: Being aware that first impressions matter.¹³

Physical Environment/Climate

Mark appropriate columns with an X	No	Somewhat	Yes	Evidence
The classroom is neat and welcoming				
It is clear what is being taught in the classroom				
Expectations, norms and/or standards are clear				
A range of student work is visible and valued				
There is evidence of a “college prep” culture — useful information for college bound students is available				
There is a manageable student/teacher ratio				
Classrooms, including AP and Honor’s classes, are diverse (or represent the cultural/gender make-up of the school)				
Classrooms are set up to allow students to work together				

Inside the Classroom: What Teachers Are Doing

Q: *What improves student/teacher relationships?*

A: When teachers open themselves to students and invite students to do the same.¹⁴

Mark appropriate columns with an X	No	Somewhat	Yes	Evidence
Curriculum and/or classroom materials appear rigorous				
Curriculum and/or classroom materials appear culturally relevant				
There is open communication between students and teachers				
The teacher provides learning opportunities for students with various learning styles				
The teacher relates learning to the life of the student (makes lessons real)				
The teacher shares authority/leadership/teaching with students				
The teacher actively reaches out to engage students who seem unengaged, are not participating or are preoccupied (teacher tries to help students who cannot focus)				

Inside the Classroom: What Students Are Doing

Q: *What improves student/teacher relationships?*

A: Trust and respect.¹⁵

Mark appropriate columns with an X	No	Somewhat	Yes	Evidence
Students ask questions related to work or seeking clarification				
Students feel comfortable sharing with their classmates as well as learning from one another				
Students work in small groups, sharing work				
Students have opportunities to play different roles in the classroom				

Suggested Discussion Questions for *Inside the Classroom*

For Administrators

- How do you help teachers be successful and engage all students?
- Do you have a way to hear from students about what they like/dislike in the classroom? If so, how do you use this information?
- Is there a structure for assessing how well students are doing based on a range of indicators, including student work, active learning, group work, presentations and service learning?

For Teachers

- How do you know when your students are learning? And how do you assess their learning?
- How do you make the class interesting and challenging to all students?
- How do you help students who are not learning?
- What do you see as the role of students in their own learning?

For Students

- Describe the teacher you like the best. Describe the teacher you learn the most from. Are they different? If so, why?
- Have you ever been in a situation where you are learning from other students, not just from the teacher? If so, how did that happen? (Did the teacher's actions have anything to do with it?)
- Teachers often are told not to do all the talking, but instead to set up situations in which students are more active — group work, hands-on activities, discussions or seminars, projects and presentations. What are the activities that you like to do best? Do you have opportunities to participate in these activities in your classes?
- Describe a classroom in which you felt safe and comfortable speaking up or asking questions when you did not understand something. What made you feel that way?¹⁶
- How is your school work evaluated? (Do you have tests? Presentations? Group Work? Portfolios?) Do you agree with this type of assessment? Why or why not?

For Parents

- How do you know when your son or daughter is learning?
- What do you think makes a good teacher? How do you know if your son/daughter has a good teacher?

Connections

Q: *What makes a school worth going to?*

A: When a variety of activities gives students opportunities to shine and contribute outside the classroom.¹⁷

Mark appropriate columns with an X	No	Somewhat	Yes	Evidence
Students have many chances to be connected to or involved in the community				
There are many community programs/resources involved with and connected to the school				
Parents/family members are actively and regularly involved in the school				
Students and their families have access to a variety of school programs and facilities before and after school				

Suggested Discussion Questions for *Connections*

For Administrators

- Are parents involved in the school? If so, how?
- What do you do to connect community resources to the school and what opportunities do students have to connect to the larger community? (Service-learning, jobs, internships, job shadowing?)

For Teachers

- What do you do to involve parents/families in their child's education?
- How do you connect what you are teaching in the classroom to the community the students live in? (Service-learning, jobs, internships, job shadowing?)

For Students

- Do you have opportunities through school to get involved in your community? Do you participate? Why or why not?
- Do you have a chance to apply what you learn in school to your life outside school?
- Do your parents feel comfortable at your school? Why or why not? What does the school do to make them feel this way?

For Parents

- What do you need in order to feel comfortable enough to go to your son or daughter's school and talk to his/her teacher?
- Do you feel welcome at your child's school? Why or why not? How does the school promote this climate/culture?

Outcomes

Q: *What makes a school worth going to?*

A: When the school views and uses students as resources.¹⁸

Mark appropriate columns with an X	No	Somewhat	Yes	Evidence
<p>The school offers support for students who are having a hard time at home, are sad or just need someone to talk to</p>				
<p>The school offers “nonacademic” classes and activities during after-school hours</p>				

Suggested Discussion Questions For *Outcomes*

For Administrators

- How does the school recognize talents of students beyond the classroom?
- How do you develop your staff to get to know students in your school?
- When there is conflict/tension among groups of students, how do you deal with this?
- What kinds of support do you offer individual students who are having difficulty inside and outside the classroom?

For Teachers

- What do you think is important for you to know about the students in your class?
- When there is conflict/tension among groups of students, how do you deal with this?
- How do you support students in ways you do not consider “academic?” What practices do you use to do this?
- What kinds of support do you offer individual students who are having difficulty inside and outside the classroom?

For Students

- In or out of school, have you ever felt that you were learning something and it was important to *you* to learn it, not just because you were supposed to? If so, what made those things so important? Have you ever had that feeling in a class?¹⁸
- Is there at least one adult at this school that you feel comfortable talking to about pretty much anything? If you do not mind sharing, who is that adult and why do you feel so comfortable with him/her?²⁰
- When there is conflict/tension among groups of students how do people in the school help resolve them?
- Do you feel like adults in your school are interested in how you are doing and what your interests are?

For Parents

- Does the school support your child in ways you would consider beyond “academic?”
- Do you feel like adults in your child’s school are interested in how your child is doing socially? Emotionally? Physically?

Youth Engagement

Q: *What makes a school worth going to?*

A: When relationships among students are respectful and build self-esteem rather than diminishing it.²¹

Mark appropriate columns with an X	No	Somewhat	Yes	Evidence
Young people have meaningful leadership opportunities in the school				
Students' opinions are valued and considered inside and outside the classroom				

Suggested Discussion Questions for *Youth Engagement*

For Administrators

- As the principal, how do you find out about what students think of the school and what they are learning?
- Are there structures in the school that give students opportunities to be engaged as decision makers, contributors and leaders? If so, how?

For Teachers

- As a teacher, how do you find out about what students think of their classes and what they are learning?
- Are there structures in the school that give students opportunities to be engaged as decision makers, contributors and leaders? If so, how?
- Do you have a way to hear from students about what they like/dislike in the classroom? If so, how do you use this information?

For Students

- Does your school value and respect youth culture? Please explain.
- Do you feel comfortable sharing your opinions with teachers and administrators? When you do share your opinions, do you feel they get heard and taken seriously?
- What opportunities do you have to become involved in making your school the kind of place you want to come to everyday?
- What opportunities do you have to become involved in leadership roles, in classes or in the school in general? In youth-adult partnerships?

For Parents

- Does the school give students an opportunity to be engaged as decision makers and leaders? If so, how?

Endnotes

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