



# A PRIMER ON CREATING EFFECTIVE YOUTH PANELS

Prepared in Conjunction with  
the Schools for a New Society Learning Institute

WITH SUPPORT FROM THE CARNEGIE CORPORATION

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**the  
forum**  
FOR YOUTH INVESTMENT

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Three times in the past year and a half, the staff of the Forum for Youth Investment has had the opportunity to organize and facilitate panel presentations in which young people bring their voices to bear on the struggle of school reform. The first, at the Council of Chief State School Officers 1999 summer institute, brought together young people in and out of Alaska's public schools to discuss what motivates them to learn. More recently, teams from urban school districts involved in the Carnegie Corporation Schools for a New Society initiative heard from students in Washington, DC's public schools about their priorities for high school reform. And in June of 2001, the Forum worked with students from Washington, DC and Sacramento as they took part in a daylong conversation titled Students Continually Learning. Based on these experiences, the feedback of young people involved, our staff's previous experience in facilitating dialogues among young people and adults, and our ongoing work around youth as agents of change, the Forum has created this short primer on creating student panels that aid in the process of reinventing high schools.

## Why Do It? And Why Not?

There is a pressing need for new voices in national and local dialogues on school reform. These are the voices of young people themselves – students struggling, succeeding, or falling through the cracks in our public schools. Youth voices are critical for several reasons:

- **Because young people deserve a place at the table** – they have the right and the responsibility to a say in all the decisions, institutions and processes that affect them.
- **Because young people bring new and important perspectives** to discussions and decisions about their schools – they are in a unique position to understand what's working, what's not and what needs to change.
- **Because young people are critical stakeholders** in the school reform process – their opinions, their buy-in and their commitment are all essential if any meaningful change is to take root.
- Because young people's participation has proven equally critical to their own **learning and development**, the **development of organizations** and the **development of healthy communities**.

There are dozens of ways to meaningfully involve young people in the school reform process. Youth panels are only one tool, with advantages and disadvantages. On the positive side, panels can be public, high-profile events that inspire and galvanize a community. They can allow for direct communication among young people and other stakeholders in school reform. And they put students in the position of expertise and authority, an important role reversal.

On the other hand, student panels have serious limitations. They tend to be a flash in the pan – generating only a short burst of excitement or change in behavior. They bring youth voices into the dialogue, but don't provide any real decision-making power. They can be a substitute for more sustained, meaningful participation – “we already did a panel, so we've already listened to students.” And they only bring a small percentage of student voices (often overachievers) to bear, making it possible to dismiss their contributions.

## Principles

**Time.** Putting together an effective panel discussion involves more than tracking down a bunch of young people. It involves work before the discussion to help the students decide what they want to say and how they want to say it. It also involves opportunities for conversation and reflection after the event.

**Relationships.** More importantly, though, an effective discussion is rooted in strong relationships *with and among the young people involved in the process*. If they know each other, students will begin to bring out each other's stories, and will simply have the trust necessary to be open around each other. If students are brought together from across a school district, it's often helpful to invite pairs from each school or organization – so that each student knows at least one other student coming into the first meeting together. One-on-one relationships *between the process facilitators and the students involved* are just as crucial. It makes a big difference to have the same staff involved in every stage to maintain the relationship-building process. As part of this process, it's useful to be in touch with *the participants' parents* – their support is both a logistical necessity and a positive addition to students' experiences.

**Facilitation.** A facilitator stakes out her territory safely distant from two extremes: on the one hand, putting words into student's mouths, and on the other hand, putting them onstage without any support. A facilitator can help a student know their audience and craft their messages accordingly; know what stories they hope to draw out of each participant up on stage; help students to identify major themes and the order in which they'd like to discuss them; and ask the prompting questions necessary to keep the conversation going.

**Diversity.** Panels can easily turn into beauty contests for high achievers and well-groomed speakers. It takes concerted effort to bring together young people with a range of school experiences – small and large schools; successful students, struggling students, and young people who have left the school system; young people of diverse identity, in terms of culture, race, gender, language and age; etc. It helps to start with a sense of the whole – what experiences you would like to have on the panel in order to represent the full range of students and to touch specific issues important to your audience. Going directly through schools may not be the best route to reaching this sort of diversity – try contacting students through community-based organizations, youth clubs and other places where students tend to be when they are not in schools. This eliminates the pressure on schools to send their star students, and helps identify students who aren't engaged in their school communities. Finally, don't be afraid to include students who are not well-groomed speakers – the process described here can bring out quieter students and less experienced panelists, as well.

**Respect.** Students know when their participation is token or their voices patronized. Respect during the process – taking young people seriously, being “real” in conversations with them, is essential. It is perhaps even more important to put advice that participants give into action, and to make young people aware of the impact that their voices made. Be frank up front about what young people can expect to happen as a result of the panel. Another part of this respect for youth voices involves compensating the participants for their contributions. When possible, it is helpful to provide stipends for young people participating in the process. Stipends for written reflections that are part of a post-event publication are also an effective way to signal the weight that will be given to their insights.

## Process

### STEP 1: CLARIFYING THE PURPOSE AND PARAMETERS

Why is it worth it to put forth such energy to arrange and facilitate a panel? What do you expect to get out of the event? A clear sense of purpose will both build energy for the process and guide the planning – panels will look very different depending on their desired impact. Several areas of clarity are particularly important: 1) the nature of the panel's audience; 2) particular issues or questions that the panel should address; 3) particular perspectives or experiences that students should bring to bear; and 4) what lasting impact the panel can have. It's important to acknowledge that a panel is a small part of a larger process of improving schools – it should be designed in a way that reflects and supports that process.

### STEP 2: FINDING THE STUDENTS

Identifying young people and getting them committed to the process is labor-intensive – both for logistical reasons and because of the struggle for diversity mentioned above. Having either a liaison with strong community connections, or a deep and broad network of connections in the schools and community-based organizations, makes this process much easier. Finding students from diverse school experiences, and getting individuals to follow through on commitments to find students, requires many phone calls and a willingness to be frank. To avoid a panel heavy on high school seniors or straight-A students or activists, new outreach strategies may need to be developed once the process is well underway. At this stage in the process, as in others, it may be useful to recruit more students than needed for the panel itself as some students may not be able to participate for some unforeseen reason. If additional students are involved, it's important to be clear about their role in the work as well. Will they take part in the question and answer time? Be a part of small group discussions following the panel? Have an opportunity to contribute to written products produced after the panel?

### Before the Panel

**Strive for diversity** - think about class year and experiences in school – from dropouts to honors students, those engaged in school activities and those not, from big schools and small – as well as age, race, ethnicity, religion, gender, etc.

**Talk to parents** to let them know why you keep calling their child.

On the **meeting space** – Where do young people spend their time? Think of a central/fun location that is accessible by public transportation. Bring lots of food and drinks.

**Speak their language** – make sure students are comfortable talking with you.

**Listen** carefully - paraphrase, make an earnest attempt at understanding the message.

**Dress appropriately** - the more comfortable the meeting, the more likely the student will be able to clearly convey his/her experiences.

### STEP 3: ONE-ON-ONE INTERVIEWS

Whether by phone or in person, the process facilitators should have at least one sustained, in-depth conversation with each participant – learning about them, their school, their hopes for the future, and their major concerns about their high school experience. These conversations build both relationships and the content of the upcoming conversations. It's useful to have the individuals who facilitate these conversations involved in every other step of the process, so that there is continuity throughout. Think about how to capture the content of the conversations, either by audiotaping or having a second facilitator take notes.

### STEP 4: INITIAL GROUP DISCUSSION

The group meeting or meetings prior to the panel are part community-building, part gripe session, part open discussion, and part planning meeting. Like in any good classroom, the pace is varied to meet the sessions' multiple aims – at times, participants may be on their feet; at others, working in small groups; at others, reflecting on their own. After an engaging, active icebreaker activity, the first order of business is to clarify expectations, purpose, and basic information about the panel and audience. If there is an overarching question that the panel has been asked to answer, such as “What motivates students to learn?” or “How can school environments be improved,” it is helpful to identify this at the outset. Then, the meeting can move into a loose opportunity to share experiences and perceptions – letting the conversation flow in the direction that students want it to go. This process takes time – using a few activities, the open discussion may take half a day or more. Partner interviews; mapping activities that ask the students to identify where they go in their neighborhoods and why; brainstorming; open discussions; forced choice activities<sup>1</sup>; and other learning models can be incorporated into this process.

Throughout the individual interviews and these group activities, it is helpful to have in mind several prompting questions that draw out the students' experiences (see box below). The questions will vary based on the issues of particular interest to the students and their audiences – e.g., the transition into high school, safety and freedom, etc. Throughout these activities, it is helpful to keep returning to the overarching question (e.g., “...so how does that motivate you?”). Especially in the full group meeting, it's helpful to keep the discussion focused on specific stories, examples and solutions. When they highlight a particular problem or issue, ask “So what would you do about it?” Quality note-taking or audio-taping throughout these discussions can both record the process and help the panel itself come together.

Once this conversation has taken its course, the work shifts toward planning the panel itself. Because of this shift in tone, it's possible to have this planning session in a separate meeting. Facilitators can help the students identify the common themes and topics that stretch across their individual experiences, and identify who wants to be sure to talk about those topics during the panel itself. The participants can return to focus on who their audiences are, what tone they should strike in order to be heard, what concrete recommendations they would like to make and what topics are of particular importance to this group.

Coaching on effective public speaking can be incorporated into this conversation. By the time the meeting is over, everyone should have a clear sense of how the conversation is likely to progress and where they individually are likely to chime in.

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<sup>1</sup> In forced choice activities, a room is arranged with signs in each corner – “strongly disagree,” “disagree,” “agree,” and “strongly agree.” The facilitator reads a statement, at which point students move to corners of the room based on how they feel about the statement. Students then have a chance to discuss their positions and move to a different corner if their mind changes as a result of hearing other people's opinions.

## STEP 5: PANELIST BIOS

At some point in this process, students should take time to write brief bios for themselves, which can be passed out to audience members before their presentation. These bios both provide students an opportunity to reflect on their experiences, and give the audience a sense of the range of students on the panel. In addition to the basics (age, school, grade), students should be encouraged to include their own description of their school, a little information about their personal history with schools, and other relevant information they think the audience should know about them (responsibilities they have, activities they are involved in). When it comes to personal information (“I’m a teen mother,” “I have learning disabilities,” “I dropped out for two years and go to an alternative school now”), some students feel more comfortable putting it in writing rather than introducing themselves from the stage. The question to ask the students is, “What do you think the audience needs to know about you so that they will pay attention to what you have to say?”

Some audience members have noted that, were it not for the bios, they would have thought that the majority of the students on the panel were highly involved honors students. The bios help counterbalance the “they’re so articulate, they must be exceptions” misconceptions that can happen when the students are prepared to speak out forcefully and clearly about the issues that matter to them.

### Questions to Get the Conversation Going

What is your high school like? What does it do well?

What has your experience been in the various schools that you have gone to? When and why have you shifted schools? What did you like/dislike when you started high school or a new school?

What are you planning to do in the future? What is your school doing to help you move in that direction? What could it do better?

What is your biggest concern or issue with your high school? How would you fix it? What one thing would make the biggest difference in improving your high school? If you were a (principal, superintendent, etc., depending on audience), what would you do?

What motivates you to learn? When do you learn best?

What is one thing that you’ve been able to accomplish in school that you are really proud of? Why?

What experiences have you had in community organizations or leadership opportunities outside of school? How do these experiences compare with what you do during school? Is there anything that schools can learn from this?

How could schools and school districts do a better job of listening to students?

What is the main message or advice that you want the audience to take away?

## STEP 6: PANEL DISCUSSION

The young people should be on site early enough to do last minute planning, go through the set of issues they agreed to discuss, spend additional time together, and relax. This time on site can be incredibly stressful if the students see and feel the anxiety of event planners, facilitators, and others; keeping them out of the blast radius of this anxiety is important.

Before the discussion begins, it's helpful to prepare the audience – just as the students themselves needed a chance to get ready before getting up on stage. Passing out student bios, along with a listening tool that helps audience members reflect on what they hear, can make the audience more receptive. An introduction that provides context – the importance of youth voices in the school reform process, the role of youth participation in young people's development, etc. – is also vital.

### Logistics

Arrange for the **taping and/or transcribing** of the panel, if appropriate.

Secure reliable **transportation** to the panel to ensure that the students get there early.

Be clear on the **time commitment and roles**. In addition to the panel, are they responding to other presenters? Taking part in discussion groups?

On the day of the panel, bring **extra copies** of media release, school release and stipend forms.

### The Panel

**Prepare the audience.** What should they be listening for during the panel?

Pass out student bios to give the audience a sense of the diversity of school experiences represented on the panel.

**Draw out particular students** with directed questions to get things started.

Phrase **questions** the same way as you did in previous meetings so they are familiar to the students.

Leave plenty of time for the **question and answer** period.

Although you will have a plan upfront, **allow the conversation to flow** where the students take it.

**Have Fun!**

During the discussion itself, the facilitator's main roles are to ask questions, provide support, and stay out of the way. Both the students and the facilitator should have a clear sense of where the conversation should start, and where it's likely to go; however, new stories, issues, and ideas will almost certainly come up on the fly. A good discussion is anything but scripted – with students responding to one another as well as to questions from the facilitator. When the facilitator does ask questions, they should use the language that students themselves used during previous meetings, probe for more detail, challenge students to make concrete recommendations and draw out students who haven't been vocal.

Both audiences and panel participants say that the Q&A part of the discussion is incredibly valuable – giving this adequate time (ideally as long as the presentation itself) will increase the value of the process. Continuing the dialogue in smaller groups after the presentation is likely even more valuable. If the panel is part of a conference or larger meeting, students can act as full participants and provide spoken or written reflection on the rest of the process.

## STEP 7: REFLECTION AND FOLLOW-UP

Both the students and the audience deserve an opportunity for engagement once the discussion is over. Some reflection can take place in a short meeting or celebration directly after the event. An additional meeting – on an evening or weekend – can provide the entire group a chance to evaluate the process and the panel itself, answers any hanging questions from the audience, and reflects on their individual roles. Finally, written reflections – short pieces of writing focusing on a theme or story brought out in the process – can provide opportunities to stretch the content of the panel and tie up loose ends.

Preparation of a short publication can help make sure that the students recommendations are remembered by the audience as well as heard more broadly. Their written reflections, the transcript of the panel itself, and the notes from earlier meetings can be brought together into a short piece that highlights the key themes and messages of the panel.

Make sure you thank the students and keep them informed of next steps in the process. Is there a publication coming out? Are there ongoing meetings that they may have the opportunity to participate in?

Finally, remember to contact parents, organization leaders, and any other adults who helped to identify and work with the students to thank them for their involvement, and to let them know how much the panelists contributed.

### Sustaining the Conversation

A single student panel does not mean that students have been adequately listened to, or that a school reform process is going to move forward with renewed energy and focus. Panels work most effectively when they are part of a larger effort to infuse young people's perspectives and voices into school restructuring. There are many other ways to give students seats at the table – here are a few other possibilities:

- **Infusing students into existing school structures** – student representatives on school reform planning teams; meaningful student inclusion in Parent Teacher Student Associations, voting student members on school boards, student positions on teacher and principal selection committees.
- **Capitalizing on existing opportunities for student voice** – asking student governments and clubs to make recommendations into the school reform process, using classes or advisories to discuss students' concerns and ideas.
- **Creating new venues for student voice** – regular student forums or “town meetings;” student unions and advocacy groups; student advisory groups which meet regularly with administrators.

### After the Panel

Immediately set up a **reflection/celebration** gathering with the group.

**Follow-up** with those students who wish to prepare written commentary on their school experiences.

Get the students **paid** as quickly as possible and keep them informed of what's happening next.

Be sure to **thank the organizations and the parents** who helped make the panel possible.

**Stay in touch!**

- **Giving students roles as evaluators** – student mapping projects of school strengths and weaknesses; survey analysis conducted by students; students as partners with school evaluators (see Northwest Regional Education Laboratory resources below).

Hopefully, all of these individual opportunities add up to meaningful student engagement in school restructuring – and to schools that are “democratic learning communities,” as one Ohio school describes itself. Student panels are the tip of the iceberg – though a useful catalyst – in this effort.

## Resources

**Murray, Susan and Wood, George. *Creating a Democratic Learning Community: The Case Study of Federal Hocking High School*. Columbus, Ohio: Ohio Department of Education, 1999.**

*Creating a Democratic Learning Community* is a detailed case study of one of the best-known examples of youth participation in school governance and reform.

**School Change Collaborative. *Listening to Student Voices*. Portland, Oregon: Northwest Regional Education Laboratory, 2000.**

*Listening to Student Voices* is a toolkit for K - 12 educational leaders and school-based teams interested in including students in continuous school improvement. It is available online at <http://www.nwrel.org/scpd/scc/studentvoices/index.html>.

**Wood, George. *A Time to Learn: Creating Community in America's High Schools*. EP Dutton, 1998.**

*A Time to Learn* describes an approach to school reform rooted in both student participation and school-community connections.