

# In Their Own Words: Participants' Perspectives on Honoring Student Voice

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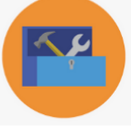
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## Introduction

The roots of the American education system—the factory model—treat children as its raw materials and its products. Despite their being the primary beneficiaries, youth are seldom viewed as decision-makers in the system that constitutes a major formative setting for their social, emotional, and intellectual lives. Numerous efforts in the field are underway to change that dynamic and ensure that students’ voices are amplified, heard, and acted upon.

[Inclusive Innovation](#) holds that those closest to an educational challenge have a rightful place at the table to define the problem and design its solution (Core Tenets). This paper, one in the series [Emerging Findings from Inclusive Innovation: An Equity-Centered R&D Model](#), draws on Digital Promise’s key pilot projects with the Inclusive Innovation model to illuminate how students’ voices were integrated in the process and made a difference to the work.

### Core Tenets of Inclusive Innovation

	<p><b>Co-Leadership</b></p> <p>The work is co-led by stakeholders who are reflective of the diversity of communities and schools to ensure mutual benefit</p>		<p><b>Center Equity</b></p> <p>The solutions are designed to address the systemic inequities that impact students — poverty, race, language, learning differences —and their intersections</p>
	<p><b>Co-Research and Design</b></p> <p>The education challenges are co-researched and co-designed to address issues the community deems important and build on what is already working within communities and schools</p>		<p><b>Reimagine Progress</b></p> <p>Progress measures must be multi-dimensional — access, participation and benefit — in recognition of the needs of the whole child</p>
	<p><b>Honor Context</b></p> <p>Context and context expertise is prioritized to center the history, culture, and perspectives of those with lived experiences relevant to the education challenge</p>		<p><b>Build Capacity</b></p> <p>The process resources communities to sustain the capacity for equity-centered R&amp;D into the future</p>

### Inclusive Innovation Pilot Projects Overview

The Inclusive Innovation model is a process by which equity challenges are co-researched and innovative equity-centered solutions that center the needs of students who have been historically and systematically excluded from opportunity are co-designed with district and community stakeholders. Four school districts across the U.S. partnered with Digital Promise to pilot the Inclusive Innovation model and address district challenges related to adolescent writing, racial trauma and mental health, and social justice and racial equity discourse in the classroom.

In collaboration with Digital Promise’s Center for Inclusive Innovation, each district assembled community-district Core teams of district leaders, teachers, parents, community members and students in an intentional partnership to address a challenge area in their district using the Inclusive Innovation model. Each Core team was composed of 7–10 community and district stakeholders, two of which were named Co-Leads. The Core team co-leads were primarily responsible for guiding the course of research and design activities, recruiting research participants, and providing access to additional resources. member participation in Inclusive Innovation varied across each district.

The four district communities are in the eastern, Midwest, and southern regions of the country, ranging in enrollment from three districts with 15,000 or fewer students and one district approaching 50,000 students. The student populations across the districts are ethnically, racially, socioeconomically, and linguistically diverse (Exhibit 1).

**Exhibit 1 Student Demographic Ranges in Four Communities Piloting Inclusive Innovation Model**

Demographic	Range
Enrollment (students)	6,000 – 47,000
Free and reduced-price lunch eligible	49 – 80%
Race/ethnicity	
African-American	2 – 38%
Asian	Up to 9%
Latino	8 – 92%
Multiracial	Up to 10%
White	4 – 59%
Multilingual learners	5 – 22%

## Data Sources

**Inclusive Innovation Materials and Outputs.** Along the Inclusive Innovation process, Core teams met at a regular cadence to build relationships, co-research challenges, and co-design solutions. The session agendas, session materials, and session outputs developed by the Core teams are all used as data in this project. These data are cited as Core team artifacts.

**Interviews.** As a research team, we developed a 26-item semi-structured interview protocol to explore interviewees' perspectives of their experience with the Inclusive Innovation process. Specifically, the protocol contains questions that were intended to elucidate the extent to which factors such as student voice, context expertise, capacity-building, racial equity are central to the Inclusive Innovation process from the perspective of the interviewee. All Core team members were invited to participate in an interview; 18 were interviewed (Exhibit 2). Interview respondents had participated in the Inclusive Innovation pilot projects for approximately 9 to 15 months.

**Exhibit 2. Number of Interview Respondents by Role Type**

Role Type	Number of Interview Participants
District Leaders	2
Teachers	4
Community Members	6
Parents	2
Students	4

## Procedures

All current and former Core team members ( $N = 34$ ) were contacted via email by a Digital Promise researcher. If Core team members agreed to participate, an interview was scheduled to take place over Zoom. Before the interview began, the researcher explained that the participants' responses would remain confidential and that no data would be reported with any identifying indicators. Participants were asked for their consent to a recorded interview. All interviews took approximately one hour to complete. With the exception of one joint interview between 2 participants, all were individual interviews between Core team members and a Digital Promise researcher. Interviews lasted approximately one hour and participants were given a \$25 gift card in appreciation for their participation.

Recordings and transcribed files were stored in a secure Box.com folder and deleted from all other servers and computers. The Box.com folder is only accessible to the Digital Promise Inclusive Innovation research team. Each transcript was integrated into MaxQDA (analytic software) for analysis.

The research team coded transcripts and selected artifacts with primary codes representing the following key constructs: context expertise, student voice, racial equity, capacity building, and outcomes. Researchers identified subcodes for each key construct in a second round of analysis and analyzed coded passages for convergent themes and disconfirming evidence.

## This Paper

In keeping with the Inclusive Innovation value of honoring student voice, this paper takes a non-traditional approach. While the research team coded interviews and artifacts topically and I organized the flow of this paper, I intentionally am not imposing a conceptual framework about how, why, and under what conditions student voice should be centered. Rather the students and the Core team members that worked with them speak directly to illustrate what was most important about their experiences with Inclusive Innovation, the ways in which the model as implemented in each pilot project reflected student voice, and the ways in which we need to improve. The paper ends with discussion and reflection about ongoing dilemmas that we will continue to navigate and learn about, in community with the many of you who also advocate for students' rightful presence in shaping the ways their needs can best be met.

## Student Voice in Inclusive Innovation

*I think my role specifically was just student. So I think I definitely understood that I was supposed to give my opinions on whether or not I thought that the solutions we were coming up with were something that students could feel that they could do. And also, I think, something that they didn't specifically tell me, but I think I knew that I kind of had to make sure that we were really keeping in mind the student perspective was something that I really came to understand.—Student*

The Inclusive Innovation pilot projects follow the five-phased Inclusive Innovation model. The model begins with Connect & Commit, when Core team members build trust and shared commitment to address a challenge; followed by Inquire & Investigate when the Core team deeply investigates the challenge from multiple perspectives and identifies key outcomes; Design & Develop, when the Core team creates prototype solutions that meet the needs of priority students; Implement & Iterate when the prototype solutions are implemented and iteratively refined using data on implementation conditions and progress indicators; and then Sustain & Scale, when other schools or communities assess whether the refined solutions might need their needs and whether and how they might adapt it.

Throughout these phases, those with lived experience—that is, those with context expertise—co-lead the process and the needs of historically, systematically excluded student groups are paramount in decision-making. The Inclusive Innovation pilot projects place a primacy on student voice by including students on the Core team leading the local effort, gathering data directly from a larger group of students at multiple places (e.g., through student persona surveys and focus groups), engaging them in “design sprints” to develop solution ideas, and soliciting direct feedback on potential solutions. The data that follow reference students’ own experiences on the Inclusive Innovation Core teams and perspectives of their fellow adult Core team members.

## Students’ Rightful Place

Students participating on the Core team articulated their rightful place in the process. They are the ones most affected by decisions about their education, they hold perspectives that differ from those of educators and other adults making decisions for them or that affect them, and often they have more insight and knowledge than adults give them credit for.

“I was like, ‘Hey, I’m actually getting listened to.’ Because as a student, because I’m young, I feel like I don’t get listened to as often as I feel like students should, which kind of downplays the whole role of trying to make things better for the students because our voices are not being heard. So it’s like they’re making changes for nothing.”—Student

“I feel like if the students were not included, we wouldn’t be able to, as a group, come up with ideas to help in the classroom because if the students are the ones who are learning, teachers wouldn’t hear what the students had to say, and so they wouldn’t know how to change anything.”—Student

The adults on the Core team also advocated that students are essential to the process, some arguing that the process would lack legitimacy and validity without honoring student perspectives.

“[W]hat about the kids that never meet or are not at that standard? They’re slipping through the cracks just like in education with so many kids that slip through the cracks.... [T]hat’s why I say with the lived experience— ...I still have some problems with the language when I’m writing. But I’ve always thought that my voice didn’t matter when I was an ESL student. And then when I became a college student, I was like, ‘Okay. My voice really matters because my professors are expecting this.’”—Teacher



“I think it’s always important to include student voice because if we are trying to meet the students’ needs, we need to know what they need.... [W]e need to include students in that process so we can get a better understanding of what is needed, and we can see some things that they might not see of what they might need. But it’s still good for us to ask.”—Teacher

“Oh, they're living it. Right? And also with the students, their voice, they can talk to you about things that may not work. They can lend their experience of telling the story of what is happening to them now or what they've seen and making sure that any solution that we come up with will be something that will have the buy-in of the students because they participated as part of building it. So I think that that is a crucial element of this project.”—Community member

Adult participants also pointed to practical and instrumental reasons for students to be involved, that they have specific ideas for workable solutions and can gain the buy-in of other students for any solution that emerges from the Inclusive Innovation process.

“Again, they can bring, again, what they feel the problems are and then what the solutions are because sometimes kids, they know what the problems are, but they don’t know what the solutions are, but sometimes they know. They're like, ‘Well, we should do it this way. This is how—’ they have an opinion.... So sometimes they have more of the answers that we didn’t think of.... And sometimes they’re willing to do it like, ‘Oh, I can do that. I can help that,’ rally, and get their peers together that we can’t, so they can get their peers on board or communicate to their peers about why this is important, what we can do. So leadership in that area.” —Teacher

“I don’t know that the solution would be—that we would have the student buy-in because it’d be, ‘Oh, there’s those adults giving us something else to do again or looking at these things.’ Really, I think that you have to have the students’ participation in order to, one, build buy-in and also make sure that you are coming up with a solution or an opportunity that they would even be interested in participating in.” –Community member

## Perspectives on How Student Voice Mattered: Problem Framing

Core team members—students and adults—identified the gap between how students understand a problem and how districts or schools might understand it, especially resulting from changes in the student body over time and increasing generational gaps.

This student’s observation highlights an awareness of how culturally diverse identities matter in students’ sense of belonging and engagement in the curriculum, which was ignored by policymakers and education decision-makers in the past.

“I feel like a lot of us understand that... the curriculum is something that the state comes up with.... [W]e have an understanding that it’s not something that we kind of have control or autonomy over. It’s something that as soon as we kind of understand it’s just something that we have to do, ... students kind of feel trapped in that.... Again, I also think that it comes down to also our different identities. Again, a lot of us might be non-citizens, or we might be non-native speakers, or we might still be in English learning classes.... And I think that’s definitely something to keep in mind with, because I think writing ...definitely kind of have to have an understanding of American politics or culturally understood things here in the United States. So I think it’s definitely something that our perspectives, the perspectives of students ...is definitely something we should keep in mind.” –Student

Students participating in focus groups around the root causes of writing challenges identified ways they expressed themselves and factors that inhibited their sense of expression.

Does your school encourage you to express yourself using different formats (art, video, technology, etc.). If so, how?

Not really. They kind of tell you to write an essay and submit it. They don't bring the fun out of it anymore, like in 2nd grade you get to sing a song, because we are older. But you can always still do it, but they decided not to. Now we have to get whatever they want us to do done, it's not freedom writing, it's just specific topics. Most of the time is just research for essays.

In elementary school, we did more illustrations with writing than in middle school.

What other opportunities would you create for students for self-expression?

I think I would be letting writing be more freedom. More like writing that everyone wants to write, not everyone wants to write the same things.

Give students a choice about how they want to write. Maybe essay, maybe they want to draw it, open options so they can enjoy it but also do the work for it.

Maybe don't put as much stress on kids as they usually do. How long an essay, what it needs to include, what it shouldn't include. Everyone should have opportunity to write what they want to write.

Teachers should let the kids have their time to write on their essays, not to put too much pressure, if they need more time, give them more time.

Students and adults also recognize that the entire way children communicate and interact has changed through technology and needs to be accounted for in understanding root causes underlying the challenge that Core teams are addressing.

"I think the student voice also definitely adds more intricate decisions only because we are living in it right now. We're the kids of it.... [T]his generation is always on their phone, so I think we're getting the most intense part of it because we're not connecting with that writing anymore. It's only on our phones. So I think it just really gives a different point of view, especially when you have a large diversity of kids because it could give you reasons why the writing isn't just connecting."—Student

“[K]nowing what it’s like for them, the reality right now, it was incredibly important, I think, to any of the decisions that were made or any of the conclusions that we came to.... I couldn’t believe how much more diverse the student body has become in [district] since when I started here in 1995. And so I’m like, ‘Well, yeah, absolutely. It’s long since due for a change ... to where anybody is going to feel like that the curriculum that’s being taught is something that’s going to speak to them.’”–Community member

Ultimately, proximity to children’s lives is crucial to accurately understanding and solving a problem.

“[I]t’s like adults making a decision for kids, which they don’t even know the problems to. You know what I mean? It’s good to have that insight of students.... It’s nice to have an insight of what we’re actually thinking, what’s going through our minds, what’s happening with everyone. You know what I mean? And not just adults making decisions for kids because as that is necessary in some situations, I feel like to make education better for kids, students should definitely be involved in it.”–Student

“[T]he further you’re removed from that situation, the less likely you are to know what is exactly happening in that student’s life. So I think sometimes you need to hear that perspective in order to make a decision that is going to be helpful to all students. A situation that I could share is right now we’re looking at food insecurity, and they were like, ‘Oh, well, they can just get this and that.’ But if you’re providing students with food that they don’t eat, that’s not solving the problem. Right? So you’ve really got to kind of talk to the students to find out like, ‘What is it that you need, or where would you go to get these services?’ in order to make sure you’re choosing a solution that would benefit all.”–Community member

## Perspectives on How Student Voice Mattered: Emerging Solutions

Like the potential differences in perspectives framing the problem, students determining solution ideas and providing feedback to adults' suggestions underscore that adults often don't have a pulse on what is appealing and workable for students.

I think the kids are telling us that they want to be a part of the process and that they want to have more voice, more inclusion, ownership of what they're learning, all of those pieces. I love the first one [solution that provides students choice in writing topics], just to be able to talk about what's currently happening.... We talk a lot about not repeating history that doesn't need to be repeated. However, we repeat history quite often. And how does that happen? How did we end up where we are? And a lot of it is just making sure that kids can make those connections and that they're engaged. And it's not just, 'You're learning about what's happened in the past.' Actually learning about what's happened in the past that could affect the future and to understand how you become a part of that future."—Principal

Participants across multiple stakeholder groups were skeptical that adults alone can design solutions that actually address the problem from students' point of view.

"No offense to teachers and stuff, but a lot of the stuff they like introducing into the classroom, I think they find more interesting than the students do or more fun than the students do. So I think having student voice made sure it was fun for the students and for the teachers."—Student

"I think we would have wound up with a bunch of adult solutions that we thought would help kids." —Parent

"I feel like, honestly, it would have been a waste of time because we would be guessing because students would look at this like, 'What is this?'"—Teacher

As Core teams further developed their solution ideas, a broader group of students provided thoughts on what they wanted to see in particular solution ideas (Exhibit 3).

**Exhibit 3. Sample summary of characteristics students wanted in a student curriculum advisory, part of a solution addressing students’ desire for more voice and choice in writing assignments.**

A vote – not just a voice	Opportunities to give feedback on existing curriculum
An opportunity to earn or recover credit	Opportunities to propose ideas and topics for inquiry units that are relevant to their life experience and interests
Opportunities to explore inquiry topics from multiple, diverse perspectives	Multiple options for how they can engage in the curriculum advisory process
Opportunities to demonstrate their understanding in a variety of formats (e.g text, video, audio)	Opportunities for collaboration in the inquiry learning experience
More accessible primary sources	No requirement for work outside of school day

Although participants were clear that student perspectives are indispensable, integrating appropriate subject matter expertise into the conversation to infuse their knowledge about technical needs, what’s known in broader research, and what’s feasibly been tried elsewhere are complementary considerations.

“I think that it’s important...to let them know that we care about what you say, but to a certain point, because we can’t have the cart drive the horse sometimes. There has to be some experts on it and some people that understand education and say, ‘Although, we hear what you’re saying, we do have to kind of—we got to stick to somewhat of a plan.’ So yeah, I think it’s just balance, just like anything else.”—Community member

## Challenges

As with the efforts to integrate those with [context expertise](#) into the process, several key challenges arose in maintaining a central focus on students and prioritizing student perspectives, including students initially feeling overwhelmed or intimidated; adults learning to listen to perspectives they might be uncomfortable with or disagree with; and difficulties in maintaining consistent priority student representation.

### Students Entering an Intimidating Situation

Students on the Core team reported that they initially felt intimidated, in part because more adults were present than students and in part because school operations were not transparent to them.

“So I feel like I had a really positive experience. I feel like I was a little bit intimidated just because I feel like I didn't understand a lot of the managing things...-and it's not something that they exactly taught me, but in their conversations, I did get to learn about it... But otherwise, I think they really kept my opinions on the forefront of what they were talking about. As a student, they really tried to make sure that my perspective, I think, was the one that they really, really kept in mind.”—Student

Adults recognizing that the students may not have been comfortable pointed to the need for both guiding questions and listening to try to understand what students are trying to communicate.

“I think that one of the things that's hardest for me is to make sure that kids understand their voice is important and that we're hearing them. And they may not be able to get their ideas out the way that they are hoping to. But for us to really listen to what they're saying and try to give them those key questions to get them to the place that their whole point is being made. And so having those students as a part of that group is crucial.”—Principal

Students also need specific information to feel like they are on sure footing to engage in conversations and make valuable contributions. Such informational needs included both educational content as well as additional student perspectives.

“I think my understanding of exactly how the curriculum is implemented and how it’s shaped and how it’s made was definitely something that... made it a little bit hard for me to contribute, just because I feel like ... sometimes the things that I would say would be redundant because I didn’t understand. Or it would be kind of irrelevant sometimes because I didn’t understand exactly how the curriculum is set up and what solutions we could actually implement based on the standards and whether or not they would fit within the standards. I think that was definitely something that made it a little bit hard for me to contribute.”—Student

“I think she [student] would have felt more confident, she would have felt a little bit more at ease that she was not having to make decisions for so many different students without any conversation back and forth.”—Teacher

## Adults Learning to Listen to Uncomfortable or Inconvenient Perspectives

Likely reflecting the confluence of school district hierarchy, traditional notions of how students are excluded or have very limited ways of participating in district decision-making, and greater numbers of adults on the Core teams, adults—in particular educators within the K-12 system—need to learn to listen to what students have to say.

Students’ characterization of problems or issues might have been difficult or uncomfortable for educators to hear because the K–12 system is primarily set up with educators being responsible for determining what students do, how they do it, and when they do it.



"I think because ...the voices of the administrators and the teachers were so strong, ...I don't think [a solution] would have really centered around the student voice as much, just because I think that a lot of the teachers kind of had problems with students kind of giving their opinion.... I just think that they probably wouldn't have kept in mind that students want to actually be able to directly critique the curriculum. ... I think that's something that we probably would have missed if we didn't really talk to students."—Student

Put differently, it is educators' work that students are evaluating, for example, contrasting "freedom writing" and "forced writing" as the difference between students' writing for their own purposes in forums that are meaningful to them and school-assigned writing. And it was the students' role to persist in reminding the adults that they had an obligation to take direction from students' voices.

"So I feel like the teachers and I think the administrators and community leaders... --they already kept in mind that students really wanted autonomy. They really wanted the topics for us to review, to be relevant to them and to be something that they enjoyed. So I definitely think that they already had that in mind, but I feel like I just kind of served as a reminder to keep in mind that although some solutions... -might be something that we're reluctant to do, but if this is what students want to do, I feel like I kind of served as a reminder to make sure that we kept what the students want in mind."—Student

A parent urged: "[W]e need to learn to constantly try to involve the new ways, like... how we see the students, and what encourages them to write...." Parent

"[T]he district decision-makers don't exactly all the time know what's best for the students themselves, and we're the ones that are sitting there for eight hours. So I feel like just having that feeling of the students because I don't want a decision to be made where it's not made for me to have a better education, you know what I mean? So I think a student being on the team, not just a student, multiple students, to get that variety of perspectives... is very much needed ...-only because they want to do what's best for the student, and having a student voice there will make it easier to find out what it is."—Student

This student was clear-eyed about adults' preferring solutions that are convenient for them, sometimes at the expense of what students feel they need.

"Sometimes it's not always the benefit of the students, if you get what I'm saying by that. But it's just nice because it's all about the students on this one [project]. Like, how can we perform better in our writing skills? You know what I mean? It's just a really comforting feeling, I guess, because it's like, "Oh, nice. This is for us."... I'm just happy that... [t]he students are able to talk with each other....[The planned solution], it's a really good way for students to connect on personal levels.... It's also a really good way for kids to learn how to speak to other kids. So I think it's really cool."  
–Student

## Keeping the Focus on Priority Students

Core team members understand that not only should students be included, but specifically students who are closest to the challenge, the ones who may be struggling with the challenge.

"[T]hey're the one that's struggling, not the teacher, not the principal. The students are the ones struggling so we need to be able to understand why they're struggling."–Parent

"[T]here has to be a place for voices of students who people roll their eyes [at] when that kid walks into the office. There has to be a place for students like that, no matter how crazy they might drive the administration. And again, it might not be them driving people crazy. It might be the way that we're seeing the situation. And that's why it's important for them to have a place or a space to share their views"–Teacher

Consistently including the priority students in the Inclusive Innovation process was difficult. The Core teams at times wavered in maintaining a clear focus on who the priority students were that would benefit from the solution they were working on.

“Well, I think we started out very clear in knowing who our primary demographic was, right? Who’s the primary target population that we’re trying to serve? ... But I feel that there towards the end,... we suddenly lost track of who we’re targeting because now I feel like we’re talking about a whole different target of students. The engagement of the students that we were talking about there towards the end, I felt really moved away [from] who we really started talking about....”–Parent

“I’m thinking about all kinds of different types of students because no students are the same....-You have students who care about school, and then you have students who are like, ‘Why am I here?’ So we need to kind of get a few of them and say, ‘Hey, why do you feel this way?’ Maybe there’s an issue beyond that. Nobody sees why they struggle in school. Unbeknownst to them, maybe they have a learning disability or dyslexia. There’s so many factors into why students don’t care. Or there could be problems at home, unfortunately.... Not that we’re stereotyping them, but we see the issue that’s going on with them, and we want them to feel included. We want to hear you out. We want to see why you don’t like school and why you don’t like writing and all that stuff.  
–Parent

"[T]he students who are priority students, it would be even more challenging to get them to come forth and say, ‘Well, this is really why I don't like writing,’ or ‘This is why I don't like writing in school,’ or ‘This is what I feel my teachers don't really understand about me,’ right? ...I think there's a lot of challenges with that. But I think we could have benefited by having more authentic student voice and student voice from the target audience."–Community member

“I don’t think there was anything blatantly disrespectful or things that disregarded their opinion. But I think that it would have been, I think, nicer for within our Core team to have a more personal conversation with students that were a priority. So I think this goes back to possibly having more students on our Core team.... I think I would have liked to see us having more discussions with students, like the groups that we had to talk about with students, because I do think that we were kind of limited in what students we got to talk to.... I just think I would have liked to see or to find different ways to find priority students because, again, I don't know if all of the students that I got to talk to personally would be considered priority students.”—Student

The students on the Core team themselves understood that they were not the priority students, and they both advocated for more diverse student involvement and stretched themselves to represent students unlike them.

“We got all the resources we needed to do well in school. We have loving parents at home. We come from two-parent households. We never really have to worry about whether there's going to be food on the table. And we live in houses, which a lot of people don't really get to. They have to figure out whether they're going to get rent paid this month or not, whether they're going to get evicted. So I think having students from a lot of different viewpoints who face different struggles could have really helped put racial equity and equity, in general, as the main viewpoint.”  
—Student

“Well, I think I had, hopefully, a good standing with it only because I didn’t just think about myself.... I wouldn’t say very confident writer, but I am pretty confident in my writings. It’s got me places, it’s got me awards.... But I always kept in mind my friends and also other students because a lot of them aren’t as confident in writing as I am. Every time a [state] test would come up, they’d be like, ‘I don’t want to do the writing portion of it....’-and I was like, ‘Okay. That’s okay. You got it.’ But just because I’ve had that experience with those type of kids and those type of friends, I feel like it just opened my eyes and it opened the way I can talk about it.”

–Student

## Conditions Supporting Student Voice

Participants pointed to several factors that supported students’ voices being central to Inclusive Innovation. These factors mitigated the challenges above, to some extent, although much remains to be done.

### Intentional Facilitation to Elevate Student Voice

Several different aspects of facilitation provided openings for students, including placing extra weight on students’ input, having external facilitators, and achieving a critical mass of students.

**Weighting student input.** For key decisions, such as naming the priority problem and ranking potential solution concepts to design further, we used protocols that gave student votes more weight. For example, students might receive two votes for each vote that adults had. When asked whether and how decisions might have been different without student participation, students and community members identified the weighting as significant.

“[W]hen we had that student feedback later on... where they rank those different projects that we came up with, absolutely, I think it would have been different if we hadn’t included them.”

–Community member

We also deliberately showed results by stakeholder type so that any differences in perspectives between students and adults was transparent to Core team members and the Core team could make a decision that recognized and prioritized the student choices.

**External facilitation.** While including student voice is quickly gaining ground as a taken-for-granted value, what that means and to what degree students have influence over any given decision nonetheless varies widely. Core team members pointed out that external facilitation may support more authentic inclusion of student voice.

“I think they [district] also see the importance and value in student voice ... because they do throw things around, like voice and choice... But is it really there? ...and it was nice because the district didn't control it [process], ...so they really did have to sit back and take it all in. And I think that's only beneficial.”—Teacher

“So I think the Digital Promise team did just perfectly on executing the student's voice. That was the whole part of the piece. They took even everyone's opinions on the little meetings that we'd put together.... And I was like, 'That's really cool,' because it's just showing that they're pushing the student voice.”—Student

**Critical mass.** The Core team conducted its work as a whole group and in smaller breakout groups. The small groups alternated between mixed stakeholder groups and affinity groups. When students were able to convene by themselves to marshal their thoughts and arguments, they felt more confident and felt that they could represent their perspectives in a way that was heard by the adults.

“[B]eing able to talk as students and really discuss the problem. Because we have our own slang as Gen Z members, so some of the things I say, my dad is like, 'What?' Or other adults will be like, 'What's she saying?' So being able to talk one on one with another student... It really helped us hash out the ideas and make them into actual ideas before we presented them to the adults.”—Student

## Adult Champions for Student Voice

Unequal power dynamics are inherent in any situation where students are brought together with adults who have authority as parents, civic leaders, and most particularly as teachers, principals, and district administrators. Students' expression of how they initially felt intimidated reflects those power dynamics, as well as the desire to have more critical mass as a student group in the Inclusive Innovation process.

Adult champions advocating for student voice with other adults in particular can directly address those power dynamics.

“Like at the dinner meeting, [Digital Promise staff] were talking about how grateful they were to have my voice there because I was a big part of the whole process. And even when we’re just on regular calls, [Core team co leaders] would just both really tune in on what I had to say. Everyone did, honestly. [Our principal, community member]. Everyone on the team knew I had to be a part... -and they wanted to check with me for validation before they did anything further.”—Student

“I feel like I was a little bit intimidated. So sometimes it was hard to just kind of hop on and just kind of give my opinion. So they [co-leaders] really made sure to kind of ask me and give me the space to actually speak and give my opinion.”—Student

In contrast, one community member reflected that the adults on the Core team could have supported students’ participation more.

“I felt there was more we probably could have done to encourage [student on Core team] to contribute more— to establish that everybody here is equally important to the process, right. Student voices, even though we emphasize that a lot, I think it’s hard to create an environment where students feel comfortable in being completely honest and forthcoming with their thoughts because they’re used to deferring to adults.”—Community member

## Small and Consistent Actions Conveying Significance of Student Voice

As students themselves expressed, they are not used to being heard regardless of how unjust such imbalance may seem. Beyond feeling intimidated initially in meetings with more adults than students, it is understandable that they might also be skeptical that their voices will matter, despite adults’ espousing that they do. Consistently demonstrating that what they are saying is making a difference at

each step of the process helped students recognize that adult intentions were genuine and that this time, the results might more accurately reflect student needs and priorities.

“I feel like [students] felt very nervous, but then their confidence was growing because, really and truly, we were asking, ‘What do you all think?’ And that kept being repeated until I think they felt very important. And I felt like they were being listened to and honored.”  
–Teacher

“My ideas, they were used to make the statements [e.g., focus group questions, shared problem and outcome statements]. I feel like all of our student ideas were used to create bigger ideas toward main goals.”–Student

“I really saw sometimes even our exact words [were] reflected in the outcomes, or things we had been talking about reflected in the outcomes. So yeah, I really saw different things reflected.”–Student

“I think sometimes there was times where the adults didn’t really understand what the kids were saying because we have our own way of expressing things in the very nuanced or very down-to-earth or sometimes morbid way of saying it.... So it felt like sometimes they didn't understand us, but there was always a chance to clear it up and have them understand.”–Student

## Explicit and Multiple Openings for Priority Students

Although sufficient involvement of priority students is an area for improvement, several explicit steps created openings for more participation. Focus groups with priority students delved into the root causes of the respective challenge each pilot project tackled. The student focus groups were led by students on the Core team, following a protocol that the Core team generated together.



"[T]hat made it feel like the student's perspective was a lot more important than maybe even I thought it was because when we really invited all those students in and they were all giving their opinions, I was like, 'This is really cool.' It's just different perspectives and I feel like they were really honoring that."—Student

At another stage, priority students gathered together for a design sprint to further specify the emerging solutions. As one teacher inferred after seeing the feedback from the students:

"[T]he students were grouped together for the discussions, and so I think they felt more confident. We still had one of your Digital Promise persons in the group, but they were able to kind of talk back and forth [about] what works or whatever. And I think they grew themselves. It wasn't like they were having to defend themselves against an adult or an administrator or a teacher. They just felt like we've got to come up with these great solutions, what works for us. And they felt very empowered to do that. It was very obvious."—Teacher

## Discussion and Reflections

Overall, students who participated on the Core teams reported having positive experiences.

"It meant really letting my voice shine because I come from an Indian viewpoint. I'm Indian by race, I guess, from the subcontinent of India. And our voice doesn't really get heard a lot. I don't know if it's because we don't really talk that much or because nobody really asks us our opinion, but that meant using my viewpoint as somebody from the subcontinent of India and someone who's a refugee to the fullest advantage, and making sure my voice gets heard." Student

"I don't think there were any challenges for me, honestly.... I did contribute into the discussion because I wouldn't say I was forced to, but everyone wanted my opinion on it. And it felt really good. It did. But it made me feel like I had a bigger voice than I thought I did before, so that was really cool."—Student

"We got a chance to talk, which in meetings with adults is pretty rare because they always view us as little kids.... But I felt like our voice [was] getting really heard and adults [were] actually listening to us for the first time.... I saw me and [another student] having a large voice and being able to really tell the adults what was happening from our viewpoint, which we really hadn't gotten a chance to do before.... But I felt our voice getting heard a lot."  
–Student

Notwithstanding these positive experiences, the common challenges we experienced across the Initial Inclusive Innovation pilot projects prompt additional considerations as we evolve the model in the coming year.

***How do we intentionally cultivate the readiness of adults in the system and community to listen to students?*** Although the adult participants espouse the value of including student voice and genuinely want to do so, many existing norms that shape how adults interact with youth—resting on ingrained power hierarchies in school and in society at large—means that adults need to shift mindsets, learn new ways of communicating and listening to youth, be vulnerable to hearing critique, and be willing to try potential solutions that are inconvenient or complicated or disrupt the existing routines.

***How do we prepare students to take on these roles and dampen the intimidation students told us they felt?*** This question may be even more crucial in working with priority students or students who are not in typical student leadership roles (student council, team athletes, club organizers, performing arts, etc.). As more than one Core team member pointed out, students who have been left out, who are not seen as positive contributors or academically engaged may not trust the adults in the system to hear and accept what they have to say.

***What are equity pause points we can reinforce, where the process does not continue without substantial input and leadership from a range of priority students?*** Student schedules being what they are likely means that flexibility in timing and multiple ways for students to be involved will be necessary. With this flexibility, the Core team members and facilitators need to be transparent about where priority students have had input, where they have not had enough opportunity to contribute and give direction, and where the process needs to defer to student leadership.

These are dilemmas that we know others in the field are also working on and have different potential solutions to offer. As the pilot projects evolved over the last 18 months, we have experimented with different strategies in our own continuous improvement process. In conversation with others spearheading student voice and leadership, we intend to learn and refine those approaches in the next iterations of the Inclusive Innovation model.