Recruiting Students for Student-Powered Improvement

Recruiting students for improvement efforts is exciting and energizing. Thoughtful recruitment requires careful planning, discussion, and a great deal of time. It also requires flexibility when initial strategies need adjustment. Avoid the tendency to underestimate what it takes to equitably recruit students *and* sustain their involvement.

Eight Considerations for Recruiting Students

1. Carefully consider the who
2. Involve youth in designing the outreach and recruitment
3. Make participation irresistible and expectations clear yet flexible
4. Provide compensation
5. Diversify your outreach and information streams
6. Anchor in relationships and trust
7. If there is an application process, make it youth-friendly and strength-based
8. Provide families with information

These considerations were developed from the work of Community Design Partners as well as that of our colleagues across the country, including:

- Baltimore City Schools
- Center for Supportive Schools
- Charleston School District
- Dallas County Promise
- Douglas County ESD
- Eskolta
- High Tech High
- Impact Tulsa
- Northwest Regional ESD
- Tulsa Changemakers

COMMUNITY DESIGN PARTNERS

1. Carefully Consider the Who

"I think that the struggle is that we have these ways to hear students' voices, but it is often only a select group of voices adults listen to. How do we get the whole wide spectrum of student voices?"
                                        -Mia, student from New Tech Network

An important consideration is *which* students are included in improvement efforts. Who are the students who have historically been excluded, ignored, or marginalized by school systems? Which students hold disenfranchised social, cultural, and political identities such as race, sexuality, class, gender, or ability? Attending consciously to who is invited to participate and who is not is central to disrupting and reimagining more equitable systems. Without this focus, we risk reinforcing the status quo.

Another consideration is the number of students to include. Do not default to adding one or two students to an adult space and call it good enough. Community Design Partners, for example, promotes the 2:1 ratio rule - at least two students for every adult in a space in order to increase student comfort and truly shift the power dynamics. Overall, never expect a student to "go it alone," and always make sure they know that participation is voluntary.

> **Example. Tulsa Changemakers** wrote down their recruitment philosophy:
>
> In Changemakers, we believe that the only true "qualifications" for being in the program are that you want to make a positive impact in your school and community AND you are willing to work hard towards it. For that reason, this guide is written with the assumption that all students at your school should be given the opportunity to prove themselves qualified with regards to those two qualifications. If you have other qualifications, ensure they are necessary and not unintentionally filtering for privilege. An example of a reasonable additional qualification is filtering for 6th graders at an elementary school that goes up to 6th grade because the program is being reserved as a special opportunity for the oldest kids at the school. Examples of potentially harmful additional qualifications are a set grade point average or disciplinary requirements. We have seen students that regularly struggle in traditional educational settings, both academically and behaviorally, thrive in a more democratic afterschool space.
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> **Examples.** In the case studies **Empathy Interviews** and **Design Camp**, team members were given specific guidance for which students to recruit.

2. Involve youth in designing the outreach and recruitment

Who knows the preferences and perspectives of students best? Students, of course. Students can and should be part of designing and implementing recruitment strategies.

>Example. At the Center for Supportive Schools, two recent high school graduates designed all of the recruitment strategies for the next year's participants for the **Led Students Lead Advisory Board**.

>Example. **Tulsa Changemakers** asked members of the youth advisory board to advise on the recruitment strategy for a new program.

>Example. Students at **Northwest Regional ESD** identified other students to participate in empathy interviews.

## 3. Make participation irresistible and expectations clear & flexible

Why would students want to participate in student-powered improvement? Think carefully through the irresistible reasons for participation. These might include:
- To make change and influence their community
- To be part of a community
- Financial incentives
- College or high school credit
- Skill building/leadership development

Youth also need to know the requirements for participation and whether there is flexibility. It is rare for a student-powered improvement idea to stay static from the first vision; what participation looks like often changes to be adaptive to the context and needs of participants.

>Example. My Brothers' Keepers with Impact Tulsa laid out four compelling reasons for participating and the participation expectations in this document.

>Example. The Center for Supportive Schools used social media posts to explain the what and the why of the **Let Students Lead Advisory**.
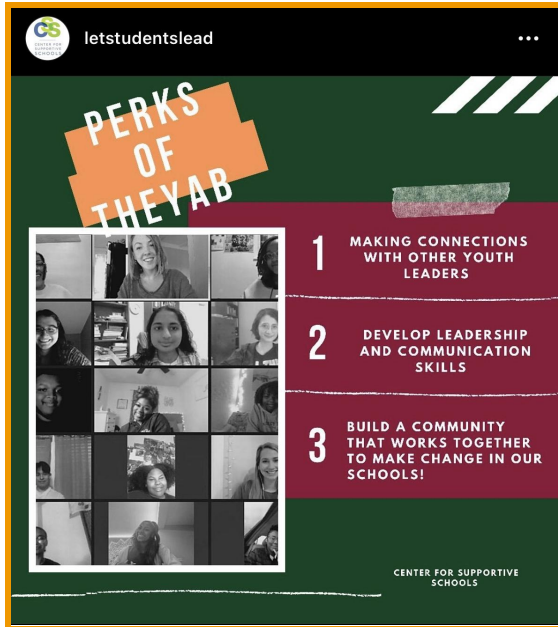
Example. High Tech High Fellows required several individualized, direct connections with each youth in order to make sure they understood the Fellowship and wanted to participate.

Example. Douglas County ESD outreach included paid information sessions; students received $50 simply to come and hear about the program and participate in example activities to get a feel for what participation might be like. The students who decided to participate were then invited to recruit their peers and were paid for each student they brought in.

4. Provide compensation

There are so many reasons to compensate students for their involvement in improvement efforts. When students provide their time, expertise, energy, and labor, they should be compensated. If someone is unconvinced, it might be as simple as asking, "Would an adult do this for free?" In an inspiring example from Baltimore City Schools, students and teachers who participated in a five-day design camp received the *same* stipend amount.

Often there are systemic barriers to compensating students. District policies, for example, might not allow direct payment to students. Tax laws require W2s to be collected for compensation over a certain amount. So many organizations have found ways to disrupt or change these barriers. Some examples are below.

Cash. Cash should always be the first method considered. Unless there are systemic obstacles that can't be overcome, cash offers the most flexibility and usefulness for students and their families.

> **Example.** Northwest Regional Education Services District paid students a $500 stipend via a mailed check at the end of their participation in the network.

> **Example.** Community Design Partners hired students as employees, following all local and national policies for contracting with minors, and put them on the payroll.

> **Example.** For a design camp in Baltimore City Schools funded by a foundation grant, students received a stipend via Cash App at the end of the project. To simplify the process, the funds were sent from the partner organization.

> **Example.** Douglas County Educational Services District in Oregon directly provided students with payment (a check) after attending three sessions.

Gift Cards. Gift cards, especially flexible cards like VISA that students can use anywhere, are an option when there are systemic barriers to providing cash.

> **Example.** Students who participated in a student-teacher design collaborative in Charleston, South Carolina, were sent $200-$500 VISA gift cards in the mail at the end of the experience.

> **Example.** Students who participated in one-time feedback circles with Community Design Partners were sent electronic $20 VISA gift cards immediately after the event.

Credit recovery/class credit. Some places have classes dedicated to student-powered improvement. In the Tillamook School District, students received credit for participating in an improvement class. Another school district in Oregon is currently designing an improvement class for credit recovery.

Swag. Providing meaningful, useful, and valuable swag is the final option when none of the other options work. Before you decide what kind of swag to purchase, make sure to ask the youth what is appealing or useful. For example, students consulted in one project said they preferred to be part of a drawing for an iPad than to each receive smaller swag.

Providing transportation funds and meals should be a given, too!

A final note: Make sure to follow local, state, and national tax laws and regulations for compensating minors. Consider questions such as:
- At what point do we need to collect a W2 from students and report their compensation?
- What are the employment terms for minors if we are considering them employees?

5. Diversify your outreach and information streams

If you're relying only on email as the way to reach students, think again! Investigate what communication platforms are most used by the youth whose participation you're trying to recruit and sustain. Let the students lead the way and select their platforms. Make sure to consider language needs and adapt communication to meet those needs. Be flexible and adaptive as the participants' needs change over time.

> **Example. [Let Students Lead Youth Advisory Board](#)** used multiple platforms for recruitment and ongoing communication including Instagram, group texts, and email to reach their students.

> **Example. [Douglas County ESD](#)** used Facebook and personal outreach as part of their recruitment strategy. Once students were recruited, they established a group text thread and also sent individualized text reminders three days and one day before every event.

6. Anchor in relationships and trust

"I felt so supported when my teacher reached out and asked me to be part of this network. I never thought I'd be asked to be part of something like this." -Alejandra, high school student

"The best way is for a living person to say, 'I think you'd be great for this.'" Program director, Tulsa Changemakers

Recruitment is often most successful when outreach comes from a person a student knows and trusts. This strategy, however, must also be grounded in consideration #1: being intentional about the *who*, so outreach doesn't default to the same students who are always tapped for involvement. Another successful strategy is for students to recruit other students, rather than this process being facilitated by an adult.

> **Example.** For **[Design Camp](#)** through Dallas County Promise, outreach to youth was done by school counselors who knew their students well. They personally connected with each student to explain the experience, express their opinion that the student would be a great fit, and answer questions.

> **Example.** Douglas County ESD organizers reached out to local partners to form student connections when they did not have direct relationships. For example, they worked with a local organization that provided services to LGTBQ+ youth. Once student recruitment got underway, the participants were then compensated for gathering more of their peers.

7. If there is an application process, make it youth-friendly and strengths-based

Many examples of student-powered improvement should not require an application process. In fact, across the case studies in the **student-powered improvement collection**, only a handful involved an application process.

When applications are necessary, consider these questions and advice from Tulsa Changemakers about the application process.

- Do you want an application or is it an open sign-up? What purpose does an application have for your process?
- Is going to you directly a necessary step to receive an application or registration form? Will this be a larger barrier for some students than others? How else might a student access the application?
- If you will have a competitive application process, how can you make an application that is rooted in the genuine criteria for success (wanting to make a difference and willing to work towards it) while not overvaluing criteria that are not necessary for success (writing ability, other academic ability, thriving behaviorally in a general classroom setting)?
- Ensure the application questions only ask for information relevant to success in the program (wanting to make a difference and willing to work towards it). If you identify other criteria for success be clear about that criteria to applicants.
- If you ask about prior experience on your application, be clear that this it is not requirement for acceptance. Some students might read it and see themselves as unqualified because they have nothing to put
- Allow for answers to be read and responded to in every language spoken at your school.
- Allow for students to submit videos or participate in interviews instead of written responses or in addition to written responses and make clear why you are doing that.

  Example. Eskolta's YPAR application process was designed to highlight the strengths of young people. "We set up recruitment so that all youth could do well and be positioned as experts," said a staff member. The process included options, such as submitting a short video or a written application.

8. Provide families with information

As students become interested in student-powered improvement opportunities, make sure to share the exciting information with their families. Consider:

- What might families want and need to know about this opportunity?
- Do we want or need passive or active consent for any of the activities?
- What are ways to involve families, too?

Sample Parent Letter About Empathy Interviews from a School District

Dear Families,

Good afternoon!

I am writing to you about an exciting project that our 9th grade communities are undertaking. As you may recall, your child and about 160 other Grant students share the same Physics, Inquiry and English teachers. We all work together to ensure that your child has a positive start to their high school experience.

One of the many things we are starting this year is an empathy interview process. An empathy interview is a structured way for students to provide us with feedback about their 9th grade experience.

In an empathy interview structure, we will invite small groups of students to share their thoughts and experiences. Due to the large number of students this year, it is unlikely that we will be able to conduct empathy interviews with all students. That said, the insights we gain from the students who do participate will benefit **all** students in our community.

Basically the way it works is:

- We invite your child to participate.
- Your child decides if they want to participate.*
- A teacher meets one-on-one with the student.
- The teachers ask the students questions and listen intently to their answers, taking notes & recording (with the student's permission) using a voice app.
- Teachers will analyze students' stories to look for trends in feedback, and create a plan to address them.

The data (students' comments, stories, experiences and feedback) we collect will not be published on any outward-facing documents, i.e. school websites, continuing education classes/assignments, conferences, public meetings, etc. When shared with other staff members, it will be anonymous.

We are very excited to start this process!

Sincerely,

The Teaching Team

*If you have any questions about this process, or do not wish your child to participate, please contact XX

For more information on student-powered improvement, visit studentpoweredimprovement.com or contact info@communitydesignpartners.com.

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