



STUDENT-POWERED  
IMPROVEMENT



# Building Student-Powered Classrooms

A guide to partnering with students to improve schools



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“I wish I could scream from the rooftops, ‘Y’all, this is worth it. Take the time to do this!’ The proof is there, and they are asking for it. If a kid is asking for it they will be so invested.”

– Ms. Perro, humanities teacher



“

“This process means I could just breathe a little bit easier in the classroom. I could look out and everybody’s interacting. And they’re working. Students are collaborating with each other and they’re taking ownership of their work.”

– Ms. Ashby, math teacher

“

“Students are most impacted by the problems we’re trying to solve. So I think that students designing solutions for the problems that they’re most connected to is really important.”

– Mia, student



“

“We think that adults know what’s best for us but the reality is we know what’s best for us too.”



– Student

# About Student-Powered Improvement

Student-Powered Improvement is an approach to change where educators design solutions with students, not for students. The student-powered improvement framework includes four different ways to engage students in improvement efforts: empathize with students, involve students, share decision-making with students, and student-led improvement efforts.

This guide and the website, [studentpoweredimprovement.com](https://studentpoweredimprovement.com), was developed by Kari Nelsestuen, Julie Smith, and Daniel Ramirez from Community Design Partners. Reach out to us at [info@communitydesignpartners.com](mailto:info@communitydesignpartners.com) to share your story, ask questions, or explore ways we can support Student-Powered Improvement in your context.

Visit our website

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## Acknowledgments

This guide is the result of many years of learning with and from educators and students from schools and organizations across the country. Special thanks to the countless students, teachers, administrators, and staff from schools and organizations featured in student-powered improvement case studies. Read about their brilliant student-powered schools and classrooms in the case studies at [studentpoweredimprovement.com](https://studentpoweredimprovement.com).



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# Introduction

There is a growing call in schools to not only hear from students, but to partner together with students to make change. When adults design with students instead of for students to make change, powerful shifts in learning are possible.

 <p><b>Student-driven solutions</b></p> <p>Involve students in creating solutions that address their specific needs and challenges.</p>	 <p><b>Increased belonging</b></p> <p>Value every student's identity, strengths, and needs as a key practice.</p>	 <p><b>Shared power</b></p> <p>Trust students as active partners in decision-making.</p>	 <p><b>Student agency</b></p> <p>Co-create environments where students can profoundly shape their schools and communities.</p>
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Today, educators have access to more student voice tools and strategies than ever. There are dozens of valid and reliable surveys to collect students' perspectives on a range of topics in classrooms and beyond. Empathy interviews, listening sessions, focus groups, student panels, and other qualitative methods are also commonly used to hear from students.

**But then what?** Gathering students' perspectives is only a starting point. To truly engage in student-powered improvement, there must be evidence that students are not just listened to, but are participants in and influencers of change. In other words, improvement with students, rather than for students.

This guide is for educators who want to engage with students to unpack student perspectives and design solutions together. The guide provides in-depth descriptions and protocols to:

 Collect student voice data

 Brainstorm solutions

 Facilitate collective sensemaking

 Design solutions together

Each lesson plan and strategy can be modified to fit your context. And, while the guide is designed for classroom settings, the content is applicable to any context where youth are co-designers.

As you explore this guide, we hope you'll keep in mind the six guiding principles of student-powered improvement. Look for more information about the guiding principles at [studentpoweredimprovement.com](http://studentpoweredimprovement.com).



As you build a student-powered classroom, we hope you will see the impacts that so many other educators have reported from their work to do the same.


# Collect student voice data

If you are reading this guide, you probably fall into one of two categories:

- 1 You already have student voice data
- 2 You want to start collecting student voice data

If you're in the first category it likely means that your school or district already has a student voice tool such as a student survey or regular student interviews. If you can access the tool and the most recent results, please skip to the next section of this guide to begin collective sensemaking.

If you're in the second category and want to begin collecting student voice data, we're excited to offer several options to help you get started. Below we outline several simple steps for collecting student voice data.



**Know your purpose.** What do you want to learn from students? It might be their sense of belonging, the strengths and challenges of instructional approaches, classroom climate, or a range of other topics. Whether your purpose is a broad inquiry or focused on a narrow topic, articulate the clear purpose of hearing from students.

**Choose a method.** There are multiple methods to collect students' perspectives on a range of topics: surveys, exit tickets, empathy interviews, listening sessions, focus groups, and more. Decide which method best matches your purpose and context. Factors to consider include:

- Who do we need to hear from? Do we need student voice data from all students or a group of students?
- How much time do we have? Methods like surveys reveal information faster than qualitative methods like interviews or focus groups.
- What's the purpose? Interviews or focus groups might be a better match if you are looking for more detailed information from students.
- What methods will students engage in? For example, some schools report high survey fatigue among students. If this is the case, consider other methods that students might be more apt to engage with.
- What opportunities already exist? Are there already methods that I can add to? For example, if the school is conducting empathy interview questions, can I add one question to their protocol for our class?

**Choose or design the specific data collection instrument.** There are many existing instruments that you can use or find inspiration to create your own. Choose an instrument that fits your purpose and is easy to use.



### Student surveys

There are dozens of excellent student surveys that exist for various purposes. [This survey compendium](#) describes many different student surveys; many are free or low-cost. One survey commonly used at the classroom level is [PERTS Elevate](#). This survey measures research-based learning conditions in the classroom such as meaningful work and classroom community.

**If you want to create your own survey, consider these hints:**

- Start small (less than 8 questions)
- Borrow inspiration and well-tested items from existing surveys
- Use words and phrases that students understand
- Keep it anonymous (don't collect student names)
- Create an online survey (e.g., with Google Forms) for fast analysis



### Exit tickets

You likely already have experience giving students exit tickets after a lesson, exam, or event. Use your next exit ticket to collect more student opinions and perspectives.



### Empathy interviews

Empathy interviews are one-on-one conversations that use open-ended questions to elicit stories about specific experiences that uncover students' needs. Learn about and plan your empathy interviews with the [Empathy Interview Guide](#).



### Listening sessions or focus groups

Who are the students you most need to hear from? Gather a small group of students for a listening session or focus group. Learn hints and tricks for these methods in the [Community Engagement Guide](#).

**Collect Data.** You're ready to collect student voice data! Make sure you are transparent with students about the purpose of the data collection and what will happen with the results. Consider what role students themselves might play in choosing, designing, and facilitating the data collection.

Once you have student voice data, move to the next section: Facilitate Collective Sensemaking.



# Facilitate Collective Sensemaking

Collective sensemaking is the process of generating shared understanding among a group of people. It involves sharing diverse perspectives and co-creating meaning in order to arrive at a common understanding of the issues at hand . In this case, students are engaged in collective sensemaking about student voice data.

## In student-powered classrooms, collective sensemaking:

- Promotes collaboration and cooperation. Students and adults must actively listen to each other and work together to build a shared understanding which can help build trust and promote collaboration.
- Leverages the wisdom of students. By bringing together students with different perspectives and experiences, collective sensemaking taps into the collective intelligence of the group.
- Leads to more inclusive solutions. Collective sensemaking can help ensure that solutions are more inclusive as we take into account the needs and interests of those most impacted by the changes we design together.






How can teachers and students apply collective sensemaking to student voice data? The rest of this section offers a protocol for students and educators to unpack data together and prioritize what's most important to address.



<sup>1</sup>Definition adapted from the Center for Healthier Children, Families & Communities, University of California Los Angeles. [Collective Sensemaking | Center for Healthier Children, Families & Communities \(ucla.edu\)](https://www.chcc.ucla.edu/collective-sensemaking/)

## Lesson Plan: Collective Sensemaking

As you prepare this lesson, consider how students might play a role in planning and facilitating the activities.

 <b>Purpose</b>	Students and educators review student voice data together to reach a shared understanding and identify priorities for change
 <b>Audience</b>	A group of 4-40 students with their teacher and/or other educators
 <b>Suggested Time</b>	About 50 minutes
 <b>Materials</b>	Student voice data for review in a format everyone can access Sticky notes Stickers or markers for voting Optional: relevant slides from <a href="#">slide deck</a>
 <b>Pre-Work</b>	Prepare student voice data in a format that students can access and understand. If there is a lot of data, consider whether you want to narrow the amount of data for this activity.

Topic (Minutes)	Details   Activity
<b>Purpose</b> (3 min)	<p>Explain the purpose and importance of collective sensemaking and give an overview of the lesson plan.</p> <p>Example: Last week you all took a 10-question survey about this class [add details]. Today we're going to make sense of the data together and see if there's something we want to attend to and change to improve things about this class. This is called collective sensemaking [add more details about this process].</p>
<b>Agreements</b> (5 min +)	<p>Review or create community agreements together.</p> <p>If your class has established agreements for working together, review them now.</p> <p>If the class does not have existing agreements, add time to establish some. You might start with this list and ask students to discuss what these mean and add more:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Listen to understand</li> <li>• Disagreement is okay</li> <li>• Step up, step back</li> <li>• Take care of each other</li> </ul>

<p><b>Collective sensemaking: Describe the data</b> (15 min +)</p>	<p>This section has three parts.</p> <p>1. Develop a shared understanding of language. For example, if a question asked, “How meaningful is work in this class?” students might discuss how students interpret the word meaningful.</p> <p>Second, share the results and support students as they learn to read the data. This might mean teaching them how to read a graph or table, or showing how qualitative survey items are organized.</p> <p>Third, in small groups have students share descriptive sentences about the data. Provide sentence stems such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ___ percent of students reported _____.</li> <li>• ___ out of ___ students say _____.</li> <li>• Across all items, _____ was highest/lowest.</li> <li>• There are ___ comments from students about _____.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Collective sensemaking: Positives</b> (5 min+)</p>	<p>With a partner, ask students to write one sticky note about something positive in the data set:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A positive thing we see in the data is _____.</li> </ul> <p>Ask for some partner groups to share their sticky notes.</p>
<p><b>Collective sensemaking: Problems</b> (10 min+)</p>	<p>Discuss problems raised by the data.</p> <p>With the same partner, ask students to write one sticky note about something in the data set they view as a problem:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Something we see in the data that is a problem or issue is _____.</li> </ul> <p>Have each partner group share and post their sticky notes on the whiteboard, clustering similar ideas together.</p>
<p><b>Collective sensemaking: Prioritizing</b> (10 min +)</p>	<p>Review the clusters of problems so everyone understands them.</p> <p>Have each student vote for 1-2 <u>problems</u> they most want to address in the class. They can use stickers or markers to make their vote anonymous.</p> <p>Discuss the results. What is the top issue that our group wants to address together? If there is not a clear winner, discuss the top choices until you can narrow down to one or vote again.</p> <p>Capture this issue for the next step: Brainstorming solutions.</p>

 **Reflect**

Reflect on the collective sensemaking process:

- How did this process feel?
- Was everyone’s voice heard?
- What did we learn?

# Brainstorm Solutions

It is time to brainstorm solutions to the problem students prioritized during the Collective Sensemaking activity.

While brainstorming is a fairly straightforward and well-known activity, there are two secret ingredients to its success:

- A good “How Might We” question to frame the brainstorm
- A collective commitment to the rules of brainstorming



## How Might We Questions

Successful brainstorms start with a strong How Might We (HMW) question. HMW questions can be easily created by transferring a statement into a question. The table below shows several examples:

Statement	How Might We question
This teacher cares about my life outside of school. (survey item)	How might we increase opportunities for our teachers to learn about our lives outside of school?
In this class, we do meaningful work, not busy work. (survey item)	How might work be more meaningful in this class?
Many students feel nervous at the start of a new year. (empathy interview finding)	How might we increase student comfort at the beginning of a school year?
Students want to feel a deeper connection to other students. (empathy interview finding)	How might we increase connections among students?
It is hard to catch up when I’m absent. (interview finding)	How might we better support students when they return from an absence?



Before brainstorming, engage students in additional collective sensemaking around words or phrases in the HMW question. For example, students might need time to discuss what meaningful work looks like, sounds like, and feels like in the example above.

Be on the lookout for HMW questions that may not work:

**When the HMW is too broad:** How might we improve the mental health of all students?

**When the HMW puts blame on students:** How might we get students to care more?

**If the HMW is outside our control:** How might we get more school funding?



## Rules of Brainstorming

Noisy. Collaborative. Generative. These are some descriptors of what you might see and hear in a room where brainstorming is going well. In successful brainstorming sessions, participants follow these guiding principles:






- Avoid judgment
- Encourage wild ideas
- Build on the ideas of others
- Stay focused on the topic
- One conversation at a time
- Be visual
- Go for quantity

Brainstorming often does not come naturally to people who are used to staying within the constraints of the existing system. The lesson plan includes opportunities to review the rules of brainstorming and practice with a fun example.



## Lesson Plan: Brainstorm

As you prepare this lesson, consider how students might play a role in planning and facilitating the activities.

 <b>Purpose</b>	Students brainstorm ideas related to the issue they've prioritized working on and select one to try
 <b>Audience</b>	A group of 4-40 students with their teacher and/or other educators
 <b>Suggested Time</b>	30-40 minutes
 <b>Materials</b>	HMW question Sticky notes Optional: relevant slides from slide deck [LINK WHEN DONE]
 <b>Pre-Work</b>	Prepare the HMW question from the top problem identified by students during collective sensemaking Set up brainstorm stations with sticky notes, markers, and chart paper

Topic (Minutes)	Details   Activity
<b>Intro</b> (2 min)	<p>Introduce the rules of brainstorming</p> <p>Engage in a fun warm-up to practice the rules of brainstorming.</p> <p>Ask students in small groups to collaboratively generate ideas per group for the question "How might we get more people to eat cake?"</p> <p>Share out a few ideas.</p> <p>Discuss what was easy and what was hard about brainstorming using these sentence stems:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Something that was easy about brainstorming was _____.</li> <li>• Something that was hard about brainstorming was _____.</li> </ul>
<b>Individual brainstorm</b> (4 min)	<p>Share the HMW statement with students and describe where it came from.</p> <p>Students individually spend four minutes brainstorming as many ideas as they can, with one idea per sticky note. This individual time encourages equity of voice across all students.</p>

<p><b>Small group brainstorm</b> (10 min +)</p>	<p>Form small groups (4-6 students) at brainstorm stations.</p> <p>Students share out their individual sticky notes, placing them on predetermined poster paper or a wall.</p> <p>Then, groups brainstorm as many more ideas as they can.</p> <p>Hint: Keep this fast-paced and encourage quantity.</p>
<p><b>Small group choice</b> (5 min +)</p>	<p>Each group chooses their top two ideas to share with the whole group.</p>
<p><b>Idea share</b> (5 min)</p>	<p>Each small group shares their top two ideas; place all shared ideas together somewhere in the room.</p>
<p><b>Top idea selection</b> (5-10 min)</p>	<p>From all the top ideas from the brainstorm, students select one idea to move to further design and implement in class.</p> <p>Students should choose an idea that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• They like</li> <li>• They believe will have an impact</li> <li>• Is realistic (can be implemented in the next few weeks)</li> </ul> <p>Consider anonymous voting as the strategy to select an idea so that each student participates.</p>



**Reflect**

Reflect on the brainstorming process:

- How did this process feel?
- Was everyone’s voice heard?
- How well did we do with the rules of brainstorming?
- What could we do better next time?

**Brainstorm resources:**

- If you have time, show this [brainstorming video](#) example and ask students to find evidence of the rules of brainstorming in the example.
- Have students act as “brainstorm observers” who will look for evidence of brainstorming rules in action and celebrate success.
- Check some additional brainstorming ideas [at IDEO](#).

# Design Solutions Together

Now it is time to design solutions together. Together is the key word in this phrase; when students and educators design together, the resulting solution will be stronger and more closely matched to students' authentic needs.

In this phase, students will design a prototype which means an early, fast, inexpensive version of an idea to test. Prototyping allows you to try an idea, get feedback from other people, and then improve the idea and try it again.

**There are three mindsets to embrace during prototyping:**

- **Bias to action.** Don't overthink it, just try it.
- **Start small.** Break down bigger ideas into smaller ones that are quickly achievable. Keep the idea small and the timeframe short.
- **Fail forward and learn.** Use failures as opportunities to learn.

For example, middle school students in an English class in Baltimore wanted to see more flexibility and choice in their learning. From their brainstorm, students voted for “students as teachers” and developed a prototype called “Freaky Friday,” referring to the role-switching movie. In their prototype, students became lesson leaders, discussion leaders, and game facilitators for 30 minutes of class on Fridays. To test their predictions about Freaky Friday, students designed a short survey with questions about student levels of engagement, enjoyment, and choice. After two weeks, they reviewed the survey data and made changes to their design based on what they learned.

More prototyping with student stories can be explored in the case studies, [Student-powered math classrooms](#) and [Classroom co-design](#).





## How to Build a Prototype

The key to collaborative design is to hear multiple perspectives on what the idea could look like and how it could be tested. The lesson plan in this guide has a very simple outline for students to plan the what, when, who, and how of the idea.

An essential part of planning is to make a prediction about what will happen when the prototype is implemented:

What do we predict will happen if we implement this idea?  
If we \_\_\_\_\_, we predict \_\_\_\_\_ will change/improve.

Predictions should be as specific as possible. Here are two examples:

- 1 Student prototype:** “Flex time.” Every Monday hold a 30-minute block for students to work on unfinished assignments and get individualized help.  
**Prediction:** There will be a 20% increase in the amount of assignments completed (from 42% to 62%).
- 2 Student prototype:** “Siesta.” Students design short 5-minute breaks during class such as music breaks, snack breaks, and chat breaks.  
**Prediction:** Student stress levels will decrease and their engagement during other times of class will increase.

With your help, students can then design a simple test that answers these questions:

How will we know if it is working?  
We will collect \_\_\_\_\_ data in order to understand if our prediction comes true.

Data sources might include: short surveys, observations, attendance data, assignment completion, student interviews, or more. For the two examples above, students would look at assignment completion to measure the prediction about “Flex time” and design a short survey about engagement and stress for “Siesta.” Encourage the data collection methods and tools to be as simple as possible.






## Learning from the prototype

After using the prototype for a few days or, at most, a few weeks, reflect on successes and challenges. Students can review the data they collected and discuss whether to adapt, adopt, or abandon the idea:

- **Adapt:** We’ve learned that the idea needs a few changes which we’ll make and then test again
- **Adopt:** We’ve learned that this idea was successful and we’re ready to use it regularly and/or spread it to other places
- **Abandon:** We’ve learned this idea doesn’t work as well as we hoped so we’ll move on to another idea

This is a great time to lean into the mindset of “fail forward and learn” and move into a second phase of testing an adapted—or brand new—prototype.

## Lesson Plan: Design Solutions Together

-  **Purpose** Students create a prototype of their idea and make a plan to test the idea
-  **Audience** A group of 4-40 students with their teacher and/or other educators
-  **Suggested Time** About 50 minutes
-  **Materials**
  - Optional: Relevant slides from slide deck
  - Optional: Handout for small group prototyping
-  **Pre-Work** Prepare prototyping materials for small groups

Topic (Minutes)	Details   Activity
<b>Overview</b> (5 min)	Introduce these concepts to students using information from this guide: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Design solutions together</li> <li>• Prototype</li> </ul> Show the winning idea students selected from the brainstorm
<b>Small group prototypes</b> (15 min)	Students do an individual quick write (2-3 minutes) to jot down their own ideas of what this idea could look like in terms of who, what, when, and how. Note: The slide deck contains a template you can use as a handout for this section. Then, divide students into small groups: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Students share their individual ideas</li> <li>2. The group discusses what they heard and collaboratively comes up with a single version of the idea, detailing who, what, when, and how using a four-square template.</li> <li>3. The group makes a prediction for their idea. If we _____, we predict _____ will change/improve.</li> <li>4. The group gives their idea a name</li> </ol> Note: The slide deck contains a template you can use as a handout for this section.
<b>Share prototypes</b> (8 min)	Each small group briefly shares their prototype with the whole group.

<p><b>Select a single prototype</b> (8 min)</p>	<p>Students select a single prototype to test.</p> <p>Tell students to consider these criteria in their selection. It must be:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Realistic: We can implement it in the next week</li> <li>• Impactful: This idea will have a positive impact on the things we're trying to change</li> </ul> <p>Students can vote for their favorite prototype with one of these two methods:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Anonymous voting: Each student has two stickers to post on their two favorite prototypes (not their own). The winning design moves forward or the top choices go into a runoff.</li> <li>• Table voting: Each table of students discusses the option and then votes as a table for one prototype (not their own). The winning design moves forward or the top choices go into a runoff.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Complete the prototype and test design</b> (14 min +)</p>	<p>Finalize all details of the prototype as a class. Make sure:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The who, what, when, and how are clear.</li> <li>• The prototype has a name.</li> <li>• The prediction statement is clear.</li> </ul> <p>Then, students discuss how to measure their prediction.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What data could we collect?</li> <li>• When and how could we collect it?</li> </ul> <p>Note: Designing the test might need more teacher support than other sections of this lesson.</p>



**Reflect**

Reflect on the following questions:

- How did this process feel?
- What was easy and what was hard?
- Was everyone's voice heard?
- What could we do better next time?

**Hold a review session 1-3 weeks later:**

<p><b>Topic</b> (Minutes)</p>	<p><b>Make a plan</b></p>
<p><b>Review</b> (5-20 min)</p>	<p><b>What did we do?</b> Review the prototype design and predictions.</p> <p><b>What did we learn?</b> Review the data collected about the idea. Discuss what else people noticed or observed.</p> <p><b>What is next?</b> Should we adapt, adopt, or abandon this idea? Make a plan.</p>

# Reflect and Expand

Congratulations! You have joined many other educators around the country who are building Student-Powered Classrooms.

**Take some time to reflect on these questions:**

- What was easy about implementing this process?
- What was surprising?
- What was hard?
- What did I notice?
- What did I learn?
- What's next?

If you're ready for more, check out additional examples and resources on [studentpoweredimprovement.com](https://studentpoweredimprovement.com). To share your story, ask a question, or receive support, reach out to [info@communitydesignpartners.com](mailto:info@communitydesignpartners.com).

Visit our website

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