

Schools Should Make Students' Wishes Come True. Here's How

Trauma-responsive care starts with listening

By Catharine Biddle, Mark Tappan & Lyn Mikel Brown — April 25, 2022 ⌚ 4 min read



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It has been a tough couple of years for schools. We are just beginning to understand the educational and social disruption that our nation's children have experienced from the pandemic and compounding economic, racial, and social inequalities. Many young people are experiencing a critical need for greater mental health and wellness supports. Educators, too, are feeling the cumulative effects of two years of constant adaptation to new regulations, the politicization of COVID-19 mitigation efforts, and mounting job requirements.

Everyone in our education system is suffering from missing connections—connections between teachers and students, staff and administration, and schools and the community. We need ideas for how to renew old relationships and foster new ones. We need ways to heal the disruption of the pandemic and address the threat of ongoing inequality that still troubles our schools.

To heal, however, we need educators and young people to feel empowered. The connection between agency, empowerment, and mental health is well documented. In health-service settings, trauma-responsive care requires listening to patients carefully, empowering them to make decisions about their care, and supporting them in taking charge of their own healing.

Why don't we do the same thing with children in school?

Over the past five years, our team has partnered with nine elementary and middle schools in both Maine and California to pilot and refine schoolwide strategies for fostering student (and educator) voices in schools to promote mental health and emotional healing. Student voice, empowerment, and attention to equity need to be at the heart of every school-based effort to address trauma.

Too many social-emotional-learning curricula and behavioral-health efforts start from a place of deficit: What is this child lacking?

Listening to children, by contrast, starts from a place of strength: How is this child an expert on their own experience? What can we learn about this child's needs and strengths from listening to them?

We have found that schools rarely prioritize meaningfully listening to students. Furthermore, adults often don't trust that students know what they need. That is why we want to see one of the key practices that we've studied in our school partnerships spread to every school in the country.

In our partner schools over the past few years, we asked every student and teacher to fill in the blank: “Someday in school, I would like to ___.” And, then, each day for the rest of the school year, a team of practitioners went about making many of those wishes come true.

Everyone involved was surprised by how modest and achievable the changes students asked for could be. One pre-K student wanted his class to lay in the grass and look at the sky. A 4th grader asked to have recess with her 2nd grade cousin on a different lunch schedule. A 3rd grader wanted every student to start the new quarter with a 100 already in the grade book so they could each feel successful for one day. Another wanted to have his mother read his class a book in Spanish while he translated for the class. Many students wanted to engage with other, younger students by teaching kindergarten or 1st grade.



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Teachers were able to join in, too: One asked for a compliment day when people left nice notes for one another. Another asked to leave school a bit early one day to be able to meet her son at the bus stop.

These “somedays” became a rallying point for building community, as well. When the school couldn’t accommodate one student’s request to bring in her pet, her someday instead became an opportunity for everyone in the school to bring in a picture of a pet or an animal they loved. All the pictures were posted on a huge bulletin board in the hallway that became a popular destination for students, parents, and teachers.

The outcomes we saw from these and other opportunities for students to voice their interests, desires, and concerns speak for themselves: Chronic absenteeism decreased, test scores increased, and school climate improved. Students reported at much higher rates than before that they felt listened to by the adults around them and that they felt safe and valued.

To support the creation of the relationship-rich environments that students, teachers, and communities need to heal from the last two years and beyond, we are calling for every school to commit to similar initiatives for their students and staff.

To make somedays happen in your school and to lay the foundation for student-centered healing, we recommend a few key considerations:

1. Make it visible. Put a sign at the entrance to your school or classroom that announces which child's someday it is. Recognize a different child every day or week so that students understand that their turn is coming.

2. Have a “yes, and ...” mindset. Some somedays may need some creative thinking between you and the student to be successful in school. Honor the spirit of the student's someday and workshop any changes to their vision in partnership with them.

3. Reflect on the practice. Notice patterns in what you see students and educators asking for. Ask yourself and your colleagues: What are we learning about how students experience education here? What new voices are we hearing? How do our relationships with young people change when we honor their expertise on themselves and their education?

As trauma-responsive educators, we are obligated to listen to children's concerns and their desire to take an active role in creating and improving the circumstances of their lives and do what we can to alter systems to better support them. Somedays offer a simple way to start.

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