



INTEGRATING CAREER PATHWAYS
IN HIGH SCHOOLS

Student Centered By Design

Systemizing Student Voice & Choice

LEARNING BRIEF #1



INTRODUCTION

In an era of increased accountability and measured student outcomes, student voice is taking on growing importance. Educators and policymakers are realizing that an adult-directed, top-down approach to learning is no longer the way. Instead, students should play an active and equal role in planning and leading their classroom instruction, as well as advising the development of school practices and policies. Recognizing the importance of deep student engagement both in the classroom and in postsecondary readiness programming, Transfer 2 Career Collaborative (T2C) partners East Side House Settlement (ESH) and Bronx Haven High School have found ways to integrate student voice into their career development offerings. This brief describes how ESH and Bronx Haven use “design thinking” to include students as co-creators of their postsecondary pathways. It also explores lessons learned that can be used to inform the road ahead.

T2C AT BRONX HAVEN HIGH SCHOOL

Under T2C, ESH and Bronx Haven High School have created a skills training program in healthcare, technology, and construction that offers career awareness and exploration opportunities, career development and occupational studies, on-site training, and internships. Students can earn certifications in CPR and first aid, EKG and phlebotomy, and Microsoft Office.

T2C LEARNING:

MOVING TOWARD AUTHENTIC STUDENT VOICE

IN THE FIELD OF EDUCATION, “STUDENT VOICE REFERS TO THE VALUES, OPINIONS, BELIEFS, PERSPECTIVES, AND CULTURAL BACKGROUNDS OF STUDENTS AS INDIVIDUALS AND AS A COLLECTIVE, AND TO INSTRUCTIONAL APPROACHES AND TECHNIQUES THAT ARE BASED ON STUDENT CHOICES, INTERESTS, PASSIONS, AND AMBITIONS.”¹

Research indicates that students who believe they have a voice in school are seven times more likely to be academically motivated than students who do not believe they have a voice.²

Examples of student voice in schools include the following:

- students participating in small-group classroom conversations
- students partnering in curriculum design
- students establishing school norms and policy
- students using their background, prior experience, and points of view to drive their learning
- students taking responsibility for their personal learning and the learning of their peers and community
- schools utilizing student feedback to adapt curricula
- schools making school decisions and policy changes with student leadership
- schools leading a student advisory board

As observed by researchers,

Student voice leads to an increased likelihood that students will experience self-worth, engagement, and purpose in school. The more educators can give their students choice, control, challenge, and opportunities for collaboration, the greater their motivation and engagement will be. This can impact a student’s level of effort and persistence, one of the most important factors that affect achievement.

Inviting students to be architects in their own learning in a genuine and meaningful way can be a game changer for student investment and engagement.³

At Bronx Haven, the T2C School Design Team⁴—consisting of school staff, ESH program directors, and intermediaries—tapped into student voice during the first year of the initiative by administering a survey to

gauge students' interest in course topics and internship opportunities. But even after modifying the school's offerings to respond to these interests, initial student participation was lower than anticipated. As noted by Elizabeth Ferreras, SDH's director of Learning to Work programs and former Bronx Haven staff member:

Year 1 [of T2C implementation] didn't start the way we'd expected. We'd had so many ideas and program offerings that the students were excited about. But then we noticed diminishing student engagement right away.

The team's immediate response was to listen to, learn from, and empathize with the students. This was first accomplished via coaching sessions with student advisors, who revealed challenges and conflicts previously unanticipated by the team. This experience crystalized the team's understanding that *"transfer students already have a huge amount of responsibility to begin with—between school, family, and jobs—so adding anything more was really overwhelming for a lot of them,"* said Stephanie Edwards, ESH's postsecondary pathways director. Learning of these trends, the School Design Team used roundtable discussions to help students define their obstacles and understand potential solutions.

These discussions revealed that student interest in career and work-based learning opportunities was still high but that they faced barriers to participation due to competing family and work obligations. After empathizing with these concerns, ESH and Bronx Haven acted on them, working to integrate career training into the school day as opposed to making it an after-school activity—a conscious choice centered on student voice.

By incorporating student voice early into the process, the School Design Team not only avoided plummeting program attendance but also reinforced the trust required for any strong relationship between students and educators. In another example of immediate action based on student input, the ESH team is now planning "Adulting 101" sessions on topics such as financial literacy and virtual communication etiquette—all aligned with the social-emotional competencies of social awareness, self-management, self-awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making.⁵ These sessions integrate career awareness and exploration activities that will prepare students to select the industry certification opportunities that are the right fit for their skills and interests, thereby promising greater motivation and likely increased retention and completion rates.

The Results

With more and better communication comes more and better data. Bronx Haven and ESH use the New Visions data portal and Salesforce to track attendance and interventions, record career pathways milestones, and monitor students' progress toward graduation. By collecting these different types of data, student advisors and other relevant staff are able to have a better picture of individual students' profiles and where additional supports might be needed. This kind of transparency, together with frequent dialogue and an adaptive approach, are at the heart of the partnership's success and make up the iterative process of ideating, prototyping, and testing—the last three phases in the “design thinking” approach.

The School Design Team, in tandem with student focus groups, is formalizing all the components of its career readiness program, from scheduled orientations to career exploration events to industry training and certification courses. Importantly, the team continues to require the attendance of student advisors at these events to ensure continuity of student voice and strong feedback loops. The team also sends weekly emails to these advisors and offers them regular informational events.



LESSONS LEARNED

This T2C partnership has identified several ways that student voice can be better used to improve career development offerings:



Invite students to be architects in their own learning. Students should be included as equal stakeholders in their college and career journeys. Developing and implementing an approach with students will result in deeper learning, better allocation of resources, and a more adaptive practice. While an “if you build it, they will come” mantra may prove productive at the outset, the ESH-Bronx Haven team has shown how a “let students build with you from within, so no one’s ever left on the outside” philosophy is a more sustainable and equitable approach to graduation, careers, and fulfilling lives.

According to Jazmin Rivera-Polanco, Bronx Haven’s principal, the inclusive nature of T2C benefits all levels of stakeholders: *“It provides a social/emotional aspect of ensuring students are advocates [and helps] develop strong personal and behavioral skills. ESH is open to all ideas offered by the school team. This makes the work a true shared goal and collaboration.”*



Use a formalized intake process to lift up student voice from day one. A comprehensive process for student intake ensures that students’ perspectives and interests are incorporated across the career development continuum. This is particularly important for students in transfer schools, who are potentially coming from other school environments that did not work well for them. This intake process includes several phases:

- **Phase 1:** Organize individual meetings between students and advisors to establish each student’s goals and opportunities for growth.
- **Phase 2:** Survey students on their academic and career interests, strengths, short- and long-term goals, and possible scheduling challenges.
- **Phase 3:** Draw on survey results to schedule orientation events according to industry and sector, which students and their advisors are expected to attend.
- **Ongoing:** Hold roundtable discussions and offer informal channels for students to voice their concerns and needs.



Make technology and data student centered. Data should be continually leveraged to ensure that student profiles are updated and readily available. By reviewing student data regularly with students themselves in coaching sessions and with a New Visions continuous improvement coach, the school team is able to keep a student-centered perspective while matching resources to needs. Having such data also allows the partnership to offer differentiated and scaffolded options each trimester for students based on their interests and skills.



A NOTE ON COVID-19

Student voice remained at the center of this partnership during school closures early in the pandemic. As noted by Ferreras:

We've created five or six different "student scenarios," and it helps us anticipate the different challenges the students might have. We are able to try walking in their shoes. For example, if I'm a student who is working, trying to finish my program, and now dealing with grief or isolation because of COVID-19 quarantine, what kinds of supports or schedule changes do I need? With the pandemic, all the rules are changing. So, when it comes to student voice, we have to keep listening.

Despite the challenges of adapting to a pandemic, the team has observed certain benefits of digital networking and virtual mentorship specific to transfer high school students, including: more efficient polling and surveying; the real-time measurement of progress; and greater comfort among Generation Z students, who are digital natives and thus used to interacting in virtual spaces.

ABOUT T2C PARTNERS



BRONX HAVEN HIGH SCHOOL is a transfer school located in the South Bronx. Students between the ages of 16 and 21 who have dropped out or fallen behind on credits can apply for admission to the school. In partnership with students, faculty, and families, Bronx Haven uses innovative methods to support the personal growth of its students to help them succeed in higher education. Each student at Bronx Haven is provided with an advisor whose responsibilities include individualized academic guidance, college and career preparation, and life skills development.



EAST SIDE HOUSE SETTLEMENT operates out of the South Bronx's Mott Haven community. It is a nonprofit social service organization that identifies the drivers of school attrition resulting from system failures. It uses a two-layered model of individualized support: a "primary person"—a caring adult who builds a coaching and mentoring relationship with each student—and a social services department comprising social workers who address deeper barriers to students' achievement.

ABOUT THIS SERIES

JobsFirstNYC and New Visions for Public Schools are spearheading the Transfer 2 Career Collaborative (T2C), an innovative career development strategy for New York City transfer high schools aimed at improving the postsecondary and workforce outcomes of students most at risk of becoming part of the out-of-school, out-of-work population. Working across twelve transfer schools in the New Visions network, T2C integrates sectoral workforce development partners and postsecondary programs to provide sector-specific career pathways for over-age, under-credited students. This learning brief is part of a series describing emergent practices in the T2C initiative that support progress toward student, partnership, institution, and system-level goals.



ABOUT JOBSFIRSTNYC

JobsFirstNYC creates and advances solutions that break down barriers and transform the systems supporting young adults and their communities in the pursuit of economic opportunities. Our innovative approach to developing new partnership models has helped shape public policy, private philanthropic investments, and the best practices of employers, colleges, service providers, high schools, and others. Over the last 14 years, JobsFirstNYC has worked with more than 150 organizations in communities across New York City to build innovative solutions that connect young adults to economic opportunities.



ABOUT NEW VISIONS FOR PUBLIC SCHOOLS

New Visions for Public Schools is a nonprofit organization that has worked to strengthen New York City public schools for more than 30 years. Since 1989, New Visions has designed, created, and sustained great public schools for all New Yorkers, driven by the belief that all of New York City's students deserve public schools that make successful futures possible. It has empowered and equipped everyday visionaries—New York City's educators, students, and families—with the tools and support needed to achieve the future they imagine for themselves. Today, New Visions helps more than 1,000 public schools plan for the success of more than 600,000 students citywide.

DEDICATION

We dedicate this report to Julia Forman, Principal Dez-Ann Romain, and all the educators we lost too young and too early in 2020. They dedicated their energy, creativity, and intelligence to building a more equitable, more supportive public school system for all students, but particularly students who have too often been excluded from educational opportunity. We honor their memory by building on their lives' work.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

JobsFirstNYC wants to recognize the leaders of the Transfer 2 Career Collaborative (T2C) partner schools, workforce organizations and institutions, and CBOs for their vision, willingness to take risks, and commitment to excellence.

This case study was authored by Jen Sciacca Curry and Therese Workman of Change Impact, Inc, and Amanda B. Rosenblum, JobsFirstNYC, with input from Marjorie Parker, JobsFirstNYC, and New Visions for Public Schools staff, including Julia Forman, Monique Lawrence, Lucinda Mendez, Jefferson Pestronk, Jessica Sasko, Jennie Soler-McIntosh, and Emily Task.

The publication was designed by Tracey Maurer and copy edited by Morgan Stoffregen.

Transfer 2 Career Collaborative has been generously supported by the following foundations: Achelis and Bodman Foundation, The Altman Foundation, Jeffrey H. and Shari L. Aronson Family Foundation, Booth Ferris Foundation, Annie E. Casey Foundation, Carl C. Conway Scholarship Foundation, Frances L. and Edwin L. Cummings Memorial Fund, James and Judith K. Dimon Foundation/HERE to HERE, MizuhoUSA Foundation, New York Community Trust, and Carroll and Milton Petrie Foundation.

Additional general support for JobsFirstNYC has been provided by the following foundations: Ira W. Decamp Foundation and MUFG Union Bank Foundation. The support of these funders does not imply or express their endorsement of the contents of this publication.



ENDNOTES

- 1 Great Schools Partnership, "The Glossary of Education Reform: Student Voice," <https://www.edglossary.org/student-voice/>.
- 2 Quaglia Institute for School Voice and Aspirations, *School Voice Report 2016* (2016), http://quagliainstitute.org/dmsView/School_Voice_Report_2016.
- 3 Kendel St. John and Lori Briel, "Student Voice: A Growing Movement within Education That Benefits Students and Teachers," topical paper (2017), <https://centerontransition.org/publications/download.cfm?id=61>.
- 4 School Design Teams are multi-stakeholder groups that drive T2C's strategy, decision-making, and implementation at the school level. Their members consist of transfer high school leaders, representatives of community-based organizations, representatives of workforce development organizations, and administrators from community colleges.
- 5 CASEL, "What Is the CASEL Framework?," <https://casel.org/core-competencies/>.

