

In Their Own Words:

A Review of Youth Perspectives on School, Mental Health, Social Justice, and More

Kiira M. Lyons, Syrena N. Williams, and Donna-Marie Winn

With Funding From the Skillman Foundation



In recent years, there has been a call for philanthropy to access and respond to youth voice. While the charitable sector has long since focused on serving youth, the perspectives and opinions of young people have not always been a part of the conversation. In response to this concern, the Skillman Foundation initiated the development of this document as a source of direct feedback from youth about what their current wants and needs are. Many organizations and resources were reviewed to collect youth perspectives, with a particular focus on Detroit youth and Black youth. Youth perspectives in the reviewed resources were primarily collected as a part of interviews, focus groups, and/or surveys completed within the last five years, with most from the last two years. Based on this timeframe, the COVID-19 pandemic was often an influencing factor on youth responses. However, many of the issues and concerns raised during COVID were also relevant before the pandemic.



To produce this overview, each resource was categorized by type of youth, briefly summarized, and takeaways and major themes were identified. [Download resources here](#). Using these takeaways and major themes, several overarching points were identified across resources, including:

- ❖ Amplifying youth voice and facilitating adult listening;
- ❖ Highlighting the importance of relationships and connections;
- ❖ Promoting mental health and wellness;
- ❖ Addressing racial injustice and inequity;
- ❖ Contending with poor police/security relations;
- ❖ Considering youth experiences in the workplace; and
- ❖ Navigating the new normal of COVID-19





Amplifying Youth Voice and Facilitating Adult Listening

One of the most repeated themes throughout the consulted resources was the idea of amplifying youth voices and perspectives. Students repeatedly emphasized that they want to be asked for their thoughts and opinions and to have their feedback taken seriously and acted upon.^{9,10,14,18,20,24,25,36} Across papers and articles, youth explained that many times no one asks for their input or thoughts about what they need and, even when they are asked, subsequent actions do not reflect their suggestions. In the words of two student interviewees, “People need to listen to students of color, give us a seat at the table,²⁴” and “don’t be afraid to follow us, because we’re leaders as well.”¹⁴

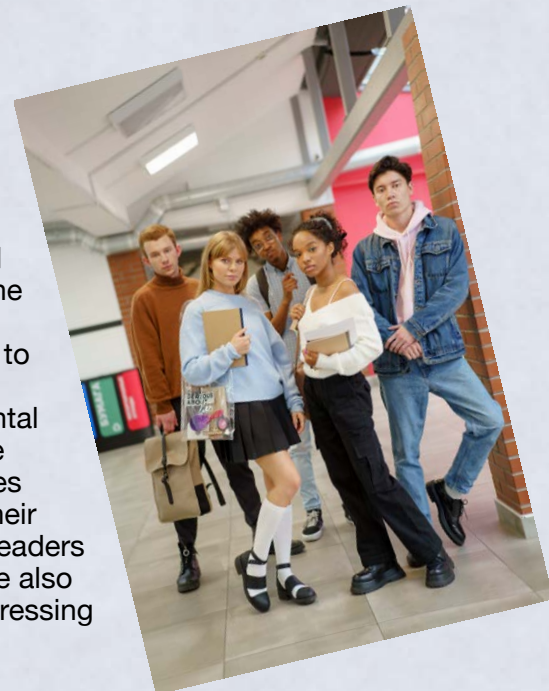
Highlighting the Importance of Relationships and Connections

Relationships and connections have become elevated concerns for students in the COVID-19 era. The recently conducted Youth Hope and Opportunity Survey showed that college readiness is often linked to positive relationships with supportive adults at school.¹ The How Learning Happens report also found that supportive relationships and higher levels of belonging had statistically significant positive effects on engagement and meaningful learning.⁸ Several other studies supported the beneficial impacts of positive relationships with adults in connected learning settings (afterschool/out-of-school programs).^{36,37} Additionally, students rely on connections with their peers to feel safe and supported at school.^{21,26} In the wake of COVID, some young people have been left feeling disconnected from school, adults, and friends.^{12,15} Some student organizations have focused on trying to foster relationships among students virtually,²⁵ but there is still a gap in this area.



Promoting Mental Health and Wellness

The need to address mental health and wellness more directly in schools has been a focal point in education research for some time. The pandemic has only intensified the call for greater mental health services. Findings from the Center for Promise's recent survey of students found that young people are experiencing a collective trauma related to COVID-19 and would benefit from immediate and ongoing support.^{11,16} Additional articles discussed the ongoing mental health concerns and barriers to treatment even prior to the pandemic.^{27,31,32,33,34} Multiple interviewees across resources discussed their personal experiences with challenges to their mental health.^{13,20} Several non-profit groups with student leaders are attending to mental health struggles,²⁵ but students are also calling for more and better resources in schools.^{11,16,24} Addressing Racial Injustice and Inequity



Addressing Racial Injustice and Inequity

Instances of racial injustice and inequity were both raised by youth being surveyed and interviewed and presented in the data about their experiences. Interviewees talked about the dual pandemics of COVID and racism and being burdened by them both simultaneously.^{5,18,23} Survey data and interview responses also demonstrated the ways in which Black and Brown youth are experiencing inequity in and out of schools (fewer resources and opportunities, microaggressions, imbalanced curricula, community violence, inequitable access to services, etc.).^{3,8,21,22,23,24,26,27,28}





Contending with Poor Police/Security Relations

The call for police-free schools is not a new one, but the charge continues during COVID.²² In a study on barriers to wellness, young people indicated a mistrust and fear of police.¹⁶ This experience extended into schools, where only 16% of students indicated feeling safe at school because of police (vs. 84% feeling safe because of their friends) and very few wanted more police or security.²¹

Considering Youth Experiences in the Workplace

Examples of student experiences in the workplace were largely set within the context of COVID. Interviewees were asked about their efforts to find work and how the pandemic created unique challenges. Some shared specific programs (such as Urban Alliance and Year Up) which facilitated their connections with internships and employment.^{12,13,15} These interviewees were also able to share their advice to employers and recommended approaching young employees with open minds, flexibility, respect, and understanding.^{12,13,15,17}



Navigating the New Normal of COVID-19

Across the different themes, students and young people were grappling with the pervasive impacts of the pandemic. Essentially every topic was colored by COVID-19. In interviews and survey responses, students reflected on adapting to virtual learning, having existing disparities highlighted, concern over spreading the virus, the isolation of quarantine, struggles and triumphs with mental health, seeking alternative community connections, economic challenges, having decisions put upon them with no say, and discovering new truths about themselves.^{2,3,4,5,6,11,12,13,15,17,20,32} Even as new waves of the pandemic ebb and flow, these considerations will likely remain relevant for the youth.

Above all else, this review demonstrates that young people are ready and willing to share their thoughts, feelings, advice, and desires with those who ask and will take their input seriously. Given this feedback, philanthropic organizations should build upon existing infrastructure for collecting youth perspectives to collect tailored data to support their work. One approach is to partner with local programs that engage the targeted youth and collaborate to administer interviews, focus groups, surveys directly to young people. These partnerships can extend beyond data collection to inform participating youth of how their valuable input is being put to good use.

