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The power of partnering with students

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“ If students have not interacted with a caring adult in school, there has to be a really intentional interruption for you to change their mind. Why would they think that you care about them or that they can trust you? That requires deep listening. We really want educators to listen to those students who are least engaged, most at the margins. Those students who aren't likely to fill out that survey. When you engage them in this very deep way, you find out they have spent so much of their school experience feeling thrown away, discarded, that nobody sees their potential. When you flip that frame and tell them, “You are the expert. I want you to tell me,” there's a healing that happens. And when they see their ideas come to life in the classroom, it's transformative.

We love student-led classroom observations. It's not punitive, it's not, what are teachers doing wrong? It's just another space to learn. Young people will pay attention to things that adults wouldn't. You never know what's going to emerge, but it's always raw. Because students sit in those classrooms too, you also get that perspective of their own experience, which is really rich. And if you have students at the margins participating then you have access to some of the richest data.

What's really powerful is you're also developing student leaders. We have students do empathy interviews with teachers too, so we all get to humanize each other in this very profound way that is not built into the way traditional classrooms are set up. That creates beautiful opportunities for co-leadership. You're helping students see themselves as agents of change in their school. You're developing partners in the work. It's planting seeds of what's possible. Once these students graduate, they're going to expect to be deeply engaged and participate as critical thinkers in society.