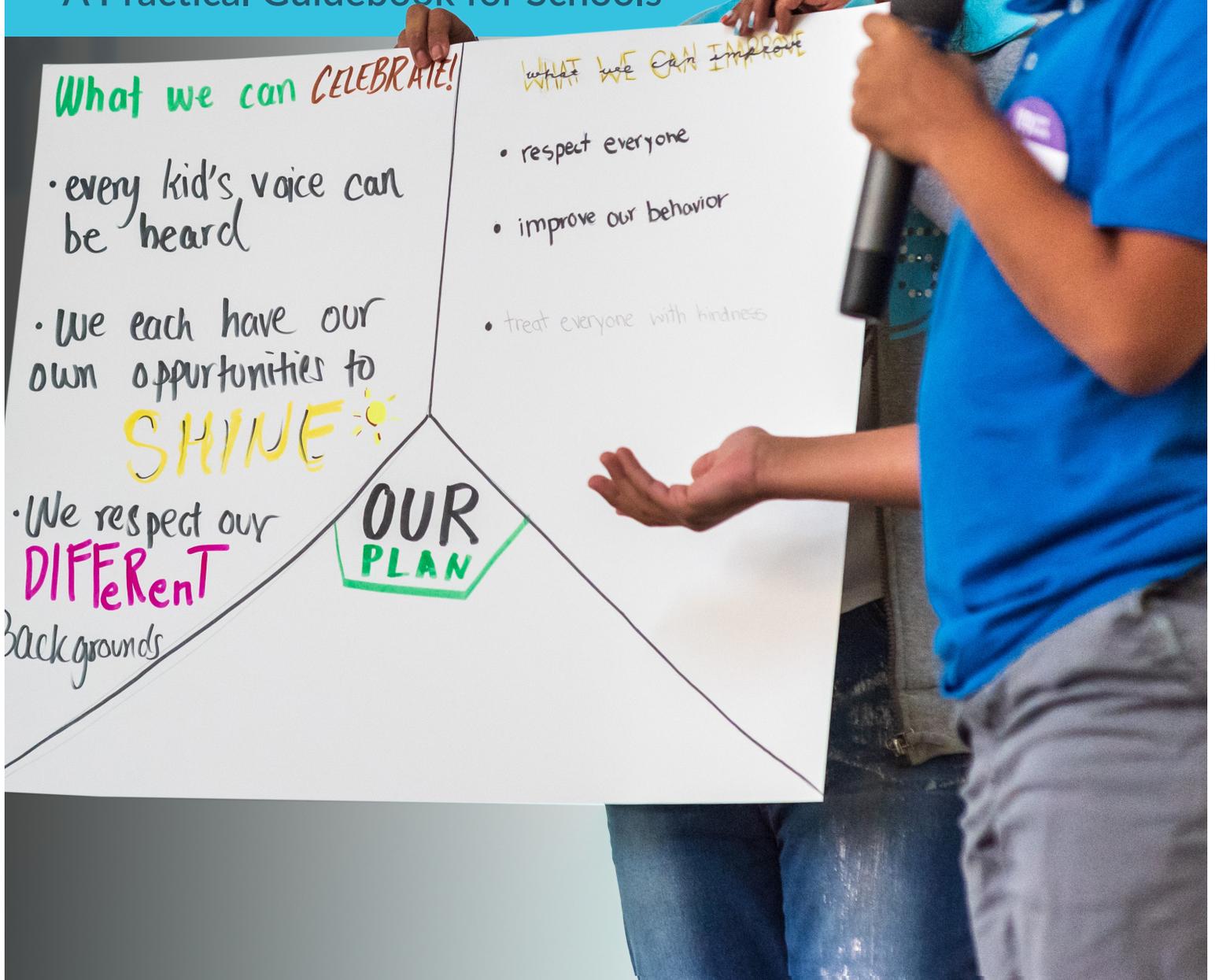


## Driving Educational Equity with Student Survey Data

A Practical Guidebook for Schools



## FOREWORD

At its core, the pursuit of educational equity is an exercise in humility. As advocates, researchers, educators, and policymakers, we have dedicated lifetimes to the question of how better to serve students. We can be so eager to marshal the power of that experience and expertise for students that we forget to work with them.

The history of progress toward justice in this country is clear: the best solutions are informed by and designed around the people closest to the problem. In an educational context, that means that if we are not listening to students – especially low-income students, students of color, and others whose voices are routinely drowned out – we are not truly supporting them.

What is so powerful about YouthTruth’s work, and this guidebook in particular, is that they give us the tools to center our efforts with actionable, nuanced data about students’ lived experiences.

Are there wide gaps between how adults and students perceive their school climate? Do students of color feel they receive the same support and expectations as their white peers? Do students feel equally safe and welcome when they walk through the school doors?

If we can’t answer these questions, how can we begin to achieve true educational equity and eliminate racism? How can we craft solutions if we don’t even understand the problems? When we have the humility to pause, listen, and learn from the people we aim to serve, then we can truly begin working with students toward a better, more equitable future.

Onward.

In community,



**Dr. Elisha Smith Arrillaga**

Executive Director, The Education Trust–West  
Advisory Board Member, YouthTruth

 [@ESArrillaga](https://twitter.com/ESArrillaga)



“To listen is to lean in softly with a willingness to be changed by what we hear.”

- Mark Nepo, poet

## We must lead through listening.

Welcome.

If you’ve chosen to read this guidebook, you likely have student survey data and are wondering how that data can help your school become more equitable. Maybe the data is from YouthTruth, maybe it’s not. Regardless of the instrument you selected (or created), **it’s what you do with the information that makes the difference.**

Whether the format for school this year is in person, blended, or fully virtual, asking all students anonymously through surveys about their experiences of school climate, culture, relationships and SEL can reveal real-time equity gaps that *can* be disrupted.

Asking good questions is the first step. Then listening, learning, and taking action is how inequities are addressed. This guidebook will take you through protocols and research-based best practices for using student survey data as part of your school system’s commitment to equity and social justice.

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## Why use student survey data for educational equity?

The deep-seated power dynamics and systemic racism long embedded in our educational institutions have silenced too many voices. To make our local school systems more just — especially racially just for Black students — young people’s voices and leadership must be at the center. When groups of students experience aspects of their learning environment less positively than other groups, this an equity issue.

## What is equity?

Equity in education means that each student has access to the opportunities, support, and resources they need to reach their full potential.<sup>1</sup>

## What are experience gaps?

Experience gaps describe differences in perceptions between groups of students.

## What does this look like?

Here’s an example of experience gaps found in YouthTruth data. This data is from our [Learning from Student Voice: School Culture](#) report, which analyzed student voice data from over 80,000 students.

### Is discipline at school fair?

Across all demographics, only 37 percent of students feel that discipline at their school is fair. So, it’s fair to say that getting discipline policies right in schools is hard, and all students tell us that this is something to work on. When breaking down the data by students’ self-reported race and ethnicity, however, student experiences vary widely. While 49 percent of Asian students, 39 percent of white students, and 39 percent of Hispanic students agree that discipline at their school is fair, only 34 percent of multiracial students and 28 percent of Black or African-American students agree. These differences in how groups of students experience fairness of discipline in their schools illustrate an *experience gap*.



**YOUTHTRUTH**  
A NATIONAL NONPROFIT

LEARNING FROM STUDENT VOICE:  
**What do students have to say about school culture?**

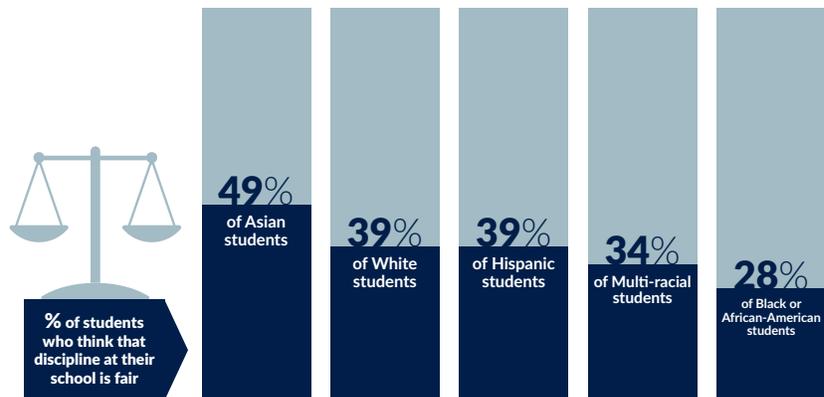
Students are more likely to succeed when they are in environments that foster a positive school culture.

School culture is built on a foundation of respect and positive relationships that help to drive, contribute to, and sustain school success. A growing body of research shows that when schools focus on improving culture and climate, they see a range of positive outcomes: higher engagement and achievement, fewer behavioral disruptions, lower teacher turnover, and higher teacher satisfaction. Additionally, a recent comprehensive review of 15 years of research about school climate, health, and academic achievement found that a positive school climate can help close the achievement gap.

**So, how do students feel about the culture of their schools?**

To help answer this question, YouthTruth analyzed survey data from more than 80,000 students in grades five through 12. The data was gathered between 2013 and 2016 through YouthTruth’s anonymous online survey administered in partnership with public schools across 24 states. Our analysis looked at a subset of questions relating to school culture — largely about respect and fairness — and uncovered some key insights. Since student perceptions are linked with outcomes, it’s smart to understand what students are experiencing. We believe these findings can help education make more informed decisions about improving school culture.

- 1 Only one in three students rate their school culture positively.
- 2 Students recognize that they and their peers are less respectful to adults than adults are to them.
- 3 Less than half of students feel that discipline at their school is fair.
- 4 Gender identity matters: students who identify as other than male or female report profoundly less positive perceptions of school culture.



## Now, let's connect this to other available data.

We know from the U.S Department of Education Office of Civil Rights that Black students are [3.8 times as likely](#) to receive one or more out-of-school suspension as white students. This includes both black boys and girls, in contrast to girls of other races who are not disproportionately disciplined in schools. The same data shows that [American Indian or Alaska Native, Latino, Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander and multiracial boys](#) are also disproportionately suspended from school in comparison to their white and Asian peers.

Today's federal and state policies leave a lot of room for discretion and decision-making up to schools and districts, so it's important that educators are able to reliably know whether or not school discipline policies and practices are working, **and for whom**. Black students deserve a system that [builds upon their assets instead of disproportionately disciplining them](#). The most powerful way for educators to really know if they are contributing to a school to prison pipeline or disrupting it is to ask those closest to the issue: students.

Experience gaps in student survey data illustrate where there may be unequal access to opportunities for students to be successful.

## How are *experience gaps* different from *achievement gaps*?

While achievement gaps are measured by how students perform within their learning environment<sup>2</sup> (grades, standardized-test scores, etc.), experience gaps are measured by how students perceive aspects of their learning environment (for example, how challenged students feel to think critically or how safe students feel in school).

Two groups of students attending the same school, learning from the same teachers, and working through the same curricula may experience supports in the school learning environments quite differently. Student surveys allow educators to measure how students perceive their learning environments, what's working and not working, and for whom.

Since a positive school climate (which can be measured through student surveys) can mitigate the negative effects of poverty and in some cases close achievement gaps,<sup>3</sup> identifying differences in how groups of students experience school allows educators to make real-time adjustment that can lead to better student outcomes. Additionally, non-cognitive interventions are particularly important for vulnerable groups of students.<sup>4</sup>

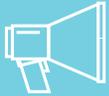
## Let's get started!

The following section of this guidebook will help you approach your student survey data with an equity lens. We'll talk about data shortly. But before diving into data interpretation and action, it's important to prepare by setting norms and reflecting on the mindset that we bring to the inquiry.

# TUNE-UP: AGREE ON NORMS



Before the *what* or the *what's next*, agree on the *how*. Establish consensus with your team about how you will reflect on student survey data to make your school system more equitable. Here are some norms to consider that prepare teams for potentially difficult but productive conversation.



**Put students first.** We will remember what the numbers and charts represent: students.



**Look for learning.** We will share what we are *learning*, not what we already know. We ask students to adopt a growth mindset and will model what we teach.



**Remember that equity is the goal.** We must not shy away or allow ourselves to be distracted.



**Listen actively.** To show empathy and understanding, we will reflect back what we're hearing or put the data in our own words.



**Use "I" statements.** We will avoid presuming to speak for others. Instead, we will speak from our experiences.



**Participate fully.** We acknowledge that addressing structural inequities relies on the participation and inclusion of every individual voice.

# START WITH EMPATHY



## “Community Circle” Protocol

Monterey Peninsula Unified School District (MPUSD) started their principal student voice for equity workshop with a Community Circle protocol. To (literally) ground the exercise, the facilitator acknowledged the history of the land on which they were standing: Ohlone land. The facilitator recognized that they were standing on colonized land and spoke to the district’s commitment to equity before completing the following protocol.

1. Stand in small circles around the room, with a circle facilitator identified in advance.
  2. Ask a check-in question that helps participants tune in to how they are feeling and recognize any distractions that may be keeping them from being present.
  3. Ask a question related to the content of the day: “When you hear the phrase, ‘student experience’ or ‘YouthTruth,’ what comes to mind?”
  4. Invite each member to bring to mind a student who they felt empathy for. Perhaps it was a student who was regularly sent to the Principal’s office. Perhaps it was a student who was vulnerable and sought support. In the circle, share about that student and why they are important.
- and family structure.
3. Ask participants to think about how that student might experience school, focusing specifically on the different components of the student’s identity.
    - a. How might the components of the student’s identity affect the way they form relationships with peers?
    - b. How do they respond and relate to their teachers?
    - c. How do they access instruction?
    - d. What barriers might be in front of them?
    - e. What advantages or disadvantages might they experience because of their identity?
  4. Put the student’s name on a post it note.
  5. Using an A/B partner protocol, ask participants to speak about their student and what they knew or wondered about the student’s experience in school, keeping components of their identity in the forefront.
  6. Invite participants to place the post it note with their student’s name on the edge of their computer screen to stay centered on that student throughout the data-inquiry process.

## “One Student” Protocol

North Clackamas School District (NCSD), took a slightly different approach by identifying an individual student in their current school and explicitly naming identity markers using this “One Student” protocol.

1. Ask participants to think of one student in their school by name.
2. Prompt participants to reflect upon that student’s identity including their race, home language, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, (dis)ability,

By focusing on the student, principals had a lens other than their own to view the data. When focusing on a specific student, the principals gained new sense of empathy and the data had new meaning.



For protocols and ideas about to engage students in unpacking the data, see YouthTruth’s

**Student Voice in Action Guidebook** here: [youthtruthsurvey.org/student-voice-in-action-guidebook](https://youthtruthsurvey.org/student-voice-in-action-guidebook).

# NOW, DATA.



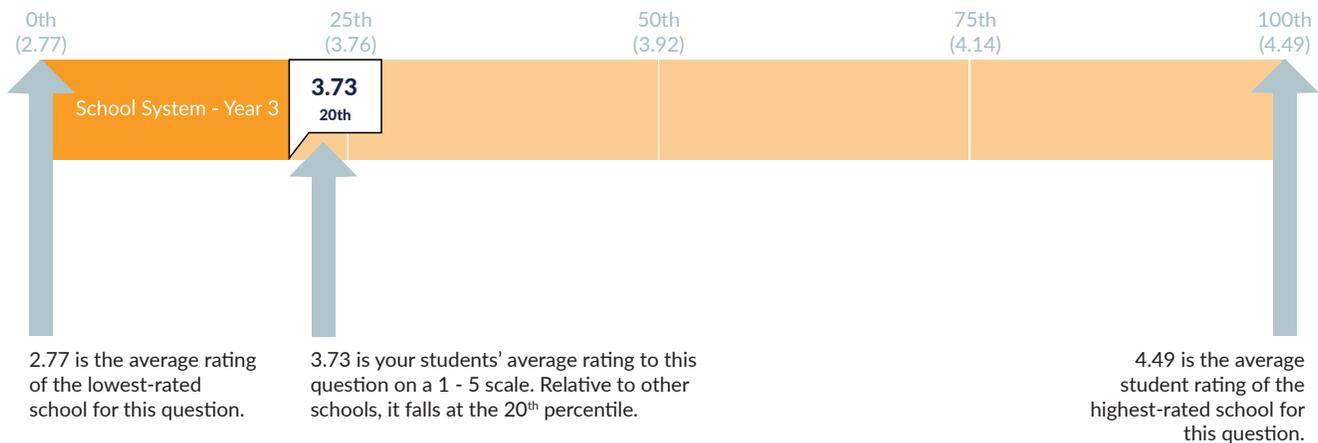
Now that you have agreed on group norms and focused your mindset towards growth and empathy, you are ready to dig into the data.

## Making meaning by exploring comparisons to other schools: what's typical?

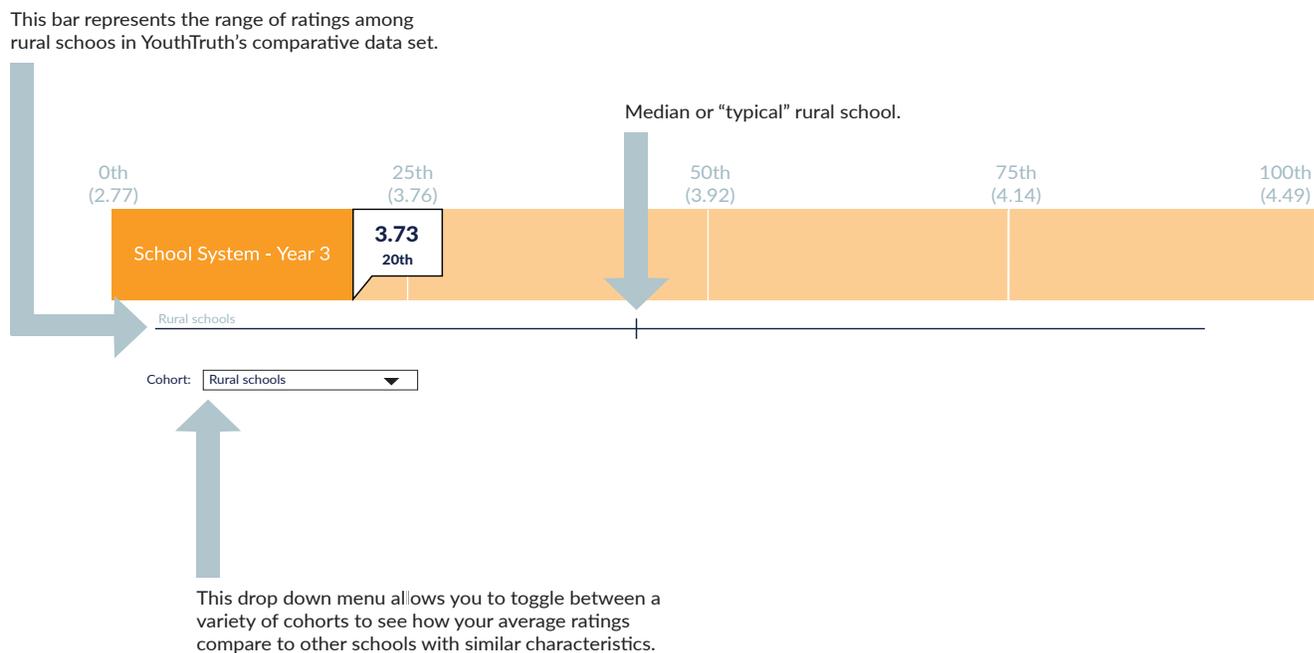
YouthTruth reports allow educators to compare the average student ratings at their school or district to the ratings of students at other schools. Because students tend to rate their schools and teachers positively overall, having a sense of what a “typical” student response is to a given theme or question is helpful.

For example, using a 1–5 scale, average school ratings across YouthTruth questions and themes tend to fall between 2.3–4.6 at the secondary level, and 1.8–2.9 for elementary respondents using a 1–3 Likert scale. Viewing your students’ perception data in this comparative context helps you know whether students in your system are having a more or less positive experience compared to students at other schools across the country.

### “The work I do for my classes really makes me think.”



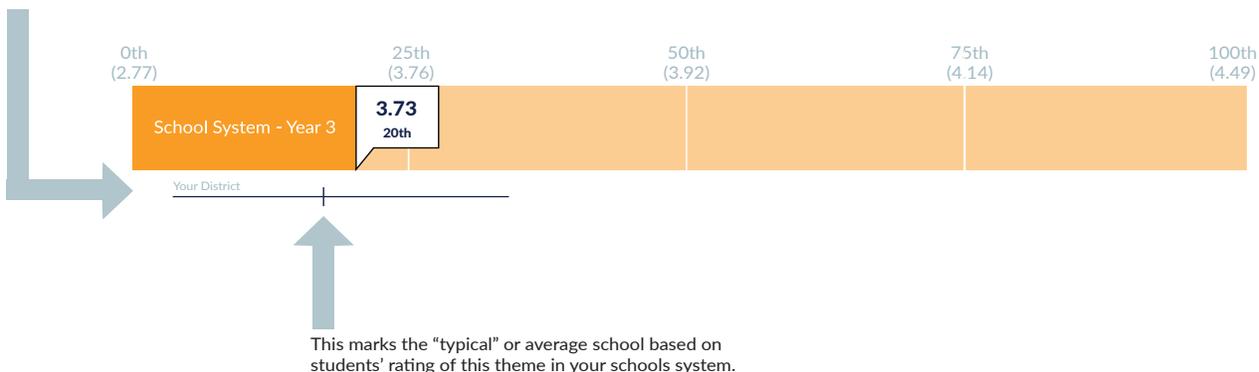
Use the “cohort” bar to toggle to see how your average ratings compare to schools with similar characteristics, such as enrollment size (small school, very large high school, etc.), and geography (suburban, rural, etc.), among other cohort options.



The cohort comparisons allow educators to make contextually meaningful comparisons with their survey results. In the above example, we see that the typical “rural school” (school located more than 10 miles from an urbanized area) is rated slightly lower than the typical school overall. When unpacking student survey data, it’s helpful to know what “typical” looks like, in general, as well as for other schools like yours.

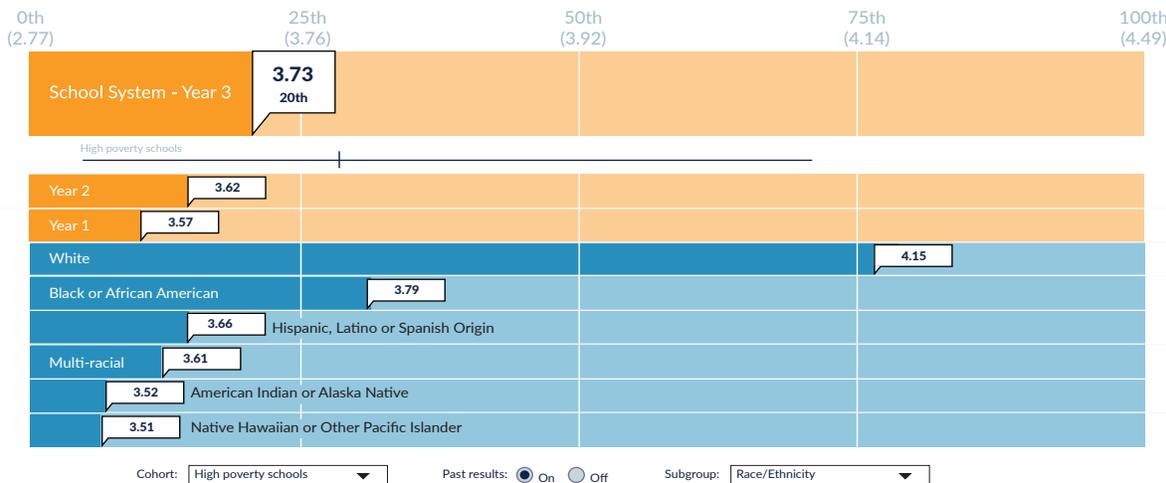
In addition, schools can compare their survey feedback to other schools in their local cohort. This helps an educator see if low student ratings are unique to their campus or possibly related to a more systemic trend in the school system.

This bar represents the range of ratings among schools in your district based on students' responses.



### Disaggregating allows you to compare how students with different identities and backgrounds experience school differently.

In this example, we see that students who identify as white experience school more positively than all other racial subgroups in this school system. The experience gap illustrated below invites us to recognize and question what systemic barriers and biases may be at play.



By disaggregating, you'll visually see the places with the biggest experience gaps and can target your interventions there.

Toggle to disaggregate the data across a range of demographic characteristics, such as gender identity, sexual orientation, grade level, grade average, English Language Learner and Special Education status, etc. Segmenting by student groups raises awareness about potential inequities.

# TRY THIS: EXPLORE DIFFERENCES WITH SURVEY DATA



Use the search bar in your YouthTruth reports to visit the data in response to these questions. Use the “toggle” feature to disaggregate the findings to see alignment or differences between groups.

## QUESTION #1

**YouthTruth survey question:** “Discipline in my school is fair.”

**Disaggregate by:** Race and/or ethnicity.

**Questions to consider:** Relate your survey data to suspension and expulsion data. Do students’ perceptions of fairness of discipline policies relate to suspension and expulsion data? If so, what changes in policies and practices could be changed to address this structural problem?

**Take action:** Check out this [Ideas that Work](#) guide for evidence-based strategies for teachers, which starts with positive behavior interventions and supports. The guide was written with the purpose of helping teachers capitalize on instructional time and decrease disruptions.

## QUESTION #2

**YouthTruth survey question:** “Adults at my school treat students with respect.”

**Disaggregate by:** All subgroups to look for perception gaps.

**Questions to consider:** What would it look like if educators were to work towards ensuring all students felt respected by adults in school?

**Take action:** Take action based on your data using [this YouthTruth graphic organizer](#) (or use [bit.ly/2HJISE7](https://bit.ly/2HJISE7)) with students or school staff. Use this worksheet to help set norms for high-quality listening and behavior toward others.



Repeat this sequence with other survey questions and reference the [YouthTruth backpack](#) for more protocols that relate directly to survey questions.



## Gender Identity & Community in a Liberal College Town

Here is a real but anonymized story about one district we work with in a liberal, university town. The district leaders know that nationally, students who identify as transgender and gender queer have higher rates of depression, are at higher risk of being bullied, and they know that these challenges affect achievement. But they live in a community that sees itself as being progressive and accepting (and in many ways is).

### The experience gap revealed in student survey data

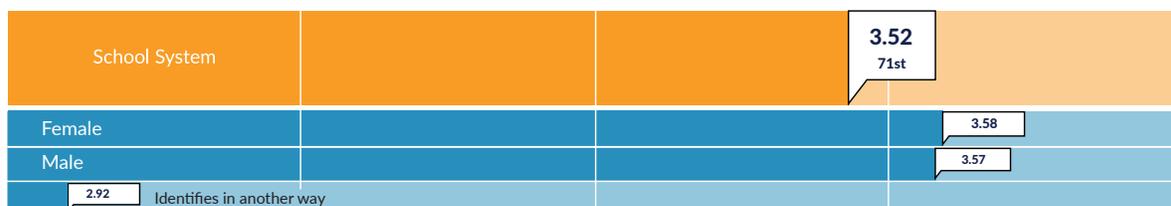
The district saw that in response to the question about the degree to which their students feel that they are a part of their school’s community, their students rated quite positively, above 71 percent of other schools across the country. Community-building and inclusivity were district priority areas, so this was really exciting to see!

#### “I really feel like a part of my school’s community.”



With this generally high rating across the board, it was eye-opening to see that, when disaggregating by self-reported gender identity, not all students were feeling as positively.

#### “I really feel like a part of my school’s community.”



We see that when disaggregating the responses to explore differences by gender identity, the average rating among students who identify in a way other than female or male was 2.92 on a 1–5 scale.

While this average absolute rating is just below a 3.0, which is a “neither agree nor disagree” neutral response, the average ratings for their peers who identify as male or female was meaningfully higher, falling in the top quartile of the scale, while student ratings for those who identify in another way were in the bottom quartile.

## Plan for improvement

In response to this information, this district implemented gender inclusiveness policies and continues to provide gender inclusiveness training for staff. And at the beginning of each training, they share this data. It surprises people, because this is what students are really saying about their experience, even in a relatively accepting community.

The data from subsequent surveys affirmed that what they were doing was working. In subsequent survey rounds the data showed an increase in ratings among the students who identify in a way other than female or male about feeling a part of their school’s community. Not only did this district make gains closing this experience gap for students of non binary gender identities, but also, feelings of inclusion increased across all groups.

This is an example of what to look for in student survey results, and the impact that identifying and addressing this experience gap could have.



### The Case for Engaging Students

Too often in education, important decisions are made without engaging the people most affected: the students. Including students in debrief conversations sends a message that student input is taken seriously, builds culture, and generates fresh ideas. Students will know they’ve been heard, and will be invaluable team members in driving change to improve learning for themselves and their peers.

The **Student Voice in Action Guidebook** features examples of engagement and youth leadership to involve students at every step of the feedback process — from surveying to reflection, and from prioritization to strategic planning. To explore the guidebook, click [here](#) or use [bit.ly/2RZb6IL](https://bit.ly/2RZb6IL).



## Race, Gender & Academic Challenge in Oregon

### Examining student experiences by race and gender identity in Oregon State

“There is no other way to get outside of ourselves and measure the health of our school through the student lens,” says Shelly Reggiani, Executive Director of Equity and Instructional Services for North Clackamas School District. North Clackamas School District (NCSd) partners with YouthTruth to drive toward more equitable outcomes for each of their 17,000 students across their 32 campuses in southeast Portland.



### What they noticed

When NCSd reflected on their first two years of survey data, school and district staff observed three trends that caused them to take a deeper look into their practice and take intentional action.



- Female students were having a different experience of academic challenge than boys, especially in math classes across elementary, middle and high school;
- Students who identify in another way other than male or female experienced less connection to staff and peers and less academic support; and
- Students of color experienced feeling less welcome in school than their white peers.

### How they explored the data

After agreeing to norms and engaging in an empathy-building exercise like the community circle on Page 6, NCSd leaders identified key questions to help guide further inquiry:

- Do female students feel they have to work harder than male students in their classes and why?
- What stereotypes or preconceived notions might adults and students in our schools have that could be contributing to how students are perceived and experienced by their race and or gender identity?
- How does race and/or gender identity impact students' academics and sense of belonging?

## What's next?

One action that arose out of NCSD's inquiry was to prioritize a series of professional development workshops about biases in instruction and school culture. Three times a year, for half a day, school principals bring teachers to learn about teaching through a culturally responsive pedagogical approach, specifically interrupting practices that disadvantage students by race and or gender identity.

*“There is no other way to get outside of ourselves and measure the health of our school through the student lens.”*

–Shelly Reggiani



**SHELLY REGGIANI**  
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, EQUITY  
& INSTRUCTIONAL SERVICES

Shelly Reggiani, Ed.D., has served as Executive Director of Equity and Instruction since 2010, leading North Clackamas School District's equity-focused programs. She has led work spanning educational professional development, instructional design, community engagement and outreach, and English Learners and Emergent Bilingual student advocacy and programming throughout her career. She was awarded her Ed.D. in Education from George Fox University.

# TRY THIS: THE EDUCATION TRUST—WEST'S DATA EQUITY WALK



The Education Trust—West's [Data Equity Walk](#) can be used to dive into your school or district's data to explore gaps between how different groups experience school.

## Here's what you need

**Timing:** ~2 hours prep, 45-90 minutes for the activity

**Materials:**

- ➔ Poster boards, sticky notes, pens (if in person)
- ➔ Your YouthTruth data or any survey data with subgroups
- ➔ Education Trust—West's Planning Template (click [here](#) — or use [bit.ly/2m8C3eJ](https://bit.ly/2m8C3eJ))

## Space:

**If in person:** A room large enough for participants to walk around and look at large charts of data

**If virtual:** Use a free version of Google's Jamboard

- ➔ [Click here for the full protocol: youthtruthsurvey.org/dataequitywalk](https://youthtruthsurvey.org/dataequitywalk)

### The Education Trust—West

The Education Trust—West is the California based office of the nationally recognized [Education Trust](#) based in Washington D.C. and works for the high academic achievement of all students at all levels, pre-k through college. The organization exposes opportunity and achievement gaps that separate students of color, English Language Learners and low-income students from other youth, and identifies and advocates for the strategies that will forever close those gaps. Learn more about [The Education Trust—West](#).



**The Education Trust—West**



## Unpacking Discipline across Stakeholders in New York State

### Examining discipline policies

Kenmore-Town of Tonawanda Union Free School District (KTUFSD or “Ken-Ton”) began a leading through listening journey with YouthTruth to help gauge how well – and for whom – discipline policies and protocols are working. The district serves nearly 7,000 students across 10 schools, and is located outside Buffalo, New York.

**“Using student survey data, I am able to have conversations about where inconsistencies and disproportionate measures of discipline exist. This data helps me share insights about experiences of discipline far beyond a discussion with just my immediate colleagues,”** says Michael F. Lewis, Ph.D., Director of Student Services and Special Education.

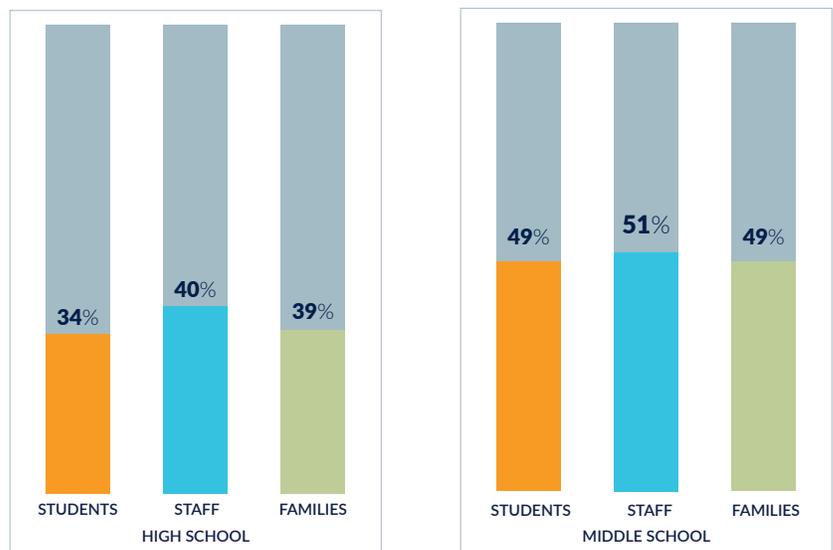
**“Next year, and down the road, trend data will continue to deepen our understanding of whether or not we’re getting discipline right. We can then make even larger recommendations and adjustments in our strategic plan to target inequities.”**



### The experience gap revealed in Ken-Ton’s data

Upon receiving feedback in year one of surveying, the district learned that only a third of high school students and less than half of middle school students felt that discipline at school was fair. Family members and school staff responses revealed similar results.

“Discipline at my school is fair.”



## Plan for improvement

In response, the district prioritized funding to address these gaps and looked at what systems might be contributing. They reevaluated the code of conduct to include more options for restorative practices such as community service or writing letters of apology. In addition to Dr. Lewis’s regular consultation with staff in situations that have potential for disciplinary action, the district now also employs a full-time staff member to consult with principals at two schools experiencing higher cases of suspensions.

Here are some additional initiatives designed to improve experiences of discipline as a result of survey insights:

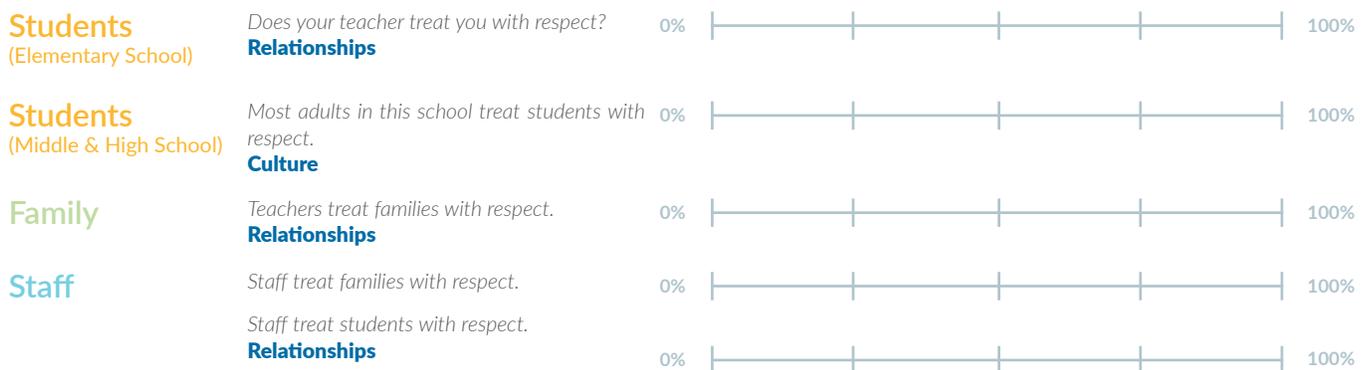
- Sharing policies and practices widely with students, family, and staff:** Better communication about successful models of restorative practice across the district are helping to keep the entire school community informed and involved. Sharing district processes more widely with students, family, and staff is holding the district more accountable to its policies and helping a greater number of people to know what is possible in situations that may require disciplinary action.
- Generating buy-in by driving response rates:** The district is committed to getting as close to 100 percent response rates as possible. As a result of the district’s thorough outreach and debrief processes about the YouthTruth Survey, buy-in has been high as the district puts the data into action.

**TRY THIS: KEN-TON LOOKED AT DIFFERENCES IN PERCEPTION OF DISCIPLINE ACROSS STAKEHOLDERS. TRY THIS WITH RESPECT.**



Look at the percent positive response tables in your YouthTruth reports in order to see what proportion of students, family, and/or school staff members have rated each question positively.

### Respect



**MICHAEL LEWIS**  
 DIRECTOR OF  
 STUDENT SERVICES  
 & SPECIAL EDUCATION

Michael F. Lewis, Ph.D., is the director of student services and special education at Kenmore-Town of Tonawanda Union Free School District, Buffalo, New York.

# TRY THIS: AFFINITY MAPPING FROM DATA WISE



The *Affinity Mapping* protocol helps educators explore trends in school climate data and hypothesize what may be contributing to differences across students' experiences in order to plan for interventions.

## Here's what you need

**Timing:** The activity takes ~1 hour to complete, but can be shortened or lengthened as necessary. The second portion of this protocol, while inspired by *Data Wise*, is a YouthTruth recommendation for next steps that may require additional time.

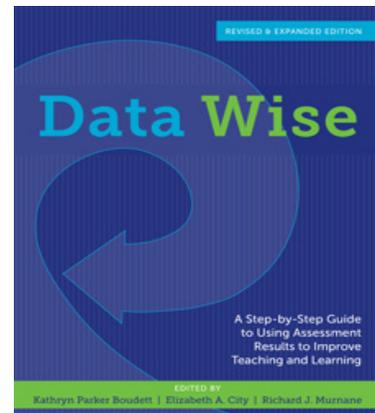
### Materials:

- ➔ Chart paper
- ➔ Small adhesive notes (at least 5 per person)
- ➔ Markers

**Space:** A room large enough for participants to walk around (a virtual room can also work).

**Click [here](#) to download the full protocol.**

**[https://youthtruthsurvey.org/backpack\\_makingmeaningofresults/](https://youthtruthsurvey.org/backpack_makingmeaningofresults/)**



# CONCLUSION

## We uplift the notion “nothing about us without us.”

Young people’s voices and leadership must be at the heart of equity initiatives. Gathering anonymous feedback from all students is the first step toward understanding whether groups of students are having different experiences compared to others. Since every injustice that has ever been experienced by someone has happened on the local level, student experience data can reveal inequities which can, and indeed must, be addressed at the local level. We hope this practical guidebook has helped you bring student experience data to bear to drive your equity initiatives.



**What would your school system look like if the unique perspectives of your most vulnerable students were central to decision-making?**

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## ABOUT YOUTHTRUTH

YouthTruth is a national nonprofit that harnesses student and stakeholder feedback to help educators accelerate improvements. Through validated survey instruments and tailored advisory services, YouthTruth partners with schools, districts, and education funders to enhance learning for all students. To learn more about the research that informs our work, please visit [youthtruthsurvey.org/resources/#research](https://youthtruthsurvey.org/resources/#research).

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