

# TEEN VOICES:

## What We Really Need From Schools

To get some insider perspectives for this issue, *EL* editors reached out to several teens across the country, inviting them to tell us about their school experiences and what their biggest challenges are. We asked them: What do you most need from your school, your teachers, your community? Here's what they said.



### Embrace Inclusivity

Muna Farah - Age 17

Health Sciences High & Middle College  
San Diego, California



As a black Muslim woman, I am often targeted for the language I speak, the clothes I wear, the religion I practice, the color of my skin, and my gender. It is hard for a person like me to thrive in any setting.

But my school has made me and my peers feel welcome and not alone. The school community has embraced my culture and has expanded all students' knowledge of other religions.

Some students aren't as lucky as I am. Some students still have to face difficult situations outside and inside their own school. So, I think one thing that is very crucial for schools to do is to make a safe environment for teens. We should not have to look over our shoulders at school to make sure we're OK.

I found my voice within the walls of my school because the staff treated me like I was their own family. They believed in inclusivity and embraced every single student. It took me a long time to realize that I fit anywhere, that I could be a part of multiple groups, not just one. This realization has brought me a lot of memories and more laughter than I could ever imagine.

I was not always like this. In my first year of middle school, I was afraid to speak out, to use my sense of humor. I was the opposite of who I am today. This scares me because I think about the teenagers who do not have the right environment to prosper into better versions of themselves. I was not always a hopeful person, but what truly gave me hope was my teachers believing in me.

## Freely Offer Learning Supports

Jacob Lewis - Age 16

Scarborough High School  
Scarborough, Maine

I'm a junior, and I have autism spectrum disorder support level one (previously categorized as Asperger's Syndrome). When I was younger, I was in special education classrooms, then in general education classrooms with a paraprofessional for support. Now, I'm fully included and taking Advanced Placement classes.

I still have an individualized education program (IEP) that includes consultation services and a few accommodations such as motor breaks and preferential seating. In some classes, I choose a seat near the door. That allows me to temporarily leave the room when the classroom environment gets too loud. On other days, I may take a walk during class to clear my head and process the lesson.

While I am grateful for these accommodations, they raise the question: Why do I, or any of my peers, need an IEP or 504 plan to have access to simple accommodations for success?



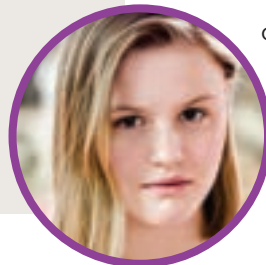
I may be more sensitive to noise or other stimuli than my peers, but that doesn't mean they wouldn't also benefit from taking a motor break. Many of the accommodations used in special education boil down to providing opportunities to learn in ways that make students more receptive. All students would learn better from a more flexible form of teaching and the ability to do things like sitting where they need to or having options of different ways to show what they know. For me, photography and videography are not only my passions, but they are also my way to connect socially and to show what I've learned. I've created videos instead of presentations for class. It presents the same material, but in a manner that showcases my knowledge and my strengths.

What I'd like to see in education are classrooms in which support is built in for *all* students. Students would feel more comfortable with their teachers because of their ability to do the work with less struggle. It would also increase teachers' insight into their students by understanding more what is difficult for them and what they need to be academically and emotionally successful. Incorporating supports in the classroom for all students should be standard practice.

## Show Us You Believe

Maisie Jung - Age 18

Sphinx Academy  
Lexington, Kentucky



Remember your favorite teacher? The one who impacted you the most? These impactful teachers weren't simply trying to get kids through the year, handing out packets and presenting slideshows. These teachers did so much more. They involved their students, opened in-depth discussions on students' interests, and sparked a passion for the subject. They were aiming to make a difference in their students' education and their lives.

This power to instill confidence, of course, has a flip side. When we see annoyance or exasperation directed at us from our teachers, it becomes more

difficult to go to the teachers for help. I couldn't count the number of times I've heard a kid talk about how they are bad at and dislike a subject, while in the same breath recounting a memory of a teacher in that subject who made them feel inadequate or unable. Excelling students are often treated as more valuable than other students. I have both seen and experienced this hierarchy of value at various points and know how much disdain for school can result from it.

For a teacher to teach well, it is vital that they continuously reach out to their students and help them aim high. Educators are entrusted with the most important job in the world—developing the minds of the young generations. And the minds of these students are heavily influenced by their teachers every day. Show us you believe. Show us you care.



## Reach Out to Bullied Students

**Sam Moehlig - Age 18**

**Dehesa Charter School  
Escondido, California**

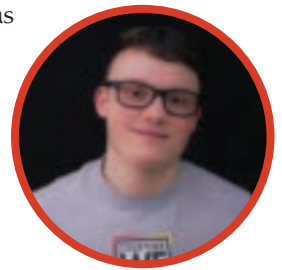
I am a transgender student. In my later elementary school years, prior to transition, I was in a physical education class that was my version of torture. Not because of the physical activity—I loved that, and I was always the kid who everyone wanted on their team—but because the second the class was over, a group of girls would corner me and start pressing hurtful questions on me.

“Sam, what are you?” “Are you a boy or a girl?” “Are you even human?”

I didn’t know how to answer them. If I said I was a girl, that was a lie, as I know myself as a boy. But if I said I was a boy, that, too, felt like a lie, as the world saw me as a girl. These girls ended up calling me “it.” Can you imagine that as a preteen? As much as the comments tore me apart, what confuses me to this

day is that every time I was being bullied and chased around the playground, my teachers were standing within 10 feet of these incidents. So, I kept it to myself for three years.

The amount of bullying that is happening in schools is rising, and as people who work with youth day in and day out, it is educators’ job to make that number go down, not up. One of the most helpful things you can do for your students is to communicate. Don’t be afraid to reach out to a youth you think is having a hard time and see if you can help. It shows that you are a safe person to talk to, and that can sometimes be one of the biggest supports you can give. Put an equality symbol or other welcoming sign on your classroom door to show your acceptance. Give them resources and connect them with counselors or support groups in the local area. Show them that they are not alone.



## Don’t Undervalue the Arts and Creativity

**Athanacia Varelas - Age 16**

**Castilleja School  
Palo Alto, California**

Don’t overlook the value of the arts in education. The arts—dance, theater, art, and music—can be a compelling vehicle for social change.

In schools, the arts are often marketed as an outlet for creativity, but what about the fact that artistic endeavors can profoundly move and impact an audience? Students live in a technological era, constantly inundated by text messages, emails, and “likes,” which glue us to our devices and numb us to the realities of other human beings. The arts have the power to break this cycle and engage with a community on an emotional level.

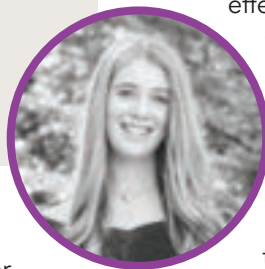
During the middle and high school years, it is of paramount importance that students are given the opportunity to understand their own unique voices and

perspectives. Schools need to provide avenues of self-expression in the creative fields for students to learn

effective communication skills. With growing teen-focused movements such as March for Our Lives, the voices of Generation Z are being amplified in ways that previous generations have never had. Educators should encourage their students to identify an issue that is meaningful in their lives and to the experiences of teenagers worldwide. I

was recently involved in my school’s annual Arts With a Heart production, which utilizes dance to raise awareness and funds for a partner nonprofit. It showed me that using the arts as a vehicle, students can educate and inform the school community about a problem through an artistic outlet.

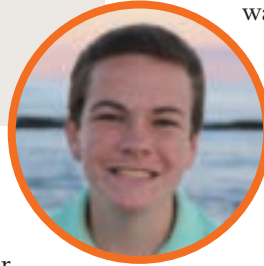
In a time when schools are emphasizing science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM), I ask that they also embrace creative and artistic learners. The interests traditionally considered nonessential, specifically the arts, will be the disciplines changing communities and the world in the decades to come.




## Why Can't We Ask Questions?

Mac Baker - Age 17

Winnacunnet High School  
Hampton, New Hampshire



Your teacher hands back a test. You got a question wrong. Your neighbor wrote the exact same answer, only his is marked as correct. You raise your hand and ask the teacher why yours is wrong. You are told it is wrong because it is wrong. No explanation. You ask the teacher to explain why the person next to you wrote the same answer and it was marked correct. He angrily tells you to

wait in the hall. Five minutes later, the teacher comes out in the hallway. He asks why you can't just accept that you got it wrong. You are frustrated, but try to calmly ask why it is wrong. After all, the point of attending school is to learn. The teacher shouts at you that it is wrong because you did it differently and screams at you to go to guidance for the rest of class. You sit, alone, wondering where you went wrong. The whole interaction seems a blur. Then you realize what was missing. The thing that all students have for their teacher, but not all teachers have for their students. Respect. 

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