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.

TEEN VOICES:
What We Really Need From Schools

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?

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.
Good Teachers Have a Ripple Effect
Joshua Lombardi - Age 17
Health Sciences High & Middle College
San Diego, California

A strong community is the most important factor of a great school. We need an uplifting place where everyone feels welcome and safe when they walk through the doors. With the help of teachers, students should be able to erase stereotypes and know each other for who they are inside.

I’ve been in school for 14 years, and I’ve found that the most effective teachers are those who make the effort to know me on a more personal level. If teachers can’t connect and have mutual understanding with students, how can they think that their students will accept what they teach them?

You know you have a good teacher when they make you learn while still respecting your individuality, when they want you to work toward your passion, when they encourage you to be the better and brighter future of the world. A good teacher does not only teach their subject, but also the subject of life.

I love my school because it provides a positive community along with teachers that actually care about their students. When teachers can have that kind of an impact on their students, then the school will see that impact in its community.

Stop the “Checklist Lifestyle”
Ethan Hemmings - Age 17
Wakefield High School
Arlington, Virginia

Two words come to mind when I think about ways to improve high schools for teens: “checklist lifestyle.”

A checklist lifestyle is when a person believes they must follow particular steps and goals in order to be successful in whatever their aspirations are. Students at my school seem to seek one of two pathways: college or the workforce. In my two-and-a-half years at Wakefield, I’ve noticed one major underlying stressor: People cannot bear to discuss for more than a few minutes the conversation about college.

Although we have a diverse community at Wakefield, many students are gaining a Type-A personality—“A” for anxiety. Too many students feel compelled to be constantly high-achieving just to be accepted—not only into good colleges, but also by their friends. Students constantly compare notes on how many AP classes they are taking or how difficult these classes are. This leads students to be stressed out by this fictitious game of “Who can work the hardest and suffer the most?” and serves as an unhealthy reminder that a student’s self-worth solely relies on their achievements.

Our teachers indirectly reinforce this ideology by promoting these classes and community service opportunities like must-have toys on a kid’s Christmas list. And the list is a student’s résumé that influences this “checklist lifestyle.”

I see this as a serious problem. I have friends who have joked about contemplating suicide because they feel completely lost, not only from the high expectations of their teachers and peers, but also from themselves. I am truly scared for their well-being because in situations like these, you never know who is truly hurting under that mask of a smile covering a person’s face. Schools need to reapproach the idea of achievement by relying on this simple principle: You do not need to be high-achieving to be loved and accepted.
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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