




Constituent Feedback in Education Grantmaking: An Untapped Resource

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In the current sociopolitical moment, in which many with less power (or those who have been strategically disenfranchised) find themselves struggling to get those in power to listen, there's broad agreement in philanthropy about the importance of constituent input. Funders are looking for ways to elevate the voices of those they're trying to help. This approach makes sense: the end user knows their unique context better than anyone else and has critical insight into opportunities for improvement. Empowering beneficiary voice is not just the right thing to do – it's also effective. The Center for Effective Philanthropy (CEP) found that funders who did so reported a more accurate understanding of the impact the foundation is having on the communities and fields in which they work. Funders who actively solicit the opinions of their beneficiaries also report a better understanding of the progress that their foundation is making strategically. 

If integrating constituent voice is a best practice for foundation performance assessment, then the majority of foundations must be doing it, right? Not exactly. In a 2011 survey of foundation CEOs, CEP found that only 27 percent of responding foundations include beneficiary opinions in their performance assessments. This number may be higher today, since there's broad agreement in the philanthropic community about “the why” behind constituent feedback. Yet many foundations still struggle with the “how.” So how does a funder actually begin to put beneficiaries in the driver's seat?

In education, the first way to incorporate student voice has to be student surveys. Student surveys are a valid and reliable predictor of student outcomes. Although the results are confidential, education funders with an equity lens can disaggregate the data by subgroups like race, gender, and socioeconomic status. Surveys are also more cost-effective and have a faster turnaround time compared to other measures of school success such as classroom observations or test scores. That makes survey data an accessible, invaluable metric when it comes to monitoring progress and making real-time changes.

In fact, the idea for [YouthTruth](#), a project of CEP, began as a collaboration between CEP and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to use surveys as a way to hear directly and systematically from students. Today, YouthTruth has surveyed over 1 million students across the country, and provides actionable measures of student engagement, school culture, and social-emotional learning (SEL) for foundation and district leaders to use in school improvement efforts. In YouthTruth's experience working with foundations across the country, we've seen amazing examples of funders who not only believe in the “why” behind listening to constituents, they've also got the “how.”




Here's just one example: the Career Technical Education (CTE) Foundation expands and enhances career and technical education programs throughout Sonoma County (CA). Their work is guided by a vision for all students to have rewarding careers that strengthen their lives, the community, and the economy. Seeking rich feedback from students to incorporate into their program evaluation and strategic planning processes, they partnered with YouthTruth to survey their students.

After the survey results were in, the foundation's leadership team began using the student feedback to move towards large-scale systemic changes. "Students know when they're not being truly heard," says Associate Executive Director Amber Figueroa, "Students want to see their input integrated... And when they don't see that, they check out, which contributes to a feeling of disempowerment and lack of engagement." CTE Foundation is in the planning and initial implementation stages of its next steps and including youth every step of the way. Here are some of the ways that they're integrating students into their planning and strategy processes:

- Inviting students to serve in an ex-officio position on the Board of Directors and as participants on the Grant Committee
- Exploring grant opportunities for schools to design and testing interventions in response to the YouthTruth data
- Developing student internships at the Foundation and engaging them in programmatic work, including strategic design and implementation
- Convening school leaders to discuss opportunities for improvement and action
- Engaging community groups such as Cradle to Career, Health Action, and Los Cien in the development of areas identified for growth based on YouthTruth insights
- Discussing the insights from students with the Board of Directors and Grant Committee, in preparation for 2020 strategic planning

Elevating student voice has brought more than just practical and mission-aligned changes to CTE Foundation. Asking students for feedback and engaging them in decision making has helped generate new partners and deepened existing relationships. "We have received tremendous response from community partners that want to engage; we're now working on enlisting full support from our school partners to partner with the larger community of youth service organizations in the development of solutions," says Figueroa.

As education funders seek strategies to increase their impact, there's no better source for insights than the voices of youth themselves. 

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