

First Ask, Then Listen

How to Get Your Students To Help You Teach Them Better

A Teachers Guide

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In the book *Fires in the Bathroom: Advice for Teachers from High School Students* (New Press, 2003), urban teenagers across the country speak bluntly about their school experiences. Their comments, gathered during intensive discussions and writing sessions with the nonprofit group What Kids Can Do, Inc. (www.whatkidscando.org) met with immediate interest on publication. Many educators, even those seasoned by years in the classroom, found themselves struck by aspects of the student experience that had somehow slipped their notice. "This book is both painful and wonderful to read," commented Deborah Meier, whose career as an educational leader spans over 40 years.

The insights in *Fires in the Bathroom* reflect a fundamental feature of adolescence that is curiously ignored by most current school reform efforts: the need for teenagers to enter into meaningful partnerships with adults. Increasingly, research suggests that addressing this developmental need within the school setting has significant positive effects on students' motivation, engagement, and academic achievement. If we seek those outcomes as an educational priority, improving communication between students and their teachers would be a good place to start.

Encouragingly, listening to students does not depend on any particular expertise. Anyone who likes young people and values their opinions can do this work. It takes time, persistence, and attention to organize, but it can easily take place in the context of a classroom or advisory group. It requires thoughtful analysis to sort out patterns and draw conclusions from a flood of material, but educators and students possess those talents in abundance.

This short manual offers a starting place for those interested in finding out what students have to say. Using the same questions that prompted the discussions leading to *Fires in the Bathroom*, teachers can begin for themselves the honest dialogue from which both students and adults so richly benefit. Whether gathered through student writing or transcribed conversations, the responses will begin to build a base of mutual confidence that students have something valuable to contribute to their own education. As students encounter here the teaching tools devised by the young co-authors of *Fires in the Bathroom*, they can critique and enlarge them based on their own experiences. And as teachers hear their own students speak their minds in a structured and respectful setting, they can begin to adapt their practice to meet their learning needs more effectively.

Tips for Structuring Dialogues with Students

The steps below reflect the experiences of researchers for What Kids Can Do, as we gathered students' opinions about school for publication in *Fires in the Bathroom*. Though your own process might easily vary, the basic principles remain important, reflecting our fundamental belief that adults must actively seek to understand what students think and why they think it.

1. Root the process in inquiry. Begin by developing questions that will yield what you're really interested in learning about. In our case, we needed to know what new teachers worried about most as they prepared to teach adolescents in diverse urban classrooms. So we began by querying several groups of beginning teachers: "If you could ask your students any question about what or how you teach, what would you ask?"

We shaped questions from their replies, sorting them into sets that seemed to go together. We tried to keep our questions concrete, basing them in students' experiences, not just their opinions. And we learned to recognize the questions that bombed, asking students during uncomfortable pauses: "Is this the right question? What do you think the real question is?" We constantly asked what we might be forgetting.

Steadily, students transformed our questions—that is, the questions of new teachers—into their own. For us, this was a crucial goal from the start: that the students be collaborators, not subjects, in the research.

2. Gather students willing to express their thoughts. Unlike teachers who have ready access to young people, we had to locate the students who would collaborate with us for *Fires in the Bathroom*. Using every available professional connection, we sought out students who would talk openly about their school experiences. Whenever we found students willing to participate, we asked whether they could interest a friend in coming, too. Academic success was not a requirement; in fact, we most wanted students who struggled in school. We paid students for their time at an hourly rate comparable to that of an undergraduate research assistant. Though most teachers will not be able to offer stipends, they can seek other concrete ways (a quiet and comfortable environment, refreshments, help with transportation) to convey respect for students' time and energy.

3. Keep groups small. Typically, we gathered in small groups of three to five students—which clearly will not be possible for teachers if they use class time for their discussions. Advisory groups of around twelve students, or extracurricular teams or clubs, however, could provide smaller alternative settings.

Each of our groups met for at least three sessions of three to five hours, for the most part on weekends and during school vacations. Inevitably, given the press of their lives and their skepticism about this unusual enterprise, only half of those we expected actually showed up. Teachers may have an advantage in this regard, if they can schedule more frequent but shorter sessions during or after school.

4. Write everything down. Our sessions combined writing and discussion, in proportion to students' capacities and rhythms. We recorded on a notebook computer everything students said, and we later transcribed their handwritten responses to our question sets as well. That visible commitment to take account of everything students said created a climate of serious purpose. The facilitator often read back what people had said for accuracy, asking follow-up questions and giving them the chance to critique, amend, or amplify their comments. A conversation that spiraled into casual chitchat returned more quickly to the subject as students saw their words written down.

Video or audio tape recorders could be good alternatives to writing down student comments, particularly when used in combination with notes on chart paper that everyone can see. Though taping conveys the desired tone of purpose and consequence to the discussion, transcribing the recordings into a written transcript is an important next step—one that makes analyzing and sharing student comments with others much easier.

5. Ask for evidence. Because students are as ready as adults to rely on abstractions or generalizations, we continually sought supporting details and specific situations in their responses. If a student complained about a teacher, for instance, we tried to nail down the offending behavior, not merely record the student's annoyance. Kids got used to our saying, "Can you tell me more about that?" or "What was *that* like for you?" As students worked together, they grew more adept at supporting their own assertions and probing each other's experiences for nuance and contradictions.

6. Analyze the material together. Because the goal of our book was to offer advice, our discussions always ended with: "So what would you suggest to a teacher?" We weighed whether spontaneous advice ("We shouldn't have homework!") was merely frivolous or contained kernels of wisdom. Analyzing students' suggestions together, we created lists of Do's and Don'ts, calendars, questionnaires, and exercises to help teachers and students better understand each other. This manual presents a few examples of the many that appear in *Fires in the Bathroom.* Students in different settings might alter or expand upon them or create their own from scratch.

7. Create a Written Product. The fact that we had to write something from students' responses lent a sense of purpose to our conversations. Teachers may likewise benefit from proposing a written product of some sort as a culmination to the discussions. Whether it takes the shape of classroom norms posted on the wall, an article in the school newspaper, or a presentation before the school board or PTA, having to create a written document adds seriousness to the endeavor.

In most cases, we chose not to publish the names of teachers when they came up in student comments, whether positive or negative. But encouragingly, students' suggestions often derived from the example of a particularly effective teacher in their school.

Reminders for Respectful Discussions

Though teachers and other professionals undoubtedly draw on their own norms for group discussions, we offer the following tips as reminders for keeping conversations respectful, positive, and productive.

1. If possible, limit the number of group participants to 12.

2. Make sure only one person talks at a time. Write down a speaking order if necessary, and do not allow interruptions.

3. Make sure everyone has the opportunity to speak; one or two people should not dominate the conversation.

4. Ask neutral, open-ended questions. Avoid leading questions and those that can be answered with a simple "yes" or "no."

5. Opposing points of view should always focus on the idea or opinion, never the person expressing it.

6. Make sure to designate a note-taker. If appropriate, appoint a clock-watcher to keep track of the time.

Question Sets and Exercises to Prompt Discussions with Students

In the sections that follow, we provide examples of the question sets we used with our student co-authors of *Fires in the Bathroom*. So as to break up the material into smaller parts, we group the questions—and exercises that accompany them—into four themes.

- *Personal Connections to the Teacher*
- *Expectations and Motivation*
- *Learning Inside the Classroom and Out*
- *Classroom Climate and Management*

We trust teachers will use these themes, question sets, and exercises as they see fit. They can use the questions to spark discussion with their own students, or modify or replace our prompts to address the questions that most concern them. They can present our questions to students as a model, then seek from students their own alternative questions.

In the case of *Fires in the Bathroom*, we discussed some of the questions as a group; for others we had students write down individual responses. How many questions or exercises to attempt in any one sitting will depend on individual schedules and the pacing that best suits students' capabilities.

A final note: each of the sets below consists of several individual questions. For both writing and discussion sessions, we found that asking students the questions one at a time produced the best results; it allowed students to focus on the topic at hand without looking ahead to what came next.

Theme 1: *Personal Connections to the Teacher*

Students appreciate being asked what helps them feel respected and engaged in the classroom, and they can often give specific examples from their experience. To keep the discussion from turning too negative, follow up any complaint with the question, "What would have been a better way for the teacher to handle that situation?"

Question Sets:

Describe the teacher you liked the best. Describe the teacher you learned the most from. Are they different? If so, why?

Do you need to like a teacher to be able to learn from a teacher? Does the teacher need to like the students? Can you tell if a teacher likes some students better than others?

Have you ever had a teacher who especially liked you better than other students? How could you tell and how did that make you feel? Have you ever had a teacher who especially didn't like you? How could you tell and how did that make you feel?

When a teacher is different from you or from most of the class in some way, what are the things they can do that can help make a connection anyway? What are the things that don't work?

Exercise: A questionnaire for teachers to give their students

Student authors of *Fires in the Bathroom* compiled the following questionnaire as a way for teachers to get to know their students. They suggested teachers distribute it to their classes on the first day of school. It reflects the information that they wanted their teachers to know about them; different groups of students, of course, may have different ideas.

***Who Are You?* A Questionnaire for Students on the First Day of School**

Note: I will not share your answers with anyone without your permission.

Basic information:

Name: _____ Name you like to be called: _____

Date of birth: _____ Place of birth _____

Phone number: _____ Email address: _____

Parents' or guardian's names: _____

Any siblings? What ages? Do they live with you? _____

_____

Others who live in your household? _____

_____

What language do you speak at home? _____

Are you new to this school? Where were you before? _____

_____

About your activities and interests:

What time do you usually get up in the morning? _____

When do you usually go to bed at night? _____

How do you get to school? _____ How long does it take? _____

What do you do after school? _____

_____

What are your other interests? _____

_____

What do you imagine yourself doing ten years from now? _____

_____

Exercise: Questions students would like to ask their teachers

Though adolescents often hide it, they are interested in their teachers' lives. The students who worked with us on *Fires in the Bathroom* listed the following questions as ones they'd like to ask their teachers. Teachers can either answer these questions for their students or use the list as a starting place to solicit questions their own students would want to ask them.

- Where did you go to college?

- Did you have other jobs before this one? What were they?
- Why did you become a teacher? Why this subject?
- Are you married? Do you have any kids?

Theme 2: *Expectations and Motivation*

These next questions ask students to think about their own learning—and as they do, to identify the conditions under which they either do well or lose heart. Not only does the discussion give the students practice in higher-order thinking, but their answers can help teachers enormously in shaping a more effective classroom practice.

Question Sets:

How does a teacher give little signals that she expects you to try hard and do well? That she expects you NOT to try hard and do well? That she thinks you are smart, or not? How might a teacher act in ways that make it safe to try hard and to do well? That make it NOT safe?

In or out of school, have you ever felt that you were learning something and it was important to YOU to learn that, not just because you were supposed to? If so, what made those things so important? Have you ever had that feeling in a class? If so, describe that time.

Has your teacher ever asked you a question that really made you think about something in a new way? That made it clear that you weren't supposed to think?

In your life in and out of school, what pressures do you feel to do well? What pressures NOT to do well?

Was there ever a time in your life that you felt that you hated school? If so, why? Was there ever a time in your life that you felt that you loved school? If so, why?

Theme 3: *Learning Inside the Classroom and Out*

These questions aim to identify the situations in which students act most like confident and independent learners—whether they are learning on their own, from their peers, or from mentors in or out of school. Students' responses can help teachers design tasks that dovetail with students' own interests and expertise.

Question Sets:

Have you ever been in a situation where you're learning from other students, not just from the teacher? If so, how did that happen? (Did the teacher's actions have anything to do with it?)

Teachers often are told not to do all the talking, but instead to set up situations in which students are more active—group work, hands-on activities, discussions or seminars, projects and presentations. What do you like about these strategies, and why? What do you dislike about them, and why? If they're not working, what could teachers do to make them work better?

Make a list of everything you know a lot about, whether you learned it in school or out of school. Next to each item, say who helped you learn that thing. Next to each thing on your list, make a check if one or more of your teachers knows about your expertise in that area.

Has there ever been a time (in or out of school) when you really wanted to write something? If so, explain. Have you ever wanted to make a piece of your writing the best it could possibly be? If so, explain why.

List all the situations in your life (in school or out) in which you read anything at all. Put a plus mark beside any of the times on your list that you enjoy. Put a minus mark beside any of the times on your list that you don't enjoy.

Exercise: A student questionnaire on individual learning styles

Our student co-authors created the following questionnaire as an aid to help teachers understand their students' various learning styles. They suggested distributing it early in the school year or semester.

How do you learn? A Questionnaire for Students

Do you like this subject? Why or why not? _____

_____

_____

What would you really like to learn about in this class?

_____

_____

How much homework do you expect? _____

_____

What's fair for me to expect from you? _____

_____

Describe the way you learn things best.

_____

_____

How do you feel about working in groups? _____

_____

Is there anything that could make this class especially hard for you?

_____

_____

Can you think of a way I could help you with this? _____

_____

Is there anything else about you that you would like me to know?

_____

_____

Theme 4: *Classroom Climate and Management*

Some of the following questions get at issues filled with tension and strong emotions on the part of both teachers and students. To keep the discussion from slipping into defensive responses or arguments, it can help to take turns speaking and listening, without interruption. Writing in journals afterward can also provide a way to reflect on what participants hear, with the benefit of time to think over new perspectives.

Question Sets:

Describe a classroom in which you felt safe and comfortable speaking up or asking questions when you don't understand something. What made it feel that way? When does it feel bad for a teacher to call on you in class? Why? How does it feel when a teacher singles you out for praise? For criticism? Why?

Sometimes teachers aren't experts in the material they're asked to teach you. Make a list of all the things a teacher should do and shouldn't do when they're in that situation.

Teachers sometimes have trouble managing their classes. What kinds of trouble have you seen teachers run into? When you see them have trouble like that, can they ever recover from it? What does it feel like to be in a class when the teacher is having trouble?

How should the teacher act when students in a class act mean or cruel to each other? How should the teacher act when a student disrupts the class?

How does a teacher know when a kid has disrespected her? What's the way the teacher could best deal with it? Describe an example of when you or another student have been disrespected by a teacher. Can a teacher fix a situation like that? If so, how?

Do you (or other students) test out a teacher when checking them out? How? What's the worst thing a new teacher can do?

Exercise: Understanding student behavior

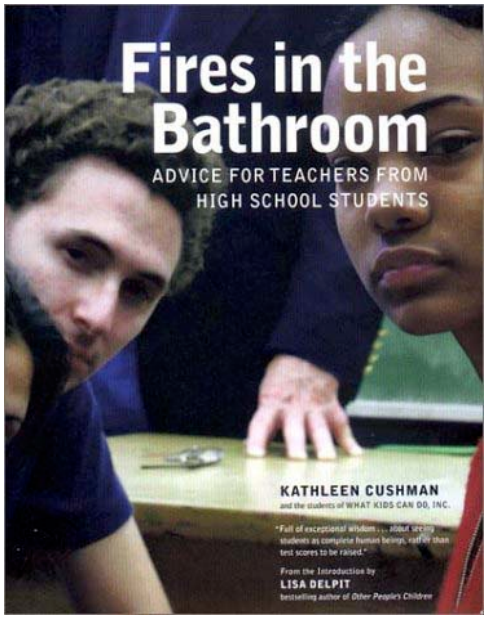
Fires in the Bathroom student authors explained that a teacher's display of fairness, trust, and respect has an important effect on students' classroom behavior. If a teacher knows and cares about the material and treats kids with respect and fairness, students say they generally will pay attention, do the work, and play by the rules. But if teachers signal unwillingness to keep up their part, kids will immediately act to right the balance, a struggle that many consider an "out-of-control classroom." Our student authors created and completed the table below as a way to help teachers understand what lies behind certain types of disruptive student behaviors. Teachers can ask their students to fill in their own answers or add to the table below.

Understanding Student Behavior

When we feel . . .	*We act like this . . .*	*How a teacher could change that feeling*
Bored	Inattentive, passing notes, playing cards, reading magazines, eating or drinking, talking to friends, giggling, pestering teacher with irrelevant questions	Use curriculum and activities that relate to our interests or call on our strengths
Physically restless		
Insecure about our status among peers		
Upset or worried about personal or family troubles		
Anxious about not being able to do the work		
Unseen and unheard, disrespected or disliked by the teacher		

Fires in the Bathroom

Advice for Teachers from High School Students



By Kathleen Cushman and the Students of What Kids Can Do; Introduction by Lisa Delpit
(The New Press, May 2003)

What's a new teacher to do when "she's trying to be nice and they're setting fires in the bathroom," as one Oakland teenager put it? How can a teacher transcend the barriers of adolescent identity and culture to reach across diverse students in today's schools? Forty students from three cities contributed their perceptive and pragmatic answers to help create this riveting guide for any teacher of teenagers

Every teenager is different, these young people say, but all need teachers who know them well without violating their boundaries, who challenge them without humiliating or ignoring them. This book sets forth invaluable techniques for creating classroom cultures where respect and success go hand in hand.

> *"If you say 'please' too much, they think it's an option."* DARYL, PROVIDENCE

> *"You love school when it makes you feel smart. When you know the teachers care about you and your future…when they act like they think you'll be someone in life."* VERONICA, OAKLAND

From the reviews of *Fires in the Bathroom:*

- "In *Fires in the Bathroom*…students turn the tables on adults, and tell them how to do their jobs." (New York Times)
- "An important book…a powerful critique of American teaching…*Fires in the Bathroom* should find a place in any professional development library…The student voices give its advice...an authenticity and a sincerity that advice books for teachers often lack…A powerful and compelling document...A major contribution." (Teachers College Record)
- "*Fires in the Bathroom* doles out practical advice…[in] an unusual…effort to tap the opinions of American high school students…Students get a rare opportunity to voice their opinions about what works and what doesn't." (Los Angeles Times)
- "This book turns the student-teacher relationship upside down…Suggests ways to deepen the unspoken bond between students and teachers." (Chicago Tribune, *Editor's Choice*)
- "This chance to hear the authentic voice of students…should not be overlooked by anyone involved in teen education." (Publishers Weekly)
- "Thoughtful and articulate…offer[s] insights about a range of school-related subjects, including classroom behavior, student motivation, and learning style." (Teacher Magazine)