



Chris Godfrey, 7th-grade math teacher and teacher leader, talks with students Meriem Gouitit and Sabirah Simon at Putnam Avenue Upper School in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Student identity and voice are woven into instruction throughout the school.

# LEARNING IS A TWO-WAY STREET

MIDDLE SCHOOL STRENGTHENS TEACHING BY FOCUSING ON STUDENT IDENTITY

BY SUZANNE BOUFFARD AND LIZ MURRAY

**"S**chool is not a rehearsal for life. School *is* life," says Mirko Chardin, founding principal of Putnam Avenue Upper School, a public middle school serving a diverse group of 6th-8th graders in Cambridge, Massachusetts. When the school was founded in 2012 as part of a districtwide middle school reorganization, its leaders and staff were determined to focus on the student experience and put student voice at the heart of their work.

"People often talk about putting kids at the center, but no one talks about how," Chardin says. "Kids can't be at the center if the adults don't have the capacity to understand their perspectives."

For Chardin and his colleagues, this means more than simply asking students what they think — although that is part of their approach. Student identity and voice are woven into instruction throughout the school, with leaders and staff constantly asking themselves how they can learn from

students about their experiences and how to use that insight to continually refine educator practice.

At the school, which serves the highest-needs population in the district — 45% of students are classified as economically disadvantaged, 29% of students have diagnosed disabilities, and 24% speak a first language other than English (Cambridge Public Schools, n.d.a) — the adults work within a framework called Going Beyond Access, which embeds identity, relevance, and cultural responsiveness into the school experience.

Chardin says the talk in education circles about equity and access to high-quality learning materials and opportunities can be powerful, but not enough. Students, he says, need authentic, relevant, and meaningful learning opportunities.

He explains by way of a medical analogy, saying that even if all patients had access to customized pharmaceuticals, “if there was no treatment plan, no understanding of patient history or allergies, that access wouldn’t be the leveraging agent that helped make people well.”

Chardin talks openly about his own struggles in secondary school as a young man of color. The lack of connectedness and relevance contributed to a cycle of disengagement, disciplinary action, and expulsions that nearly kept him from a high school diploma. He is passionate about making sure he provides his students with different school experiences.

That kind of passion — for academic excellence, social justice, and applying knowledge to improving one’s



Maryam Barry shares her story of self with principal Mirko Chardin.

self and the world — is one of the five core values of the school. The other four are pride, ownership, balance, and perseverance (Cambridge Public Schools, n.d.b).

Established by the school’s founding faculty and students, the values resonated because they were authentic and not educational jargon, according to staff. At the heart of all of them is a sense of visibility and identity.

### BEYOND ACCESS

The Going Beyond Access framework, which Chardin developed based on research and scholarship, is anchored in three core concepts.

The first, derived from the work of Beverly Daniel Tatum, is valuing impact over intentions. While students and staff recognize the importance of operating with positive intent, they also push themselves to consider whether the steps they take are having a real impact for students and

the community, and that requires listening to and making sense of kids’ experiences.

The second, building on the work of Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot, is ensuring that students can see themselves reflected in the work. That includes learning from faculty who share their backgrounds, seeing images of people who look like them on the walls, doing readings and assignments that reflect their culture and interests, and having frequent opportunities to tell their stories. Students report that it also includes staff routinely seeking student input and revising learning opportunities accordingly.

The third piece, drawn from the work of Christopher Emdin, is ensuring that learning tasks are authentically relevant for each group of students. The team works to check its own assumptions about what resonates with students and learn from the students themselves.

“What is relevant for a group of young people in June 2019 is not necessarily going to resonate for a group in September 2019,” Chardin says. The only way to avoid incorrect assumptions is to listen. When educators don’t do that, he says, their efforts to connect with students fall flat.

**EDUCATOR LEARNING**

To ensure that identity, relevance, and cultural responsiveness are embedded schoolwide, they are emphasized in professional learning for leaders and staff. In addition to regular professional learning and collaboration structures that occur several times per week, staff choose focus areas for six staff intensives per year because, as Chardin says, an assembly or occasional reading doesn’t suffice “if we are going to embrace social justice ... [and] lift up identity.”

That means committing to authentic learning opportunities that model the kind of learning experiences adults want to create for young people. After all, Chardin asks, “How can an adult who has never been at the center of their own learning experience create rich learning experiences for kids?”

The school’s professional learning is grounded in the following key strategies:

**A parallel path for adult learners and student learners.** When the team embarks on a new initiative for improving its work with students, team members practice and experience the new learning tasks together so that they understand and empathize with the student experience and can revise accordingly before implementing. As Chris Godfrey, a 7th-grade math teacher, explained, until you do the assignment yourself, “you don’t know what you don’t know.”

For example, last summer, Christina Farese, the school’s director of teaching, learning, and coaching, led math team members through an activity on examining their mathematical thinking and exploring their math identities before they implemented

**WHAT STUDENT VOICE MEANS TO ME**

*Here’s what Putnam Avenue Upper School students say student voice means to them:*

**Nuraya Toledo, 8th grade:** “[It means] that our opinions matter. Certain things we do, they ask our opinion on it. It’s more helpful for us than them just handing to us and we just sit there.”

**Abby Duncan, 8th grade:** “For me, it’s seeing teachers going out of their way to give us students what we need to better ourselves in that subject. ... Seeing us doesn’t necessarily mean only hearing our voices, but observing us and seeing us through our actions as well.”

**Sammy Nkemnik, 8th grade:** “I think it’s the ability to ... go up to a teacher and tell them what you don’t like about the class and then have them change it so it’s a better learning environment for you.”

**Adam Ouassaidi, 7th grade:** “It can help the teachers improve what they’re teaching, because if you tell them ... what they need to work on or how it will help you with learning, then they can change it up and make it better for the students as well as the teachers, which is pretty much the goal.”

**HOW WE ELICIT STUDENT VOICE**

*Putnam Avenue Upper School staff describe how they elicit student voice:*

**Chris Godfrey, 7th-grade math teacher and teacher leader:** “We start the year with a lot of team building and just getting to know our students, and that sets the foundation for the work we’re trying to accomplish. There’s a quote that always stands out in my brain that goes something to the effect that, ‘You have to earn the right to redirect someone.’ There are a lot of individuals in education who are really well-meaning, but they miss that piece of building that relationship to be able to deliver the content.”

**Kareem Cutler, 6th-grade math teacher and teacher leader:** “We do verbal and written surveys to learn about students’ experiences. We do an activity called number talks [an instructional strategy aimed at engaging all voices in the math classroom and empowering all students to discuss and feel empowered by their mathematical thinking].”

**Michelle Calioro, math coach and founding teacher leader:** “We did math identity projects as a team over the summer, and then teachers did them with their students [to explore feelings about math and beliefs about self related to math]. A lot of my students don’t see themselves as mathematicians, but in this project ... they start to open themselves up and see [being a mathematician] is a lot more than they would have normally seen.”

a revised version of the activity with students (see sidebar above). The adults make this learning transparent to the students.

This commitment to modeling extends to structuring staff meetings and professional learning the way

teachers are expected to structure classes. “We need to look at our meetings as lessons and our agendas as lesson plans,” Chardin says. The same applies to common planning time, staff intensives, and other forms of professional learning.



**Starting small.** When starting new initiatives, the school's leaders believe that less is more and that it's important not to rush to scale. Michelle Calioro, a founding teacher, explains that this gives people a chance to be vulnerable. "To really give kids voice and choice, you have to give up some teacher control, and that can be scary," she says. "... [Starting with pilots] gives people opportunities to take a little risk. It shows that we're going to do it together, and then we'll see what happens and we'll grow from there."

For example, school leaders used small pilot projects to begin using Universal Design for Learning, an instructional framework that helps educators make learning accessible to all through recognizing learners' variability and providing flexibility.

They worked with volunteers to experiment and grapple with it over a three-year period. Those volunteers gradually became teacher experts who helped lead a full rollout. Universal Design for Learning is now applied schoolwide, and staff are working to make cultural responsiveness an explicit part of the framework.

**Collaborative learning.** Teachers and staff do not learn or work in isolation. Among many structures for professional learning are common planning times three times a week, during which teachers engage in grade-level planning, delving into student work, data, and student support. Sometimes they will examine a video or text and discuss its implications for their instruction.

Chardin says this kind of collaborative learning is especially important for cultural proficiency because it ensures that adults are developing relationships and learning from colleagues who are different from them.

**Commitment to action.** Chardin says he and his staff have made a commitment to "being doers." That means constantly asking themselves, "Do we actually believe what we say we believe?," following through on

their commitments, and ensuring that everything they do — even what they hang on the walls — has a purpose. That applies to how adults work with each other as well as with students.

### PUTTING TOGETHER THE PIECES

One example of how leaders and staff put all these pieces together can be seen in the school's annual Story of Self project, which builds on work by sociologist Marshall Ganz. Each fall, students spend several weeks crafting a personal narrative about a challenge they have faced, a choice they made in navigating it, and the outcome of that process.

Their stories are shared with their peers, school staff, and the wider community during a special event in December. The goal is to illustrate how this experience shaped or demonstrates a key value the student holds while promoting writing and presentation skills.

The focus of the project is on students, but it doesn't start with students. First, staff write their own stories and share them with one another. Then they share them with students to model vulnerability, build trust, and normalize the experience. Chardin says this gives adults a sense of humility and connection as they coach students to craft their narratives.

After students write and share stories of challenge and growth, school staff who lead advisory groups facilitate circles, derived from restorative practices, to help students reflect on their experience. For example, in Fatima Sammy's 8th-grade advisory, students begin by sharing their feelings about the experience, then give other advisory members support, and identify feedback about their own performance to keep them growing and stretching.

This structure works well because the school implements restorative practices regularly. As with many other initiatives, school leaders launched restorative practice with a pilot that focused on whether adults could engage productively in a restorative circle. Over

time, the practice grew and staff learned to facilitate it with students. Now students participate in several circles a week, during advisory period and sometimes during core classes.

Sammy says circles give students space to deal with frustration that arises in the classroom and with peers and teachers so they can move on. Counselors also lead smaller circles with students having conflicts. 8th-grade student Abby Duncan, who finds that circles ease the stress of a hectic week, says that teachers also use them to see if lessons connected with students.

### TRUST AND VULNERABILITY

Support for adult learning and growth are at the center of all of this work, which requires trust and vulnerability. "If we want to treat our kids with respect and dignity, we have to treat our adults with respect and dignity," Chardin says. "We've tried to model the idea that our school needs to be an adult learning community in order for it to be a rich learning community for students. And the learning experiences for everyone have to be authentic."

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**Suzanne Bouffard (suzanne.bouffard@learningforward.org) is editor of *The Learning Professional* and vice president, publications at Learning Forward. Liz Murray (lmurray731@gmail.com) is an educational leadership consultant in the Boston area. ■**