



Creating “Good” Schools Observation and Discussion Tool ABRIDGED

*Developed by Francine Joselowsky, Jean Thomases
and Nicole Yohalem*

This abridged tool is excerpted from
*Creating “Good” Schools: Observation and Discussion Tool
Helping Young People and Adults Have Conversations about
What Makes a “Good” Youth-Centered School*
and is available online at www.forumfyi.org

September 2004



The Forum for Youth Investment (the Forum) is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization dedicated to helping communities and the nation make sure all young people are **ready by 21 — ready for work, college and life.**™ The Forum provides youth and adult leaders with the information, technical assistance, training, network support and partnership opportunities needed to increase the quality and quantity of youth investment and youth involvement.

impact
strategies, inc.

About this resource: Creating “Good” Schools: Observation and Discussion Tool: Abridged is a resource produced by The Forum for Youth Investment (the Forum), based on a series of focus groups, work with the Cross-City Campaign for Urban School Reform on their “Students as Partners in High School Redesign Conference” and workshops made available through a partnership with the Office of the Secretary of Education and the California Department of Education. This document was developed with the generous support of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the Carnegie Corporation of New York.

Printed in the U.S.A. • February 2005

SUGGESTED CITATION: Joselowsky, F., Thomases, J. & Yohalem, N. (2004). *Creating “Good” Schools: Observation and Discussion Tool: Abridged*. Excerpted from *Creating “Good” Schools: Observation and Discussion Tool: Helping Young People and Adults Have Conversations about What Makes a “Good” Youth-Centered School*. Washington, DC: The Forum for Youth Investment, Impact Strategies, Inc.

© 2004 by Impact Strategies, Inc. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any manner whatsoever, mechanical or electronic, without prior permission from the publisher, except for brief quotations or summaries in articles or reviews. For additional permission:

Please contact the Forum and Impact Strategies, Inc. at The Cady-Lee House • 7064 Eastern Avenue, NW • Washington, DC 20012-2031
T: 202.207.3333 • F: 202.207.3329, youth@forumforyouthinvestment.org • www.forumfyi.org, for information about reprinting this publication and information about other publications.

Overview of the Tool

The tool you are about to use is designed to be used both when visiting another school and as an assessment of your own school. In each section, we will ask you to do three things:

- 1. Observe:** Tell us what you see.
- 2. Find Evidence:** Record examples of what you see.
- 3. Ask Questions:** Dig deeper. Some things in a school are easier to see than others, that is why we include a section of suggested questions. We suggest that you ask questions to teachers, students, administrators and parents (if possible) as different stake holders often have different opinions.

How the Tool Works

This tool is meant to serve as a guide to help students and adults begin to see real opportunities to improve their school community. The following three steps will help you collect data as you walk around a school:

1. Observe the Space/Activity: What Do You See?

Try to familiarize yourself with the tool. As you walk through different spaces in the school entrance/walkways/hallways/classrooms/offices/cafeteria, begin by “observing.” What do you see, both in the physical environment and in the interactions between young people and young people and adults?

2. Collect Evidence and Assess: Give Examples of What It Looks Like

Once you have observed the space/activity, look at the statements in the tool. Based on what you see, decide which category this school falls into. Then mark an “X” in one of the boxes under “No,” “Somewhat” or “Yes” and write down what you see, your own “evidence” or examples.

Example: The entrance of the school is clean, open and inviting.

- **No:** The entrance is dirty, dark and unmarked. It looks like you're entering a prison.
- **Somewhat:** There is some trash or graffiti, but it seems out of place. The entrance is small and crowded.
- **Yes:** There is no trash or graffiti. The entrance is well marked and bright. There are trash cans outside the entrance.

3. Ask Questions: Dig a Little Deeper

Sometimes you might have to dig a little deeper to find out more about the things you can not see. As you walk around a school, there are some things you will not be able to observe, so you might need to ask questions to get more information. For example, it is really hard to see if students have a role in making decisions in a school if you do not sit in on some type of meeting (*see Youth Engagement: Personalization and Climate, page 12*), so you need to ask both youth and adults questions to figure out if this is really happening. (At the end of each section you will find a list of suggested questions that will help you collect this information.)

Personalization: Climate: Entrance, Hallways and Community/Shared Spaces

Q: *What makes a school worth going to?*

A: When the school makes students feel like they belong.¹

Mark appropriate columns with an X	No	Somewhat	Yes	Evidence
The entrance/hallways is clean, open and inviting				
Adults are visible				
Adults and students are interacting/engaging with each other in positive ways				
Adults are modeling behavior they expect from students				

Mark appropriate columns with an X	No	Somewhat	Yes	Evidence
Students are interacting comfortably with all students				
Students feel comfortable and safe				
School/Community pride is evident				
There is a strong sense of community and openness in the school				

Mark appropriate columns with an X	No	Somewhat	Yes	Evidence
Students of different cultures, ethnicities, ages and genders hang out together and respect one another				
The cultural diversity of the school is celebrated and valued				
Bathrooms are clean and safe				

Suggested Discussion Questions For *Climate*

For Administrators

- How is the school made welcoming to youth? (At the beginning of the year, everyday, for students entering mid-year?)
- How do you create a climate in the school that engages students and respects their diversity?

For Teachers

- What do you do to try and develop relationships with young people at the school?
- How do you create a climate in the school that engages students and respects their diversity?

For Students

- Is this a school where students want to be? Why or why not?
- Do you feel safe here? Why or why not?
- Do you feel like you belong? Why or why not? What does the school do to make you feel this way?

For Parents

- Do you think your child feels welcome and safe at school? Why or why not?
- How does the school promote a positive climate/culture?

Inside the Classroom: Climate

Q: *What improves student/teacher relationships?*

A: Being aware that first impressions matter.²

Physical Environment/Climate

Mark appropriate columns with an X	No	Somewhat	Yes	Evidence
The classroom is neat and welcoming				
It is clear what is being taught in the classroom				
Expectations, norms and/or standards are clear				
A range of student work is visible and valued				
There is evidence of a “college prep” culture — useful information for college bound students is available				
There is a manageable student/teacher ratio				
Classrooms, including AP and Honor’s classes, are diverse (or represent the cultural/gender make-up of the school)				
Classrooms are set up to allow students to work together				

Inside the Classroom: Instruction: What Teachers Are Doing

Q: *What improves student/teacher relationships?*

A: When teachers open themselves to students and invite students to do the same.³

Mark appropriate columns with an X	No	Somewhat	Yes	Evidence
Curriculum and/or classroom materials appear rigorous				
Curriculum and/or classroom materials appear culturally inclusive				
There is open communication between students and teachers				
The teacher provides learning opportunities for students with various learning styles				
The teacher actively reaches out to engage students who seem unengaged, are not participating or are preoccupied (teacher tries to help students who cannot focus)				
The teacher shares authority/leadership/teaching with students				
The teacher relates learning to the life of the student (makes lessons real)				

Inside the Classroom: Instruction: What Students Are Doing

Q: What improves student/teacher relationships?

A: Trust and respect.⁴

Mark appropriate columns with an X	No	Somewhat	Yes	Evidence
Students ask questions related to work or seeking clarification				
Students feel comfortable sharing with their classmates as well as learning from one another				
Students work in small groups, sharing work				
Students have opportunities to play different roles in the classroom				

Suggested Discussion Questions for *Inside the Classroom*

For Administrators

- How do you help teachers be successful and engage all students?
- Do you have a way to hear from students about what they like/dislike in the classroom? If so, how do you use this information?
- Is there a structure for assessing how well students are doing based on a range of indicators, including student work, active learning, group work, presentations and service learning?

For Teachers

- How do you know when your students are learning? And how do you assess their learning?
- How often do you meet with other teachers? Which teachers do you meet with?
- How often do you talk about individual students and how they're doing? Effective instruction? Student work?
- How often and in what ways do you communicate with students about how they are doing?

For Students

- Describe the teacher you like the best. Describe the teacher you learn the most from. Are they different? If so, why?
- Have you ever been in a situation where you are 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 are the activities that you like to do best? Do you have opportunities to participate in these activities in your classes?
- Describe a classroom in which you felt safe and comfortable speaking up or asking questions when you did not understand something. What made you feel that way?⁵
- How is your school work evaluated? (Do you have tests? Presentations? Group Work? Portfolios?) Do you agree with this type of assessment? Why or why not?

For Parents

- How do you know when your son or daughter is learning?
- What do you think makes a good teacher? How do you know if your son/daughter has a good teacher?

NOTES...

Youth Engagement: Personalization and Climate

Q: *What makes a school worth going to?*

A: When relationships among students are respectful and build self-esteem rather than diminishing it.⁶

Mark appropriate columns with an X	No	Somewhat	Yes	Evidence
<p>Young people have meaningful leadership opportunities in the school</p>				
<p>Students' opinions are valued and considered inside and outside the classroom</p>				

Suggested Discussion Questions for *Youth Engagement*

For Administrators

- As the principal, how do you find out about what students think of the school and what they are learning?
- Are there structures in the school that give students opportunities to be engaged as decision makers, contributors and leaders? If so, how?

For Teachers

- As a teacher, how do you find out about what students think of their classes and what they are learning?
- Are there structures in the school that give students opportunities to be engaged as decision makers, contributors and leaders? If so, how?
- Do you have a way to hear from students about what they like/dislike in the classroom? If so, how do you use this information?

For Students

- Does your school value and respect youth culture? Please explain.
- Do you feel comfortable sharing your opinions with teachers and administrators? When you do share your opinions, do you feel they get heard and taken seriously?
- What opportunities do you have to become involved in making your school the kind of place you want to come to everyday?
- What opportunities do you have to become involved in leadership roles, in classes or in the school in general? In youth/adult partnerships?

For Parents

- Does the school give students an opportunity to be engaged as decision makers and leaders? If so, how?

NOTES...

Endnotes

1. What Kids Can Do. (2003). *Redesigning High Schools: Student Perspectives*. Providence, RI: What Kids Can Do. Retrieved April 13, 2004, from www.whatkidscando.org/intheirownwords/Perspectives.html.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. What Kids Can Do. (2003, September). *First Ask, Then Listen: How to Get Your Students to Help You Teach Them Better. A Teachers Guide*. Providence, RI: What Kids Can Do. Retrieved April 13, 2004, from www.whatkidscando.org/firesmanual.pdf.
6. What Kids Can Do. *Redesigning High Schools: Student Perspectives*. 2003.

NOTES...

NOTES...



The Forum for Youth Investment
core operating division of **Impact Strategies, Inc.**
The Cady-Lee House
7064 Eastern Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20012
Phone: 202.207.3333 • Fax: 202.207.3329
Web site: www.forumforyouthinvestment.org
youth@forumforyouthinvestment.org