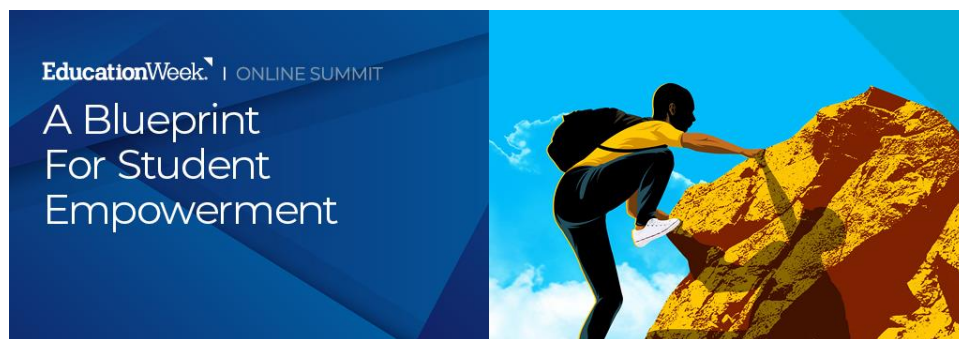




Character Education & COVID-19: How to Build Confident, Engaged Learners Now

Thank you to those who joined us for this event, which took place on Tuesday, September 22, 2020. Below, you can read the reporter wrap-up our journalists wrote for you.

Here are takeaways we've distilled from those discussions with you, the Education Week readers.



A Blueprint for Student Empowerment

Moderator: Mary Hendrie, Deputy Opinion Editor, Education Week

We say we want to prepare students to be active and engaged citizens, but what does that actually look like? What do student-activists learn from their firsthand experiences with democracy? And how can educators support, rather than hinder, students in their activist efforts?

Guests:

- **Brandon Griggs**, High School Senior and Student Activist, Jacksonville, Fla.
- **Maggie Di Sanza**, High School Senior and Founder of Bleed Shamelessly

Key Takeaways:

Student empowerment starts with the right environment. And that environment starts with expectations. Summit guests wanted to remind educators that young people can tell when you believe they're capable of real change. Acknowledge the expertise students have about the issues that affect them personally, and don't write anyone off on the basis of age. As Di Sanza explained, "I personally don't see empowerment as a certain type of knowledge that one must acquire; but rather, how an individual student feels in terms of their ability to take action." Building this culture of empowerment also takes patience. As one participant recounted of student leadership efforts in her school surrounding racial equity, "While those are big topics for students, these are their own ideas. It took several meetings to empower them to speak up, but now they are ready to lead."

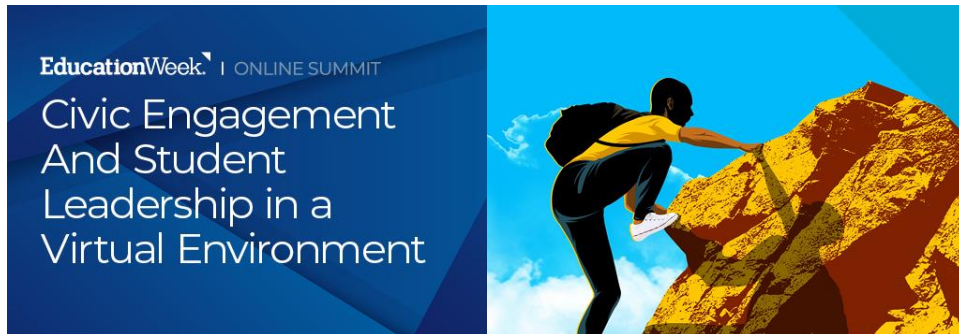
Voting is on everyone's mind. Voting initiatives—both efforts to register eligible students and student-led efforts to get out the vote—were a subject of active conversation. These efforts look different in a virtual setting, Di Sanza noted, but should still focus on the relevance of politics in students' lives. As Griggs added, "Many teens see their vote as insignificantly small and unable to make a difference, so they neglect it altogether." Educators can have a role in combatting this sense of futility by connecting policy issues to students' real and immediate concerns.

The value of student activism shouldn't be tallied only on an individual scale. While participants agreed that activism reaps personal rewards—communication skills, a sense of empowerment, and empathy were among the qualities noted—the ultimate goal is one of connection and mutual uplift. "The entire premise of advocating for peers is empowering others beyond yourself," Di Sanza wrote. Griggs also emphasized this connection to community, noting that seeing other teen activists succeed can give students a sense of what's possible.

This work is hard, and it takes a toll. Guests acknowledged that fighting for social change can be mentally and emotionally taxing. Having other role models in their community can help, as can taking time to take care of themselves. Di Sanza called on educators "to help students find a balance between working for the betterment of society, and taking care of themselves, their family, and their communities."

Resources:

- [How I Found My Confidence as a Teen Activist \(Opinion\)](#)
- [Yes, I Get My Period. School Shouldn't Shame Me for It \(Opinion\)](#)
- [I'm a Youth Organizer. Stop Getting in My Way \(Opinion\)](#)
- [A Back-to-School Plan Built Around Student Connection \(Opinion\)](#)
- [How Students Find Strength Now: An Opinion Project](#)
- How Students Find Strength Now | Learning My Voice Has Power
 - Insert link offline: <https://video.edweek.org/detail/videos/featured-videos/video/6188906182001/how-students-find-strength-now-%7C-learning-my-voice-has-power>



Civic Engagement and Student Leadership in a Virtual Environment

Moderators:

Stephen Sawchuk, Associate Editor, Education Week

Dominique Bander, Editorial Opinion Intern, Education Week

In the time of the coronavirus and reckoning on racism, youths around the country are seeing the importance of activism and civic engagement. What does this kind of work look like during the pandemic and the national call for racial justice? How can school leaders incorporate this work to encourage student leadership and civic engagement?

Guests:

- **Voncia Monchais**, Youth Engagement Director, Mikva Challenge DC
- **Saniya Sah**, Freshman, Northeastern University, Boston, Mass.

Key Takeaways:

You can still do a lot of engaging civics teaching online, but student leadership is crucial. “Strong school cultures often have student leaders encouraging others to participate through social media and other avenues of communication,” Sah said. “I’ve seen student leaders/organizations collaborate with school staff (like principals, teachers, etc.) to organize opportunities for students to become civically involved during the pandemic, whether it be hosting Zoom parties for phonebanking or devoting online class time to the introduction of virtual participation within the community. Students can also engage remotely in virtual issues summits, campaign fairs, and presidential debate watch parties.

Community service is too often divorced from true civic engagement. While community service is often a district graduation requirement, there’s frequently no explicit discussion of why it matters in the context of civic action or what impact it can have, which leads to students “going through the motions” or pursuing it purely for the sake of college applications. A better approach could be talking to students about “what they’re truly passionate about—maybe through talking about their college essays or classes they’re taking,” Sah said. “Then you could work together to find service opportunities that connect to those passions, so those students are more inclined to participate for the sake of service and not college.

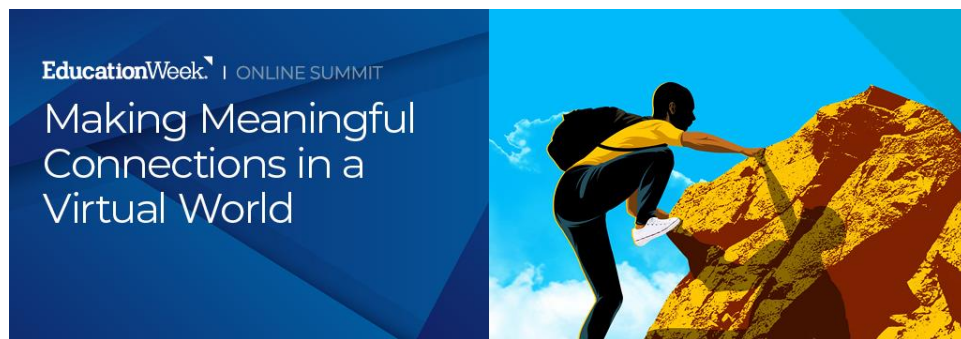
Online formats permit new ways to reach students who are less vocal. “There are some students who always speak up, some that watch before they send something in a chat or speak aloud, or some that don’t say anything at all,” noted Monchais. “One way is to provide multiple ways to engage—Flipgrid may be a great tool for some learners but getting involved via an anonymous survey/Doodle poll may be another option for students to chime in. Another way I learned about through Teaching Channel was ‘Wingman’ where a student who is shy or reluctant provided feedback to their peers on their discussion, and adding what they would say if they were in the conversation in the Google Doc or sheet of paper.”

Create meaningful youth-voice opportunities. Youths are not apathetic or cynical, Monchais noted, “they’re simply uninvited to the table to make decisions. Even in some spaces where decisionmaking bodies want student voice ‘represented,’ students are instead used as ‘tokens’ rather than having their opinions truly incorporated into the decisionmaking process,” she said. Students should demand to be part of the creation of a youth-voice opportunity, including those offered in a remote setting.

Classroom discussion is imperative, even in a remote setting. “Learning about social justice issues through school instead of social media made me more passionate about them and want to fight against racial injustice. I think it’s easier for classes like these to move to an online format, especially when they’re so discussion-based. Having conversations with small groups of students on topics regarding race is a great way to educate and empower them,” Sah said.

Resources:

- [Citizen Z: An Education Week Project.](#)
- [Students Deserve a Voice in Our Pandemic Response. Here's How to Give It to Them \(Opinion\)](#)
- [How Students Find Strength Now: An Opinion Project](#)
- [How Students Find Strength Now | Supporting Student Leadership \(video\)](#)
 - [Insert video offline:](https://video.edweek.org/detail/videos/featured-videos/video/6188897345001/how-students-find-strength-now-%7C-supporting-student-leadership?autoStart=true) <https://video.edweek.org/detail/videos/featured-videos/video/6188897345001/how-students-find-strength-now-%7C-supporting-student-leadership?autoStart=true>



Making Meaningful Connections in a Virtual World

Moderator: Lesli A. Maxwell, Managing Editor, Education Week

School is about much more than academics, but relational and character-based skills have proven harder to cultivate remotely. How can educators and school leaders make space for students to connect to their own identities, the experiences of others, and to a learning community amid this global crisis—and why does it matter? How should our schools prepare students to enter into a world with so much uncertainty?

Guests:

- **Jill Gurtner**, Principal, Clark Street Community School, Middleton, Wis.

Key Takeaways:

Building connections virtually: Many educators are struggling to build connections with students and engage them in learning in the virtual environment. Gurtner strongly advised teachers to start by humanizing themselves and sharing details of their lives as a starter for helping students feel more comfortable talking about themselves. She said creating environments where students will feel safe and welcome starts with “setting classroom/Zoom room norms and talking about how you as a community will respond when someone is struggling to meet those expectations.” Gurtner talked about how the virtual learning setting gives teachers an opportunity to show vulnerability and how they learn themselves—and a chance to model risk taking and growth.

Supporting parents: Gurtner recommended that educators reassure parents that it’s OK if they don’t feel fully able to support remote learning. “Because educators take a beating at times, we sometimes forget that many families still hold us in very high esteem and being explicit about the fact that we know they are doing their best and that we appreciate that matters a lot,” Gurtner said. “Once they know that, they will begin asking for the support they need, and we can problem-solve together.”

How students can support one another: One audience member shared that his school is encouraging students to share a “kindness shout-out over the livestreamed morning announcements, about something another student or staff member has done, above and beyond, to help others. Most of the shoutouts regard a student helping another student access a meet or reaching out after school to students who seem to be struggling.” Gurtner applauded this type of opportunity for students to lift each other up, also suggesting that kids be given opportunities to put their shout-outs in writing, which feels safer for some students.

Resources:

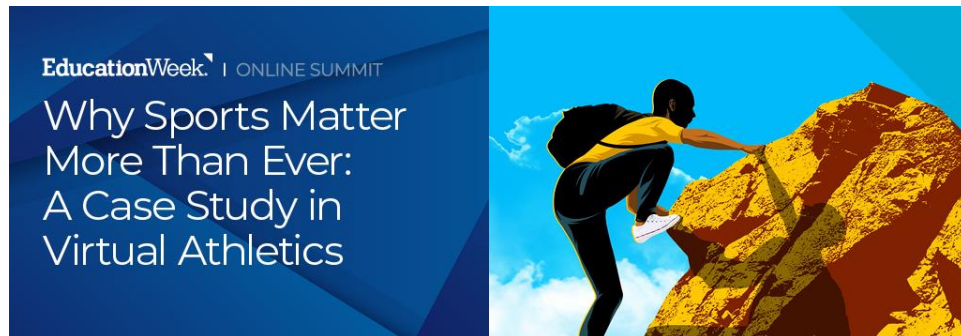
[A Back-to-School Plan Built Around Student Connection \(Opinion\)](#)

[How Schools Can Make Advisories Meaningful for Students and Teachers](#)

[What Student-Centered Schools Look Like](#)

- How Students Find Strength Now: An Opinion Project

[How Students Find Strength Now| Becoming Independent Learners – Collectively \(video\)](#)



Why Sports Matter More Than Ever: A Case Study in Virtual Athletics

Moderator: Kevin Bushweller, Assistant Managing Editor, Education Week

Sports seasons were canceled but athletics were not at one high school in Vermont after the COVID-19 shutdown. School leaders reasoned that building community and character—the intertwined goals of their sports program—was more critical than ever in the pandemic, so administrators retained their coaches, and the coaches rallied their teams. What can other schools learn from this experiment in remote athletics?

Guests:

- **Patrick Burke**, Principal, South Burlington High School, Vt.
- **Michael Jabour**, Activities Director, South Burlington High School, Vt.
- **Aaron Murakami**, Senior, South Burlington High School, Vt.

Key Takeaways:

- **Developing grit, perseverance remotely.** There were several comments and questions regarding how to develop character traits such as grit, perseverance, and a team-oriented attitude in student-athletes in remote learning environments. One very important lesson, the guests said, is teaching the value of “just showing up.” Athletic coaches in the school held virtual team meetings and Zoom workouts when the building was closed, and sports seasons were put on hold or canceled. Some athletes did not show up for the virtual workouts, but many did, and Patrick, Michael, and Aaron said participation helped student-athletes stay engaged with their sports and their teammates and coaches during a very difficult time. Virtual team meetings and workouts also encouraged student-athletes to check in with each other and let a coach or other adult know if they were worried about a teammate or a friend.

- **What makes a great high school coach.** All three guests weighed in on what they see as the most important qualities of a high school coach in normal times or during a pandemic. Student-athlete Aaron said, “The most important quality in a coach is realizing they are a role model to the people they are coaching.” That is one reason why South Burlington High School tries to hire coaches who are also teachers in the school. The school wants coaches to model a commitment to academics, as well as athletics for their student-athletes. During remote learning, that teacher-coach combination became that much more important as coaches had to help keep student athletes focused on the positive things they could be doing to improve themselves as students and athletes. They also emphasized that good high school coaches, under any circumstances, do not take themselves too seriously, a character trait that they said is useful way beyond sports.

- **Helping student-athletes who were falling behind.** Student-athletes who struggle academically and largely just show up to school so they can play sports are a particular concern of athletic directors and coaches across the country when students are learning remotely, and regular sporting activities are put on hold. For all students at South Burlington High School, regardless of whether they were athletes or not, if a teacher felt a student’s engagement was fading, they could prompt a meeting between the student and a school engagement team. In some cases, a coach’s relationship with one of their student-athletes was leveraged to help re-engage the student.

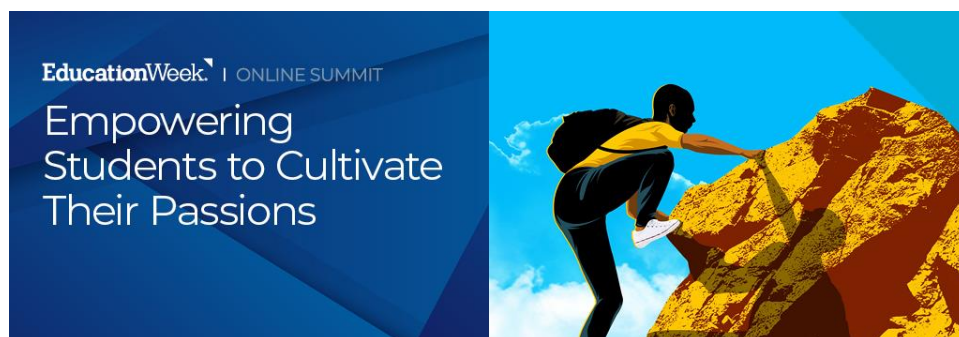
Resources:

[The Case for Continuing School Sports Remotely \(opinion\)](#)

[Should Schools Suspend Sports? The Debate Is Getting More Tense](#)

[Which High School Sports Pose the Greatest Risk for Coronavirus Spread?](#)

- How Students Find Strength Now: An Opinion Project
- [How Students Find Strength Now | Everybody Needs a Team\(video\)](#)
 - <https://video.edweek.org/detail/videos/featured-videos/video/6188889221001/how-students-find-strength-now-%7C-everybody-needs-a-team?autoStart=true>



Empowering Students to Cultivate Their Passions

Moderator: Bess Keller, Senior Contributing Editor, Education Week

Too often student success is gauged by performance on standardized tests, with Black, Latinx, and other historically marginalized students often deemed to be "behind." What happens when students are empowered to cultivate their own passions and shape their learning environment? How can that change both outcomes for students and the effectiveness of schools? What can educators do to make student-centered success a reality?

Guests:

- **Azadi Mathew-Lewis**, Freshman, Hampton University
- **Nicole Williams Beechum**, Senior Research Analyst, University of Chicago Consortium for School Research

Key Takeaways:

There's no substitute for getting to know your students. To engage students and have them take ownership of their own success, there is no substitute for talking with and getting to know them—authentically knowing them, not shaming their lives, communities, and families. Educators should be learning from their students.

Two characteristics of the spaces we should be creating for young people so they will take agency and thrive are safety and choice. Young people need to feel it is safe to have their own ideas that may possibly conflict with adults'. And choices in the classroom can help students discover and pursue their passions and they motivate good work. Choices should prompt students to gaze beyond themselves or to explore and listen beyond their own personal echo chambers.

Take young people seriously. Young people commonly feel that their voices aren't heard by adults or that adults aren't taking their ideas seriously. Young people feel it's hard to relate to adults when adults fail to acknowledge the differences between their growing up and the way young people are growing up now.

Reflect on you own biases and past. White educators often have stereotyped notions of their African-American students, though the educators try to hide it. To be put in a metaphorical box is deeply discouraging to the students.

How can you put student success at the center of school life? Invite students into a substantive decisionmaking process, give them real roles for participating, listen to them, discuss/debate their ideas (young people are amazing at *doing* the work and supporting their ideas when they are passionate about them), implement their ideas, and give them credit for the change.

A first step for educators wanting to help young people claim their passions is for the adults to reflect on how they were treated when they were young. Were they treated compassionately? Justly? Healing work may allow adults to have more open conversations with young people about what they need without the young people feeling attacked or judged.

Resources:

- [What Happens When Students Have Ownership Over Their Success](#) (Opinion)
- [How Students Find Strength Now: An Opinion Project](#)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=3&v=ROtD5A-xQpc&feature=emb_logo

Development of independent content for this virtual summit is supported in part by a grant from The Kern Family Foundation. [megan: the kern grant credit should read, but please confirm: Coverage of character education and development is supported in part by a grant from The Kern Family Foundation, at www.kffdn.org. Education Week retains sole editorial control over the content of this coverage.]



For more information about the “How Students Find Strength Now” opinion project, read the entire report [here](#).

[Find out](#) if your state or district requirements enable you to use our [Certificates of Completion](#) for CEUs and professional development or "[clock hours](#)."