

Student Leadership Roundtable

27 Aug 2025

1. Introduction

What does it take to create education systems where young people are both learners and leaders? How can young people and adults work together in a genuine partnership?

These questions opened the roundtable conversation convened by Teach For All's Global Institute. The event brought together a diverse group of over 20 students, educators, and system leaders from more than 10 countries—including Brazil, Canada, Ecuador, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Peru, South Africa, Sudan, and the UK—all grappling with a shared disconnect. Participants spoke of systems that are failing to inspire and actively harming students, trapping them in a culture of comparison undermines their well-being and sense of self-worth. Today's systems, they argued, are built on a fundamentally inequitable premise: designed to measure and distinguish between people. This creates an environment where a student's worth is defined by grades, which later map onto a societal fixation on wealth and status. In such a context, adult-driven efforts for student voice often fall short. Participants argued that the very term 'student voice' has expired because it implies students must join adults' worlds. It is no longer enough for students to have a seat at the table; the critical question is what happens *at* the table. The roundtable centered on three core questions:

- What would an ideal future education system look like, one where all students are learning, thriving, and actively shaping their world?
- What are the key levers—big or small—that can help us shift from our current reality to this envisioned future?
- And what are the enablers that can accelerate this change, and the barriers we must overcome to make it a reality?

The conversation surfaced both the current reality and the future we need to create—along with the deep, relational work required to get there. That work lives at the level of purpose, mindset, and power. This briefing distills the powerful insights that emerged and highlights new strands for the path ahead.

2. Current Reality & Future Systems

"Leadership is about every student having a voice and the chance to make change—no matter their title." — Khairi Abdullah.

The roundtable split into smaller breakout groups to explore why current education systems are failing to cultivate student agency and well-being, and what shifts are needed to create a different future. A common thread across all groups was that the systems aren't broken; they're working exactly as designed: on harmful principles that sustain a culture of comparison and erode students' well-being and potential. In response, participants shared a range of visions for a future intentionally rebuilt to dismantle these structures: a

co-created ecosystem where learning is joyful, purposeful, and deeply connected to students' lives, their communities, and the collective pursuit of a better world.

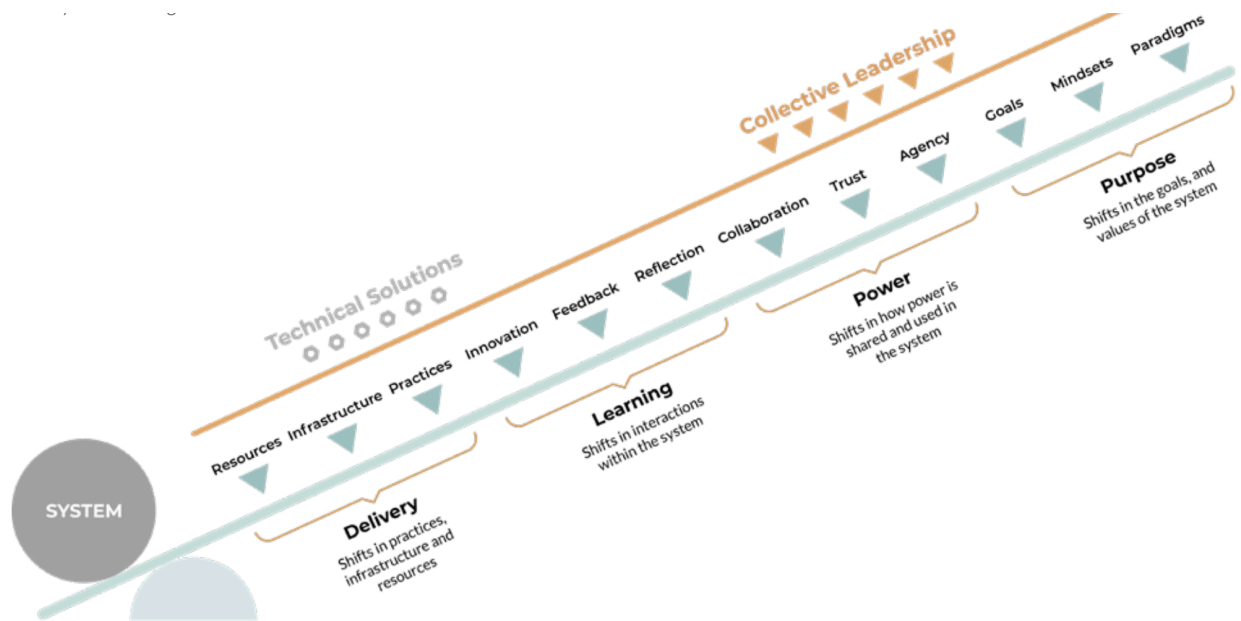
Current Reality: <i>Why are current education systems failing to cultivate student agency and well-being?</i>	Future Systems <i>What systemic shifts are needed for a future where all students thrive?</i>
A system with a misaligned purpose of sorting and ranking , where worth is "defined through grades and numbers" and later by "money, through wealth, through status," leaving education feeling "meaningless" and "self-focused."	A system with a redefined purpose of cultivating well-being and sincere interest , prioritizing a "sincere eagerness to learn," valuing the "journey over the outcome."
A hierarchical power structure that tokenizes student voice , where the term "student voice" implies students must join adults' worlds, leading to initiatives that only capture the "most outspoken, confident voices."	Power sharing that is built on authentic partnerships , where students "play the role in shaping things actively" by co-creating curriculum and are involved in the "full cycle of engagement" from ideation to implementation.
Perverse incentives that replicate competition within student leadership , creating a new "ladder" where students grapple with "mental health issues, physical health issues, [and] self-injuring" due to constant "comparison of one human being against the other."	A focus on collective agency over individual leadership titles , where students are freed from "unnecessary competitive pressures" and can develop the "confidence that you can make a difference" in a way that creates "positive sum games."
A disconnected curriculum irrelevant to students' lived realities , forcing them to learn about topics like "Egyptian pyramids" while their communities face urgent crises like suicide, addiction, and the legacy of cultural and physical genocide.	A connected and healing curriculum rooted in community , that takes place "on the land," reclaims culture through shared rituals and traditional skills, and generates the "ecstatic joy of working as a team."
A culture of fear and emotional overwhelm , where students are "pressurized" and their "mental health and confidence are suffering," while adults are too "emotionally and psychologically overwhelmed" to defy the status quo.	An ecosystem of joy, trust, and "desirable struggle" , where fulfillment comes as a "reward of effort" and agency is built from accomplishment, positive community, and the foundational elements of love and trust.

3. Levers for System Change

"I now think that we ARE the system... if we collaborate with trusting, loving relationships, we can move mountains."
— Andrew Speight.

Moving from a system that harms to one that heals requires addressing deeper systemic drivers. It means a shift in the stories we tell, the power we share, and the relationships we build. We've drawn on a framework

from [The Missing Piece](#) to organize these levers into four domains: redefining the system's Purpose, redistributing Power, improving how the system Learns, and transforming the Delivery of education.



A. Purpose: Shifting the 'Why'

This means moving from a narrow narrative of individual achievement to a more expansive vision of collective well-being and agency.

- **From Leadership to Agency:** A shift in purpose involves changing the narrative from a competitive, ego-centered framing of "leadership" to an inclusive focus on "agency." As Michael Backlund argued, agency is about "having the confidence you can make a difference," a capacity that exists within every student, not just those holding a title.
- **From Grades to Growth:** Shift the purpose from one of performance, where students feel they must "score good marks," to one of personal flourishing. As Muskan noted, true leadership is about helping others grow. This requires, as Shakira Ilmansyah asked, a new focus on assessing "growth in thinking" rather than just correct answers.
- **From Achievement to Aliveness:** A transformed purpose redefines success itself. It means creating an education that honors what it means "to be fully alive" and gives students the "capacity to sit with the pain of the world without being paralysed, so we can be agents of change," as Mohini Govender stated.

Power: Shifting the 'Who'

To make a new purpose real, the system must deliberately shift who holds power—moving from adult-driven hierarchies to authentic youth-adult partnerships.

- **Step Aside and Enter Youth Worlds:** A fundamental power shift begins when adults recognize their role is not to lead, but to support. As Jen Bahrami urged, "I used to think we adults had to be in the middle of it all; now I just want to step aside." This means moving beyond inviting students to join

adult-designed spaces and, as Franco Mosso Cobian reframed, for adults to become humble enough to be included in the "worlds, tables, and ecosystems" that young people already lead.

- **Embrace Collective Power:** To catalyze change, stakeholders must recognize their own influence. As Andrew Speight declared, "I now think that we ARE the system... we have the collective power to make the change." This mindset shifts the locus of control from distant policymakers to the students, teachers, and community members who can "band together" to create change themselves.
- **Co-Create from Ideation to Implementation:** Authentic partnership requires sharing power structurally. This means involving students in the "full cycle from ideation to implementation and evaluation," as Ziyaan Virji explained. It means putting "money where your mouth is" by resourcing, funding, and hiring young people to lead.

Learning: Shifting the 'How'

A system can't evolve if it doesn't know how to learn. Leaders spoke about a "new DNA" for how the system must learn and relate.

- **Move at the Speed of Trust:** Trust is not a byproduct of a successful project; it is the prerequisite for any meaningful change. As Vikram Bhat emphasized, "Systems move at the speed of trust." It cannot be a "peripheral outcome" but must be intentionally prioritized as the central goal. In a transformed system, "the trust is the outcome."
- **Make Love the Engine of Change:** Lasting, systemic change is driven by a different kind of motivation. As Shaheen Mistri stated, "Systems change with love." When educators and leaders act from a place of love for their students, their subjects, and their world, "we shift power in very genuine ways. We start to truly listen and engage students as partners."
- **Redefine Rigor as a Tool for Liberation, Not Just Excellence:** A key lever is to reclaim the concept of rigor from a narrow focus on academic excellence and reframe it as a path to freedom. As Hatim Eltayeb noted, the "most fulfilling, liberating, empowering classrooms" are also rigorous. But the conversation made clear: it matters what is taught with rigor. The shift is from "knowledge of the powerful"—which upholds existing structures—to "powerful knowledge" that equips students to analyze, question, and shape their world. This kind of liberating rigor, participants emphasized, only thrives alongside deep psychological safety, so it expands what students can do, rather than limiting who they can become.

Delivery: Shifting the 'What'

The vision for a new system is made real through tangible changes in practices, resources, and learning environments.

- **Deliver Learning Through Community and Culture:** Participants offered powerful alternatives to the artificial classroom. Maggie's story of land-based learning—reclaiming identity through "bonfiring, fishing," and "rituals of building community"—showed how a culturally-rooted pedagogy can create safety and "ecstatic joy."
- **Align Incentives with the New Purpose:** A transformed system must reward what it values. A key lever, noted by Ziyaan Virji, is to "make incentives align" at the systemic level—financially and politically—with the goal of fostering holistic growth and well-being, not just academic grades.

- **Integrate Rigor with Liberation:** Empowering students requires both care and high expectations. As Hatim Eltayeb argued, the "most fulfilling, liberating, empowering classrooms do have a lot of rigor." The goal is to provide students with "powerful knowledge" that gives them the freedom and skills to make sense of and shape their world.

4. From Inertia to Action: What It Takes to Shift the System

"Not doing these conversations with only the converted, but in a spirit of partnership with those who maybe aren't currently aligned." – Shaheen Mistri.

Shifting an entrenched system is not just a matter of identifying the right levers; it requires navigating the landscape of human fears, mindsets, and structural inertia. The roundtable conversation unearthed what accelerates change and what holds it back.

Enablers What Accelerates Change?	Barriers What Holds Us Back?
The Bravery to Defy and Create: Change is often sparked by individuals and groups who possess the "bravery to defy" the existing system. This courage, as Andrew Speight noted, enables them to create new models and prove what is possible, often from the ground up.	Emotional Overwhelm and Fear of Risk: Many stakeholders are "so emotionally and psychologically overwhelmed" by the high-pressure system that they lack the "mental capacity to face what feels like yet another battle." This fear is compounded by a lack of trust between the governed and the government.
Youth-Led Spaces and Intergenerational Partnership: Progress accelerates when adults support and enter youth-created spaces. Inviting adults to these spaces, as Ziyaan Virji suggested, is a way to shift mindsets, secure resources, and build the intergenerational coalitions needed to drive change.	The Colonized Mindset and Fear of Losing Control: A significant barrier, identified by Mohini Govender and Franco Mosso Cobian, is the "colonized idea" of standardization and adults' deep-seated "fear of losing control." This prevents the trust required to honor multiple ways of knowing and cede power.
Trust-Based Philanthropy and Direct Resourcing: Putting "money where your worth is" is a critical enabler. As Jennifer Bahrami described, creating grant structures that fund students directly—outside of school or parental control—builds trust and enables change through direct empowerment.	Burnout, Tokenism, and Youth Exploitation: Without proper support and authentic power, youth engagement can quickly become exploitative. As Jennifer Bahrami warned, "burnout by youth" and tokenism are major barriers that drain energy and undermine the very partnerships that are meant to drive change.
Creating Platforms for Dialogue and Collective Action: Change is enabled by intentionally creating spaces for dialogue, especially with those who are not yet aligned. As Shakira Ilmansyah proposed, making these platforms a "standard" practice, rather than a special event, builds momentum for collective action.	Lack of Time and Competing Crises: The system is constrained by a universal lack of time. As Andrew Speight noted, "we are all the time pull." This is intensified by the presence of multiple, competing crises—economic, climate, and educational—that can make it difficult to focus on deep, systemic work.

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Art and Creativity as Underutilized Tools: Art is a potent, yet often ignored, enabler. As Vikram Bhat pointed out, art provides a vehicle for empathy, imagination, and creating new solutions. Integrating it more actively in schools can unlock new ways of thinking and being.	The Invisibility of Lived Experience: Existing systems often exclude ancestral and lived experiences, as Raquel Jardim noted. This hinders the development of intuition and perpetuates solutions that are disconnected from the realities of students and communities, leading to a cycle of ineffective reforms.

5. The Path Forward: Laying the Ground for What Comes Next

"Counter our power-over measures of success with concrete mechanisms that honor multiple ways of knowing, being, relating, and acting." — Mohini Govender

The roundtable did not end with a checklist, but with a challenge: to move from an inspiring conversation to a fundamental shift in practice. The path forward is not to create another student leadership program, but to fundamentally change how we approach systems change itself. The next step is to ask: What are the implications for our work? The insights from this roundtable demand that student partnership cease to be a "special project" and become, as one participant reflected, "more fundamentally part of everything that we're doing." This requires a radical commitment to three key shifts.

1. Integrate, Don't Isolate: Embedding Agency into All Our Work

The most immediate shift is to move student partnership from the margins to the core of strategy. The work is not to find a student "here and there to kind of bring into this that we're doing," but to see students and their organizations as essential partners in all system-change initiatives. Whether the focus is on building shared purpose, redesigning assessments, or influencing policy, the new standard must be co-creation. This means moving beyond one-off workshops and consultations to build the "movement infrastructure" that makes youth-adult partnership the default operating model, instead of a celebrated exception. Participants also acknowledged that believing in student partnership is easy; relinquishing the control, ego, and "power-over paradigms" that are baked into the current system is the real challenge. The path forward demands that we move from intellectual agreement to embodied practice, asking ourselves the hard questions: How do I build across generations, with trust? How do I lead with love? As Franco Mosso Cobian shared, this requires "addressing the ways in which I myself was trapped in the ladder of success and comparison," and having the humility to let go of previous beliefs.

2. Building Movement Infrastructure: From Moments to Standard Practice

Inspiration is fleeting; infrastructure is what sustains a movement. A key insight was the gap between powerful, one-off moments of partnership and embedding them into our daily operations. As Alex Beard reflected, a powerful workshop with student climate activists was a great experience, but "we haven't made it a standard practice." The path forward requires building the "movement infrastructure" to make youth-adult partnership the default, not the exception. This looks like what Michael Backlund proposed: collectively finding "consensus on the biggest problem and lever we all agree on" and then each pledging

resources to address it. It means creating the rhythms, roles, and feedback loops that ensure students are consulted, funded, hired, and trusted co-designers of the system itself.

3. Expand the 'We': Engaging Parents as Shapers of Purpose

A systemic approach must also engage parents, who have often been absent from these conversations. Parents often hold deep-seated beliefs and expectations that drive the purpose of education. While students and educators may want to move beyond grades, they are often caught in a system shaped by parental fears and aspirations. The path forward requires building bridges between the "education conversation" and the "parent conversation." This means creating new platforms for inquiry that bring students, educators, and parents together around the one question that unites them all: "What is the best for your children?" The starting point is relational and practical: reaching out "1:1 to those on the other side of the divide," as one participant urged, and creating spaces for dialogue with empathy and love. This also includes working on the most personal lever for change: the deep inner work required of adults to genuinely share power. As Hatim Eltayeb noted, "whole people make whole people," and this transformation begins with us.

While the principles of love, trust, and agency are universal, the path to realizing them is context-dependent, and the work ahead is to unlock change, rooted in local realities. Ultimately, the roundtable made clear that we are not waiting for a hero or a policy mandate. As Andrew Speight concluded, "We ARE the system." The power and the responsibility to create change reside within the collective. The path forward is not a map to be followed, but a practice to be lived—in our mindsets, in our relationships, and in our daily actions. The work starts now.

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