

# Executive Summary

Efforts to elevate student voice in education decision-making have grown over the past decade—through state legislation, district governance structures, and school-based student groups.<sup>1</sup> Leaders increasingly recognize that student perspectives are critical to improving outcomes amid persistent challenges in K–12 education. Yet existing student feedback mechanisms rarely capture the voices of students most impacted by education inequality—those whose experiences most clearly reveal where systems are failing. These “marginalized” or “at-promise”<sup>2</sup> (Mireles-Rios et al., 2020) students are often low-income, students of color, English learners, and students with disabilities who commonly struggle academically, have been suspended, and are chronically absent. However, despite this broad range of experiences, they are routinely excluded from conversations about how schools can better support their success.

The Roses Talk Project, a partnership between the Stanford Center for Racial Justice and the San José Unified School District (SJUSD), seeks to remedy this exclusion by deliberately elevating these students’ voices in education policymaking—translating their experiences into actionable, evidence-based recommendations for school and district leaders. Through interviews and focus groups with at-promise students at Gunderson High School, this project identified persistent challenges faced by marginalized young people and ideas for policy change that could meaningfully improve their educational trajectories.

Our analysis is grounded in the concept of opportunity infrastructure—a system of resources, supports, and practices

that shape students’ educational outcomes. This report describes two pressing issues that at-promise youth identified: (1) barriers to adequate and accessible opportunity infrastructure; and (2) a need for new forms of opportunity infrastructure. Their insights underscore a central truth: while many factors affecting young people lie outside the control of schools, school administrators and district leaders still have significant power to redesign education systems to meet the unique needs of historically underserved students.

In response, this report outlines a set of ambitious yet feasible recommendations for SJUSD and Gunderson designed to expand opportunity infrastructure across four key areas: (1) post-secondary support; (2) teaching and learning; (3) discipline, relationships, and school climate; and (4) facilities and athletics. Together, these recommendations aim to reduce longstanding disparities in student outcomes, strengthen trust between youth and adults, and create school environments where every student can thrive.

**Post-Secondary Support:** Students emphasized the need for structured, accessible guidance on navigating college, career, and financial aid pathways. We recommend streamlining access to existing resources, integrating mandatory grade-level college and career readiness sessions into the school schedule, and developing near-peer mentoring programs that expand advising capacity and social capital—particularly for those who lack information and support outside of school.

**Teaching and Learning:** Students reported disengagement from passive instructional methods and called for classrooms that are more active, collaborative, and connected to their

1 For example, under California Education Code section 52060(g) (2020), “The governing board of a school district shall consult with teachers, principals, administrators, other school personnel, local bargaining units of the school district, parents, and *pupils* in developing a local control and accountability plan” (emphasis added). Many school districts also have student members on the school board and high schools typically offer a “Leadership” class where students are involved in various activities, including sharing their perspectives on issues pertaining to the student body.

2 California AB 413 (2019) deleted the term “at-risk” and replaced it with the term “at-promise” for purposes of various sections of the Education and Penal Codes. Bill analysis from the Senate Committee on Public Safety refers to “at-promise” as the “extraordinary raw potential every young person possesses. The term views youth through a strength-based perspective. It also helps to fill in some of the details missing in the former labels, reminding us that youth have natural gifts and innate potential for greatness.”

lives. We recommend adopting instructional practices that make learning active and dynamic in each classroom, and developing a culturally sustaining, career-connected curriculum that validates students' identities while preparing them with real-world skills in areas such as financial literacy and entrepreneurship.

**Discipline, Relationships, and School Climate:** Many at-promise students described strained relationships with adults and a discipline system that feels punitive rather than supportive. We recommend co-creating a school discipline system with students and families, potentially shifting toward restorative approaches, and establishing a schoolwide relationship-building strategy that emphasizes care, consistency, and shared power. Additionally, restructuring Gunderson's advisory period to prioritize mentorship can deepen trusting relationships and foster belonging.

**Facilities and Athletics:** Students repeatedly identified the physical environment as a barrier to a sense of belonging and motivation. We recommend targeted investments in clean, functional bathrooms; upgraded water infrastructure; and cosmetic improvements that make the campus more welcoming. Additionally, restructuring athletics scheduling—particularly late-evening practices—can help student-athletes balance academic and personal responsibilities while preserving the benefits of sports participation.

**Build and Sustain Opportunity Infrastructure:** To ensure long-term impact, we recommend formalizing the roles of at-promise students as partners in school and district decision-making, such as incorporating them into existing advisory boards or establishing new committees focused on their needs. We also encourage SJUSD and Gunderson to expand partnerships with local institutions to build capacity for implementing new programs that are responsive to the recommendations in this report.

The Roses Talk Project highlights the importance of listening to and learning from students who are most impacted by systemic inequalities in education. Their insights point to concrete ways schools and districts can create more supportive, responsive,

and equitable learning environments. While at-promise students face complex challenges, these recommendations offer clear starting points for change.

The project also embodies the principle that higher education institutions can and should play a pivotal role in enhancing the quality of K–12 public education. By bridging research, policy, and practice, our collaboration with SJUSD and Gunderson demonstrates how community-engaged scholarship can advance educational equity. We hope these findings inspire district leaders, educators, and policymakers to more actively include marginalized student voices in their decision-making to promote better outcomes for all students.

