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Case Study: The Top Five Things Students Want

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Every year, we spend time at Mindsteps™ conducting student focus groups with the schools we serve on an ongoing basis. We conduct these focus groups to find out if the work we are doing with teachers and administrators is really making a difference where it counts – with the students. Every year, I am surprised by what the students tell us and this year is no different. Here are the top five things they told us:

We want more interactivity: In just about every focus group we conducted, the students begged for more interactivity, more hands-on activities, and more opportunities to figure things out for themselves. They don't want to be dragged through the curriculum in a slow death-march towards the state test; they want to be engaged. They want to learn how to learn for themselves. They want hands-on activities and opportunities to learn collaboratively. They want teachers who take time to answer their questions rather than dismiss them. In short, they want to be partners in their own learning.

We can tell when you are "winging it": The most interesting thing I learned from our focus groups this year was how often students complained about disorganized and ill-planned lessons. They want teachers who have a full understanding of the curriculum and a clear idea of where they are headed. They like teachers who seem to have clear learning goals and hate classes where the teachers seem to be, in their words, "winging it." Students want to know that their teachers have a good grasp of the subject and a clear plan for helping them learn it. They tend to trust the teachers who are well-planned and distrust the ones who aren't.

Don't make it personal: I don't know whether we are under a lot of stress lately but this year many students surprised us by saying that their teachers take things too personally. Whether it is crying in the classroom, being sarcastic, choosing favorites, punishing the entire class because of a few students, getting frustrated by their questions and refusing to answer, losing our tempers and yelling, or taking out our personal problems on the students, the students just wanted us to "chill out" and "act like adults."

Make it relevant to US: For the first time since we've been doing student focus groups, we heard student say over and over again how much they enjoyed it when teachers made their subjects relevant. They love it when teachers show them how what they are learning relates to their lives. But, students caution that they are interested in how what they are learning is relevant to *their* lives, not their teachers'. They don't want to hear about our lives; they want us to show them how to use what they are learning in their own lives.

You still talk too much: Although the feedback we get from students differs from year to year, this one remains consistent. The students HATE classes where the teacher spends most of the time talking. They want opportunities to digest the material for themselves through class discussions and interactive activities. They want the chance to think about what they are learning rather than simply plowing through the curriculum. Every single focus group said that their teachers do far too much talking and they wished that learning involved more of a conversation rather than just a teacher monologue.