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Every year, the first thing I have my sophomores do is write me a letter. In that letter I ask them to articulate their hopes and goals for the year—in my classroom and beyond. I ask them to consider how school, English class in particular, might help them achieve their goals.

I engage them in this exercise for two reasons. First, it helps me discover if I need to tailor my curriculum to accommodate for any obvious gaps my students identify. And second, because in giving voice to the skills and knowledge they hope to learn over the year *I build* in collective support for the work will do together. I don't have to ask for buy in later on because they have already *told* me that these are the things that they want to work on.

Armed with my students' hopes and desires, I'm able to explain to them how every decision I make during the year—from the books we read to the assessments they complete—factors into their larger goals of becoming better readers, communicators, and thinkers. These are invariably, year after year, the skills my students tell me they want to work on.

In opening up the curricular conversation at the beginning of the year, my students know that I have their interests in mind, and while they may not always *like* what I ask them to do, they trust me, and they do it. Generally.

I share this because last year Burlington and Winooski High Schools both decided to create new Graduate Expectations, beginning with the question, "What do our graduates need to succeed?" Rather than isolate 4 or 5 of our brightest minds in a dimly lit, smoky bunker to come up with a list of Graduate Expectations, we took the question—not the answers, but the *question*—to the community.

We hosted dozens of conversations—which we dubbed Neighborhood Learning Conversations—in people's homes, classrooms, and community centers, asking parents, students, teachers, and our business community, "What skills, dispositions, and knowledge do our students need in order to be successful after high school graduation?"

We took the information collected at all of the neighborhood learning conversations, and last February hosted a community wide event at Burlington High School where over 350 people came together to prioritize a list the most commonly named skills. *Then* we headed into a dimly lit, smoky bunker... just kidding. We enlisted a diverse committee of stakeholders to help hammer vetted recommendations into a workable list which we took back to faculty for feedback.

I share these two stories to highlight the importance of getting out early, in front of as many stakeholders as possible—students, parents, other taxpayers—to allow *their* needs and desires to drive necessary curricula and policies. We could have come down as two high schools from on high and said, "These are our new graduate expectations," and stepped back to prepare ourselves for the inevitable backlash, just like I could take my sophomores through an entire year of instruction without asking them about their needs; both decisions would be misguided. Whether it's the nuts and bolts of what I do every day in my classroom, or the desired end product of 13 years of public school, we all need to create effective formats and settings that allow us to seek specific information from the real players, to actually *use* the information we gather--people know when they're being tokenized, and to design for flexible application so our policies can live and change in context.