

# **OUR CLASS OUR VOICE**

**CREATING CHOICE AND AMPLIFYING  
AUTONOMY IN THE ELEMENTARY &  
MIDDLE SCHOOL CLASSROOM**

**GINA RUFFCORN**

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## E N D O R S E M E N T S

I was in Gina's sixth-grade reading class. I remember the first time we walked into class Gina was standing there at the front of the class and greeted us as we walked in. Gina has done this for as long as I can remember. Even if she's grading papers, she will stop and look up to greet you in some welcoming manner, usually with a big, warm, "Hello Darling, how are ya?" You just felt welcome anytime you walked into the room and that feeling just made me, personally, want to be there full time.

Whenever there was a lesson to be taught to some rowdy fifth and sixth graders, you could leave it to Gina to find a way to keep those kids entertained. Gina just has that special personality that you can't help but be peppy and ready to tackle the day with some enthusiasm.

The next thing that stuck with me most about Gina is how caring she is about each one of her students. All these things I've mentioned prior pale in comparison to Gina's genuine care for your well-being. I will not lie. I am guilty of having called Gina mom in class before by accident, but that's further evidence of just how much she makes you feel welcome and like someone cares.

Gina was an overwhelming positive influence on every one. I can personally say that the things she taught me then and even now, have definitely shaped me into the man I am today.

—**JADEN O.**

*Class of 2018, West Harrison CSD*

I had Ms. Ruffcorn for two years, fifth and sixth grade. I loved when we were done reading *Hatchet* we made the posters of the stuff Brian was able to use to survive. I also loved reading and watching *The Outsiders*! I actually have a quote from the movie tattooed on my arm!

I was able to be myself in her classroom and we were always comfortable with her seating options! I feel like compared to other classrooms we were able to explore the things we enjoyed and she always made things fun. Ms. Ruffcorn also never took crap from anyone and I loved that. She will forever and always be one of my favorite teachers!

—**ALLISON H**

*Class of 2018, West Harrison CSD*

What didn't make Ms. Ruffcorn's class different?

Her classroom was always so inviting and warm and homey. Nothing about her room was plain or boring. She had little areas to read and relax, books everywhere, and fun decorations on every wall. Everything was colorful. We didn't use the harsh lights in a regular classroom all day long. Instead, she had the cutest lamps and lights to fill the room. Not to mention there was not a single regular boring, uncomfortable chair in her room.

I also loved that she incorporated Go Noodle and Skype into her classroom. I watched her students break into teams and Skype other classrooms around the world to guess where they were from using maps, coordinates, and all kinds of resources.

Her teaching techniques made kids love to learn and she pushed them to be the best version of themselves. Gina is a big part of my life and helped me grow into the person I am. I couldn't be more thankful to have had such an incredible teacher like her.

—**HAILEY A.**

*Class of 2018 West Harrison CSD*

As I thought about the difference between Ms. Ruffcorn's classroom and everyone else's. I thought, is that even a question to ask?

For everybody who just started fifth grade, it may not seem like that much of a difference, going from fifth to sixth grade, but it is a massive change. Every time I have a chance for a class in her room, I'm extremely happy. The way Ms. Ruffcorn brings fun and games into learning is incredible. It's not as silent and serious as my other classes. The room has a genuine child-like feeling. Like no matter how old or mature you are, it will always, and I mean always, bring out the child in you.

So to sum up my answer, Ms. Ruffcorn's room is a place you can go to if you feel stressed or pressured no matter what grade.

—**SHAWN F.**

*Class of 2025, West Harrison CSD*

Gina contacted me and asked me to describe what made not only her, but her classroom, different from my other teachers' throughout my school experience. The truth is, there is no

comparison between her and other teachers because Gina is a one-of-a-kind woman. She'll leave an impact that will last a lifetime on every single student she interacts with.

She is the type of woman that every parent hopes their kid will someday become. Someone that you can always depend on, no matter the time of day or the situation at hand.

Gina made her classroom feel like home, a room you could walk into and you were greeted with a warm smile and welcoming hug. A judgment free zone. A carefree place where the rest of the world's problems could not touch. A safe space. Many of us needed that at a young age. The weight of the world simply dropped off your shoulders when you walked in the door.

Gina will always hold a special place in my heart, simply for the fact that she was more like family than just a teacher to me. Even now, in my adult life with work and raising kids, Gina still takes the time out of her busy schedule to check in on me. The amount of love, kindness and passion for teaching that Gina holds is unmatched by any teacher I've ever seen.

—**SHELBY L.**

*Class of 2018, West Harrison CSD*

The way to describe Ms. Gina Ruffcorn's room isn't with words. Experiencing the positivity, style, and teachings in that room will be sure to leave one speechless. She sets up her room not as a traditional classroom but in a way where people of all walks of life can feel accepted, heard, or even just present. She makes anyone feel accomplished and valuable with every obstacle that may come his/her way.

The room itself was filled with colors, scents, decorations, music, laughter, and fun. Walking into that room, one can just feel that the energy of the space shifts so stress and negativity are not promoted. The seats are not a regular desk and chair; no, they are fitness balls, cushions, bean bags.

It felt as if that room could withstand every crazy idea, every off-the-wall plan, any dance party, and especially the wind-down time. Although students love to get up and have fun, there were still many times when we would sit to read an empowering novel. Everyone had a role in that room. Not one person was ever excluded from the incredible lessons Ms. Gina Ruffcorn had to share.

—**RILEY A.**

*Class of 2023, West Harrison CSD*







*This collection of experiences and ideas is lovingly dedicated to each and every one of the students who left a lasting impression with me. Listening to and learning from all of you shaped me into the teacher that I would have wanted when I was a student.*



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## F O R E W O R D

I vividly remember one of my first in-person conversations with Gina Ruffcorn, which took place as we meandered through the late-afternoon streets of downtown Austin. We had attended several presentations earlier in the day at the Texas Computer Education Association Conference. The sessions focused on using technology to empower students and virtually connect classrooms. Gina spoke passionately about her teaching philosophy and the student agency she had successfully fostered as we walked. In contrast to some of the day's presenters, her methods were easy to understand and grounded in techniques that she had honed in her classroom. I recommended that she write a book.

That conversation took place in February 2015. Since then, Gina and her students have continued to teach me and countless others new ways of developing a class culture centered on student autonomy. On many occasions, her students have virtually connected with groups of educators I was training around the globe—from Kenya to California. Gina didn't have to say much on those calls; her students took the lead and explained how their classroom operated and why her methods helped them succeed. On one occasion, Gina had to miss school on a day her students were supposed to connect with a group of educators. Instead of canceling our call, she allowed her students to run the session without her. They owned the opportunity. The teachers in my session left both impressed and inspired to give their own students more voice and choice.

## 2 • OUR CLASS, OUR VOICE

Gina has also profoundly impacted my own career as a teacher and an author. When we first started collaborating over a decade ago, we had a lot in common. We both taught in rural, culturally isolated areas. We were both fifth-grade teachers. We were both looking to emerging technologies to help our students see the incredible possibilities, diverse perspectives, and inspiring people outside our small towns. Our work together as we tried to meet the challenges in our local communities helped me develop many of the techniques and projects that led to my recognition as a Global Teacher Prize finalist and Pennsylvania Teacher of the Year. As I've written in my books about how a healthy democratic society relies on student agency in schools, I've often pictured Gina's students as examples of how we can get education right.

I could not be more excited about this book. Selfishly, I am eager to incorporate new classroom practices based on tips found in the following chapters. More importantly, I am thrilled that others will finally be able to benefit from the expertise of one of the most authentic and excellent teachers I've met anywhere in the world. Our children will inherit this planet from us sooner than we realize. The practical ideas in this book are a way to ensure they are prepared to shape it into something extraordinary.

—**MICHAEL SOSKIL**

*Pennsylvania Teacher of the Year*  
*Global Teacher Prize Top Ten Finalist*

## INTRODUCTION

**M**aking decisions in daily life is a fundamental human need. As adults, the ability to make our own decisions motivates us to create, shape, and meaningfully contribute to our own choices. It connects us. It gives us purpose.

Students crave those same feelings.

As an undergrad, I don't remember any of my pre-service coursework ever mentioning student choice or autonomy. The prevailing focus was on the teacher, the classroom management, and the presentation of the content material. No one ever addressed the students' thoughts. Their opinions. Their choices. Their need for autonomy.

I had some epic power struggles with students in my first years of teaching, many of which could have been completely avoided. What if the classroom's culture could have been improved by talking to the kids and getting their input? Think about that. What if the kids felt like they were a part of the decision-making process in their day?

What if your chair-tipping student could benefit from alternative seating? No more reminders or escalated voices insistently nagging about all four legs needing to be on the floor. Seating choices completely change the entire situation.

How about that time after recess when no one can get settled back down? Would the kids respond more calmly to the lights being dimmed while they worked, or if they listened

to a read-aloud? Students are capable of making decisions and choosing the setting that works best for them.

Simply surviving in a classroom from day to day should not be a goal for you or for the students. Ask yourself how you could alter your daily classroom reality by giving the students

**"Honor your students' voices and build the classroom with them. It has unimagined benefits."**



choices and making small adjustments based on simple decisions. How would the classroom environment thrive if the students could make choices and decisions that benefitted them?

Honor your students' voices and build the classroom with them.

It has unimagined benefits. Asking their opinions, giving them a say in daily operations, or allowing them to vote on an activity makes students feel important and valued. My classroom was built—and continues to flourish—based on the ideas and experiences on each page.

Take your students into account when you're making plans for the classroom—from creating your physical space to operating it on a daily basis. I am certain of that fact because eighteen years later, I have tried, revised, and successfully implemented every idea in this book with my own students in my own classroom.

Creating choices and opportunities for student autonomy is the foundation for this book's three areas of concentration: Providing Choices, Creating a Classroom, and Establishing Relationships. In this book, I share ideas directly from my own fifth-grade room. Of course, just because I teach fifth grade doesn't mean you do. But the tips, suggestions, and strategies



in this book apply to all different ages in the elementary and middle school world, even into the high school realm.

In this book, you'll also hear from my students. They'll tell you in their own voices why certain decisions worked for them. You'll also hear from Isabelle Foland, who was one of my fifth graders years ago. As of the publication of this book, Isabelle is planning to major in journalism and mass communication at the University of Iowa.

“What I remember most from her class was feeling like there were almost no limits on my creativity,” Isabelle said. “The way she teaches encourages kids to have freedom and independence while also teaching them to make better choices. I would say Ms. Ruffcorn has a reputation within our school for her unique yet effective and fun teaching style. I was very eager to find out exactly how her methods came to be.”

So, what did I ask the journalist to do? Interview me! You'll find parts of my interview with Isabelle throughout the book.

As you read this book, I encourage you to make the modifications to fit your situation, which might look different for kindergarten, middle school, and high school classes. I invite you to examine each idea and truly seek out how you might use it or adapt it to give your students more autonomy and voice. That's the goal here—the students and their needs to feel seen, heard, and known.

A few years ago, my school district was interviewing administrator candidates. One contender stopped outside our classroom with the current administrator. “Here is our fifth grade,” our administrator said. “You may not agree with her methods, but you can't argue with her results.”

I took the comment as a compliment. Many of my methods may not be things that everyone would agree with. I'm okay with that. My methods work for me and for my students. We're the ones living in room 508. It's our home.

How do we determine the best methods for us—even if they're common, traditional approaches—to get the results we seek?

Ask yourself what you're open to trying. What are you really, truly open to trying? Decide what you want your classroom to look like—with your students.

Pick and choose the concepts that speak to you.

Then think about your students.

Ask yourself:

**"Which traditional methods can I revise? How would they improve my students' experiences in my classroom? How would they give the students choice and autonomy?"**





## SECTION I

# PROVIDING CHOICES

Inherently all people need to feel like they matter. Everyone wants to be noticed, to be seen, to be valued for their thoughts and abilities. Kids in classrooms are no different.

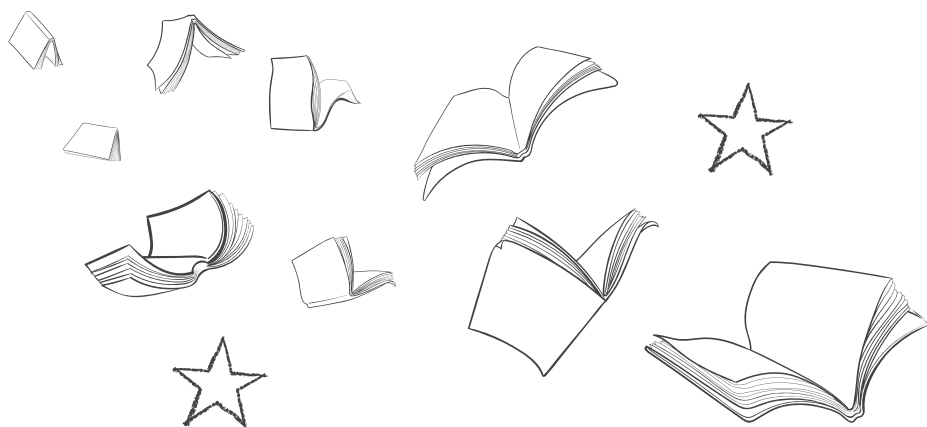
This section explores many ideas focused on the central theme of offering student choices that can be used or adapted for any classroom.

As you read, think about you, your teaching style, your grade level, your classroom, and your students.

Ask yourself:

**"What could my version of student choice look like?"**





## CHAPTER ONE

# Gathering Student Input

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**T**he changes that I have made to my daily routines, my classroom management style, and my learning environment are based on the most important factors present in the classroom: the kids.

I know: that doesn't sound like a startling revelation. Hear me out.

I have changed my class. My decisions are not made because of the students. They are made *with* the students. No one ever seems to suggest asking the kids' opinions

about the classroom operations. It doesn't make sense to me. Teachers' choices affect the kids directly, every minute, all day

**"My decisions are not made because of the students. They are made with the students."**



long. However, no one ever seems to give them an opportunity to consistently make their voices heard. The students' lack of choice seems odd to me.

What if a student identified something to help the classroom run more efficiently? What if they saw an adjustment that could help everyone feel happier or be more successful? Shouldn't that student get the opportunity to make a suggestion?

Do you suppose they feel like no one cares about their needs? Do they think things are being done "to them" instead of "with them"? Do the kids feel that their voices aren't important to you and in their classroom? And when they feel that way, how does that impact their learning and growth?

Those are the kinds of wonders that I ruminate about. The more I put myself in the kids' shoes, the more I thought I needed to change. The kids who share the space with me ought to have input into its operations.

Taking those thoughts into account, I questioned my past classroom management decisions.

- ▶ Had I made things harder on myself and the students by not considering these ideas earlier?
- ▶ Would there have been fewer issues or less stress if I had talked to the kids and made some mutually agreed upon changes?
- ▶ Were there things I had never considered before because I wasn't a student in my classroom?
- ▶ Should classroom management be a two-way street?
- ▶ Should the students have more choices and decision-making options?



I needed to know what my students wanted in a classroom in order to be more productive learners. That is the ‘why’ behind the creation of student surveys.

## FIRST-WEEK STUDENT SURVEY

When I begin the year, my new students complete a survey. It’s not a learner inventory. It’s not a “tell me about your summer” writing piece. It’s a survey of them as students.

- ♥ What is your favorite thing about school? Why?
- ♥ What do you dislike the most about school? Why?
- ♥ How do you like to learn?
- ♥ What works best for you?
- ♥ What are you looking forward to the most in fifth grade?
- ♥ What are you most worried about as fifth grade begins?
- ♥ What is something you want me to know about you?
- ♥ What do you know about your teacher?
- ♥ What do you expect or want from your teacher?

The results of those initial questions help me begin to shape our year together. We can build on many of the kids’ favorite things about school. Hard dislikes can be altered or discontinued, if possible. For instance, if the group dislikes one online practice site over another, that’s an easy concession to make.

If group work or partner activities are favorites, I begin to plan opportunities for collaboration.

I talk at length about the things from the survey that they anticipate most. We do a wide variety of unique activities during the year. I like to make a big deal out of those examples to build interest and engagement. I share information about virtual field trips, mystery location sessions, and other cool things that make our year special. By the time I am done chatting up all of the experiences we will have together, the kids' eyes are shining, and they're raring to begin.

The worries from the survey are often not shared aloud. We will, however, address common concerns that quite a few of the incoming students shared. Oftentimes, the worries are easily dispelled. Homework-related fears are the most common. Getting those thoughts out of the way noticeably changes the atmosphere in the room. The relief is almost palpable. Offering reassurance about the scary things instantly builds connections to the kids.

I want to know as much about the students as individuals as possible. That's the focus of the "What do you want me to know about you?" question. I've learned some really interesting information over the years. Sometimes kids will try to offer up phrases they have heard their parents say about learning difficulties from previous school years. They'll say, "I can't memorize math facts because I have short-term memory loss disease," or "I need more one-on-one time in math because my mom wasn't good at math either." Other times, children use this question to explain what they want to do when they grow up. Some responses are truly one of a kind. One is pretty much

cemented in my memory: “I like to read horror books. I believe in ghosts, and I want to learn more about witchcraft so I can practice magic and spells and speak with the dead and stuff.” Kids will share all sorts of revelations if you ask.

Dispelling or clarifying things that kids think they know about me helps build connections with them. It also gives me a chance to explain the ‘why’ behind some aspects of classroom management style. For example, a student’s answer was, “I know it’s gonna be an easy year. We never have to do homework cuz my brother’s friend said so.” In that case, the student did not know as much as he thought he did. Once I tackled his misconception, the whole class understood that if they got their work done in class, *then* there wasn’t any homework. The older brother’s friend was wrong, and the rumor was quieted.

The feedback from the last question—“What do you expect or want from your teacher?”—never gives me much information. But it serves a greater purpose. It lets the students know that they can have expectations of me as their teacher. The idea of telling a teacher what they want or expect from them is an unfamiliar experience for students. The question sets the stage for them to begin to understand that, as the year unfolds, I will aspire to rise to their expectations of me.

The survey is an incredibly valuable tool. The way I relate to students, the activities I decide to include in lessons, and the pitfalls I need to avoid are all examples of ways the students’ voices help inform the way I teach. Without the guidance from their replies, I’d be stuck floundering until I accidentally tripped across things that worked, or worse yet, I’d fall face-first into a situation I could have avoided. Each year I’ve used

the questionnaire, I've gained useful insights that shape the way I interact with my students.

## **PULSE CHECKS (NO MEDICAL TRAINING REQUIRED)**

I pose prompts to gauge students' thoughts and opinions once every nine weeks, which I call 'pulse checks'. Pulse checks are informal surveys where I ask these simple questions:

- ▶ What are three things we need more of in our classroom?
- ▶ What are three things we need less of or to get rid of?
- ▶ What do you wish the teacher knew?

Those three questions are the bedrock of the quarterly pulse checks. I've added extra ones at times, but I don't want the pulse checks to become overwhelming essays. I want the students to legitimately reflect on our experiences. After all, I don't know what I don't know. It's another chance to share their unique voice.

I've given the kids the option to answer anonymously if that makes the responses more honest. Let me issue a word of caution here: If you don't want unflinchingly candid responses, do not ask kids for their opinions. You can't get angry or bent out of shape based on their observations. It's important to make sure that you are open and ready to accept or honor the kids' thoughts. Pulse checks are only valid if you genuinely want to understand the students' perspectives.

The kids turn their pulse checks face-down, and I collect and review them before the next school day. The following morning,

during our daily overview, the Secretary goes to the board with the Insurance Officer. (These are two classroom jobs you'll learn more about in Chapter 3.) Each is in charge of recording the answers in two columns: "things that we need more of" and "things we need less of." I read the suggestions while the kids record them on the board. Once all of the responses are recorded, we discuss them as a large group.

Student feedback can lead to many adjustments. Generally, their proposals are simple requests. Coming to a common consensus on ways to change our routines requires flexibility on everyone's part. When students lead the discussion about their opinions, it builds a sense of community in the classroom.

The suggestions students make are usually in their best interest. After all, that's why they chose those changes. Personally, I don't ever remember them suggesting anything that didn't benefit me in some way.

That being said, I've never had a class of students purposely attempting to weasel out of work or get away with absurd requests. The kids seem to genuinely understand the purpose of the pulse check. Kids usually don't take the offer for granted or make a mockery of it. Truly, they want to have a say in the decisions that affect them daily.

Here's a taste of what kids usually want:

- ▶ More game-type learning activities
- ▶ Different classroom coupon options
- ▶ More escape rooms
- ▶ More time to work on assignments (like a study hall)
- ▶ Four GoNoodles in the morning instead of just three

- ▶ More partnering for activities or projects
- ▶ Extra time added to independent reading period

Some items are non-negotiable. For example, as much as they don't like practice problems in math, getting rid of them

**There's incredible benefit to talking about impossible requests and clarifying my decisions.**



completely isn't a possibility. I can lessen the number of problems or vary the way we practice in class, but I can't discontinue practice problems entirely. Another frequent request is an increase in P.E. classes. I have no control over how many days per week the class

has P.E. I understand they want more P.E. days, but that is an administrative decision. If I can't accommodate the students' suggestions or if they are administrative in nature, I explain that.

There's incredible benefit to talking about impossible requests and clarifying my decisions. Students feel like their concerns have at least been heard and valued. If they understand the situation, they are more likely to accept certain rules and regulations that they had taken issue with before.

The list of things students have responded that we need less of has included:

- ▶ Math videos
- ▶ Typing practice
- ▶ Online spelling word practice
- ▶ Read-aloud time
- ▶ Math time

There are even times when the students' answers mirror my thoughts on what we need less of. For example, "people talking when they shouldn't be." The fact that a majority of the class wanted the same thing that I did was powerful. Their peers were annoyed with the behavior as well. It's powerful to be able to say that your neighbors and your teacher all agree that talking excessively is distracting. Students can remind blurters and chatters that it's not just the teacher that needs them to stop. The fact that their classmates also want them to quit interrupting our learning is a strong deterrent.

The "What do you wish the teacher knew?" question is important. It lets the students privately share concerns. Sometimes, this is easier to do in writing, especially if it's an issue they are embarrassed about or can't bring themselves to vocalize.

In a very small class of thirteen students, I had a learner who struggled in math. She didn't want everyone to know how hard it was for her. She got anxious; She wouldn't ask for help, she didn't even raise her hand to have me scoot over to help her. She knew she needed help, but she didn't know how to get it without everyone seeing her struggle.

When she shared this with me during a pulse check, we came up with a secret cue system. When she needed help, she flagged me in a way no one noticed, and I made my way over to her inconspicuously. I checked on others and then on her. That way, it didn't seem like she was the only person I was assisting. It worked for her, and she felt less self-conscious. If she hadn't shared her concerns, I couldn't have supported her needs.

## SPECIALIZED SURVEY SITUATIONS

Sometimes, a consistent issue I can't figure out impacts the class. Sometimes, negative behaviors hurt our classroom community. That's when I pop in a specialized student survey. These situations don't happen often, but when they do, it's essential to get the students' thoughts and opinions.

One time, a group of boys was being disrespectful outside of our classroom. One day in particular, several of them had been rude in the lunchroom and on the way back from lunch. Those same boys were written up at recess for breaking the rules and thrown out of Art class. The other students were upset because they were missing out on things and getting chastised for the behavior of a few kids. The rest of the class was consistently distressed about the situation. Many of the kids would return to the classroom, adamantly stressing their innocence during situations. They were concerned about losing privileges or rewards based on other students' bad decisions. Obviously, there was a significant need to collect some student feedback regarding the concept of respect with a specialized survey.

Since the issue seemed to be specifically isolated to just a few kids, those were the only survey participants. The feedback from the questions showed their honest insights—or lack thereof. Using their responses, I developed a mini respect unit for the group. I grounded the group from all Art, P.E., and music classes while we worked our way through the issues. As we discussed the disrespectful behavior and explored why it was happening, I used the answers from the survey to drive the conversations. As a group, we talked about how to be respectful and what to do in different situations in order to not show disrespect



to others. After a few weeks, we had formulated a few workable solutions that would demonstrate respect to ourselves and to others.

The survey responses helped me to understand their perspectives and allowed me to work collaboratively with the boys on a solution.

## **SURVEYS BOOST CLASSROOM COMMUNITY**

Taking informal surveys in my classroom has made classroom management a two-way street. They create immeasurable differences in the way our classroom operates. Our surveys allow student voices to be heard and honored. Students have more ownership of the classroom environment and what we do in it. When we openly acknowledge the suggestions and comments the kids make, it improves the tone of the classroom culture.

Student surveys have shown me so much about my kids' wants and needs. We can easily make most of their suggested changes to make our classroom match their vision. I'm open to their input. When they know their teacher really listens to them, it builds a stronger relationship with the students. Being flexible and open to change are life skills that kids will need as they continue throughout their school years and beyond. Our surveys—and how we use the input gathered through them—show students how that should look.