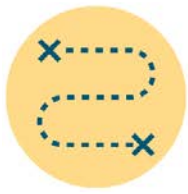STUDENT VOICE & CHOICE TOOL

Employing Math in a Community Clean-Up Project to Engage Student Voice

By Erin Kimball

TOOL DESCRIPTION
A lesson plan and related materials for a community-minded project driven by student choice.

CRITICAL CONTEXT INFORMATION
This lesson was initially developed for fifth graders at an urban charter school but, with modifications, could be applicable for students of all ages.

TOOL & LINKS
- Clean-Up Project Lesson Steps
- Student-Facing Slides for Lesson (to inspire other teachers in developing their own)
- KWL Chart (used within the Lesson Plan)
- Letter-Writing Materials (printable PDF) and Exemplar Letters

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About this Tool & Guidance for Adaptation

Linked above is a step-by-step teacher plan, as well as excerpts from the student-facing materials, for this four-day lesson that explores pollution as a way of learning math. It provides opportunities for voice and choice. (Notably, teachers could pick the location for the clean up based on student choice or choose a different issue to explore actively with a similar approach that incorporates service-learning.)

Guidance per Erin

- Ask yourself: How do my students see themselves in this subject? It may be helpful to interview your students or spend time in their community.

- Tally how many choices students make for themselves in one class. Everything from where they sit, when they can get a pencil, which question they start with or how they answer a problem can count!

- How often are students the knowledge-keepers? Can students answer questions for each other rather than have a teacher share the answer? Are students asking the questions or making the observations that lead to the conclusion or is a teacher walking them there?

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Photos from Implementation
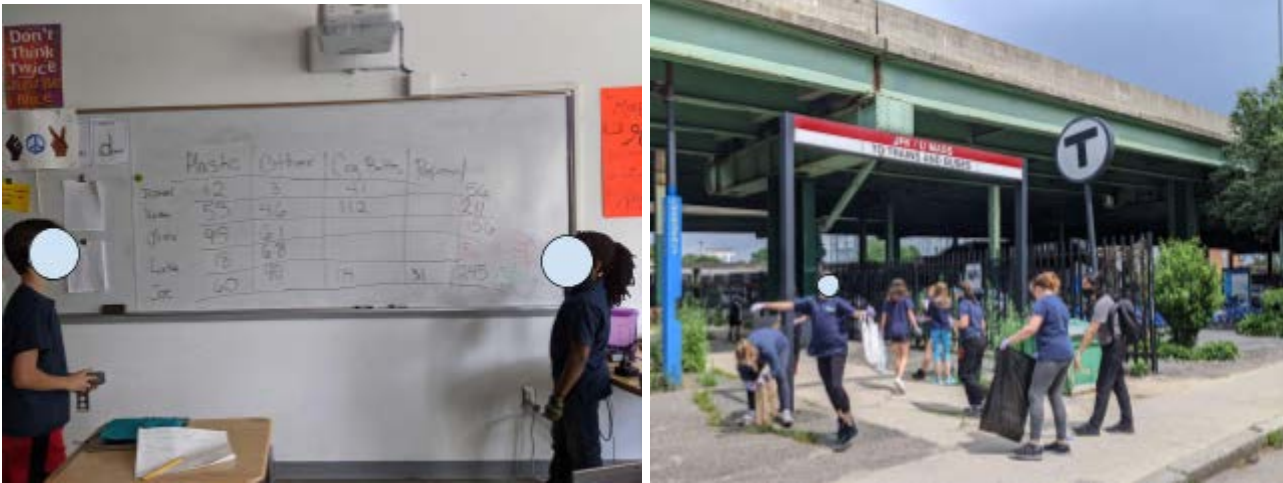
Teacher Narrative

"But when are we going to use this?!" As a math teacher, I heard this a lot. I was frustrated. Shouldn't my students trust that I'm teaching this for a reason? They're going to need this next year in school! I worked to make lessons more gamified and fun, but still heard "but why do I have to learn this?" I realized that my students had a point. If the content isn't relevant to them, how can I ask them to connect with it, internalize it, and be successful with it?

I slowed my frantic rush to remake every lesson with what I thought they would like and started to think more about how to make lessons more real for them and embed more Student Voice and Choice in my class. Conversations and student surveys were easy gateways to learn more about my students. They shared their love of their neighborhood, anime, art, an interest in the environment (largely sparked by their science lessons earlier in the year), and the desire to feel like they were "doing something."

While I haven't found a way to tie in the Anime, I pulled many of these ideas together to create a Clean-Up project that centered on Student Voice and Choice. Students would:

- Work in groups to create a hypothesis about what kind of trash they would find the most of;
- Create a way to answer the question and make a tracking system for their data;
- Find a system within their group to decide how they would tally their findings, carry the trash and pick it up;
- Use their data to identify the problem and several possible solutions; and
- Choose a solution and the appropriate audience for it and then write a letter to work towards creating change.

Not every unit has a full project like this yet, but I'm working on making my lessons more student-focused and I'm leaning more and more on my students as the experts.

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MEET THE AUTHOR

Erin Kimball teaches 5th grade math at the Boston Collegiate Charter School. As a math teacher, she would hear far too often, "but when are we going to use this?!" She was frustrated but realized that her students had a point. If the content isn't relevant to them, she realized, how can she ask them to connect with it, internalize it and be successful with it?