

Objective 3.2: Engaging Student Voice

Defining Student Voice

Student voice is defined by the Search Institute as “the opportunities students have to participate in and influence the educational decisions that shape their lives and the lives of their peers” (2022). A 2019 report by the Center for American Progress defines student voice as “student input in their education ranging from input into the instructional topics, the way students learn, the way schools are designed, and more”. The authors of this report define student voice as “authentic student input or leadership in instruction, school structures, or education policies that can promote meaningful change in education systems, practice, and/or policy by empowering students as change agents, often working in partnership with adult educators” (2019). More generally, SoundOut.org defines student voice as “any expression of any learner about anything, anywhere, anytime related to learning, schools or education” (2015).

Impact of Student Voice

Research conducted by the Center for American Progress states that:

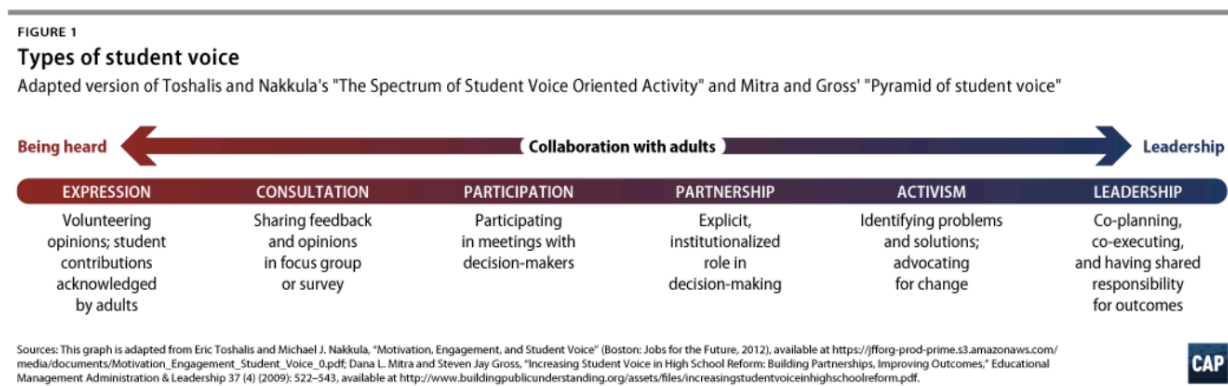
According to a 2016 Gallup poll that measured student engagement, about three-quarters of fifth graders—an age at which students are full of joy and enthusiasm for school—report high engagement in school. By middle school, slightly more than one-half of students report being engaged. In high school, however, there is a precipitous drop in engagement, with just about one-third of students reporting being engaged. Similar to the drop in engagement, a recent poll from The New Teacher Project (TNTP) found that students see less value in their work and assignments with each subsequent year of school. (2019, p.1)

Strategies for Engaging Student Voice

There are many ways to solicit and engage student voices in school, which vary by the age and grade of student. According to the Center for American Progress, “efforts to incorporate student voice are stronger when they include the following elements: intentional efforts to incorporate multiple student voices, especially those that have been historically marginalized; a strong vision from educational leaders; clarity of purpose and areas of influence; time and structures for student-adult communication; and, most importantly, trust between students and educators” (2019).

Below is an illustration of the spectrum of student voice that is typically present in schools that use student voice to impact outcomes.

Figure 1: Types of Student Voice



The following table, also from the Center for American Progress, is helpful in understanding various strategies for each educational level and the ideal implementation for each.

Figure 2: Strategies to Incorporate Student Voice

TABLE 1
The implementation of strategies to incorporate student voice is critical
 Poor to ideal implementation, affected grade levels, and areas of influence of each strategy

E Elementary school
M Middle school
H High school

Strategy	Area of influence	Poor Implementation ←	→ Ideal implementation	
Student Surveys E M H	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instruction • School policies • District policies • State policies 	Data are collected occasionally and are not reported to key stakeholders or used to influence key decisions. This strategy includes only superficial topics.	Data are collected regularly. The survey covers important topics such as school climate, instruction, and teacher and administrative quality and effectiveness. Results are given to stakeholders and influence decisions.	Students contribute to the survey design or a subset of survey items. Students analyze survey data and create a plan for student action.
Student Perspectives on Governing Bodies M H	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instruction • School policies • District policies • State policies 	The governing body has one student representative who is an advisory, nonvoting member and who is hand-picked by an administrator.	The student has to be elected by their peers to become the student representative on a governing body; the student is able to vote on limited issues.	The governing body has multiple student representatives, and every member has the same power and responsibilities. There are diverse perspectives among the student representatives.
Student Government or Councils E M H	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instruction • School policies • District policies 	Turnout is low and nonrepresentative of population. Elected student leaders manage or consult on superficial student activities irrelevant to school structure, such as prom or community service events.	The student government partners with the administration to propose initiatives that can shift school culture, such as coordinating a schoolwide student and community survey.	The student government is autonomous with budget authority and diverse representation. The body has a structure to regularly collect opinions of the full student body.
Student Journalism M H	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instruction • School policies • District policies • State policies 	Students cover limited, often superficial topics; readership is low.	Students identify topics, with input from teachers, that are important to the student population and school community.	Students are responsible for the production of the newspaper from start to finish, including selection of content, editing process, and release. Teachers ensure content is appropriate.
Democratic Classroom Practices E M H	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instruction • School policies 	The class brainstorms classroom rules at the beginning of the school year. The teacher rarely revisits them or reengages students to adjust the rules.	The class brainstorms and votes on topics or projects to explore in a unit of study.	The class regularly brainstorms solutions to challenges, including conflict resolution, and co-creates curriculum and assessment methods. The teacher periodically asks students for feedback on classroom processes.
Student-led conferences E M H	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instruction • School policies 	The student leads a short, scripted portion of a parent-teacher conference; the teacher and parent do not ask for the student's opinion during the rest of the conference.	Students prepare a portfolio of work for the conference, and a teacher describes how the work reflects learning goals.	Students describe how their work meets learning goals; the teacher and parent consistently engage student to develop solutions to academic, behavioral, or social challenges.
Youth-led Participatory Action Research E M H	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School policies • District policies • State policies 	A research question is developed by adults, and students serve as data sources and/or data collectors.	Students partner with teachers to create a research question about an issue in their school or area. The group is not given dedicated time to work on their project nor training to support quality research and policy analysis.	Students create a research question that addresses an oppressive issue in their school or area. Students develop a plan for data collection and present recommendations to a decision-making body. Students take action to effect change.
Personalized Learning E M H	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instruction 	Students can choose between three options for essay topics.	Students work with teachers to develop questions to explore in each area of study.	Students work with teachers to create their own learning plan. Each student can demonstrate mastery of learning goals in various ways, including project-based learning, at their own pace.

Source: For more information about the implementation of youth participatory action research, see YPAR Hub, "Continuum of Youth Participation & Engagement" available at <http://yparhub.berkeley.edu/get-started-lessons/continuum-of-youth-participation-engagement> (last accessed June 2019).

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Next Steps

The next steps toward Objective 3.2 in the strategic plan involve connecting with members of the student body to discuss which research-based strategies are preferred and expected to yield the desired results of the strategic plan goal. In the Upper School, portions of this work will likely occur within the Knights Roundtable Advisory Boards that were implemented during the 2023-2024 school year.

List of Referenced Resources:

[Student Voice: Empowered to Transform Education](#) - Search Institute

<https://www.americanprogress.org/article/elevating-student-voice-education/>

<https://cdn.americanprogress.org/content/uploads/2019/08/05072200/StudentVoice-report.pdf>

<https://soundout.org/2015/04/03/student-voice-toolbox/>

<https://studentpoweredimprovement.com/the-journey/> - inventory surveys/next steps

[Search Institute Toolkit](#) - inventory surveys/next steps

<https://www.americanprogress.org/topic/education-k-12/>

Nova's Current Opportunities for Student Voice

- **School of Grammar**
 - Student Proxeny (5th grade students)
 - Student-read daily morning announcements for Lower School
- **School of Logic**
 - Student Senate
 - Slideshow and announcements at lunch
 - SoL Knights Roundtable Student Advisory Board
- **School of Rhetoric**
 - Student Senate
 - NHS
 - Slideshow and announcements at lunch
 - Student Representative to the Nova Classical School Board
 - SoR Knights Roundtable Student Advisory Board
 - Student-read daily morning announcements for Upper School

Exemplar Schools

Eden Prairie School District, Eden Prairie, MN

Eden Prairie High School

Oak Point Elementary School

Brimhall Elementary, Roseville, MN (Principal: Ryan Vernosh)

Nekoosa High School, Nekoosa, WI [\(Link\)](#)

Waunakee Community High School, Waunakee, WI [\(Link\)](#)

Variety of school examples across the US [\(Link\)](#)

These schools have been recognized as exemplary institutions for their innovative approaches in providing platforms for students to actively express their individual and collective voice.