



ESTABLISHING STRUCTURES FOR STUDENT VOICE

Prepared for Washington Association of School Administrators

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INTRODUCTION

Members of the School Information Research Services (SIRS) branch of the Washington Association of School Administrators (WASA-SIRS) are interested in developing structures for hearing and responding to student voice. In schools and school boards across the state of Washington, administrators (e.g., school-based administrators, superintendents) see the need to listen to how students are dealing with the several contentious issues that have arisen since 2020 – issues that continue to exact serious negative outcomes on students and school environments. Various community members in the individual WASA districts have agency and power to be heard through their expert use of media and through resources associated with their political activism. Student voice, on the other hand, seems to be absent from the current political discourse both at the district and school levels.

To address this oversight, superintendents and school administrators need best practice research on how to implement structures (e.g., policies, strategies, programs, systems) that can give students voice and agency. A systematic approach will allow students access to opportunities to share their experiences and tell their stories of how the current climate is affecting them. These structures also need to create avenues for administrators to appropriately and immediately respond to concerns and opinions raised by students. WASA-SIRS has partnered with Hanover Research (Hanover) to develop a best practices report so it can provide members with strategies for hearing and reacting to student voice. This report draws on recommendations for eliciting student voice and creating structures to support student voice in the secondary literature, as well as case studies of schools and districts that have been cited in the secondary literature for their effective student voice practices. This report includes the following sections:

- **Section I** reviews strategies to obtain student voice at the school, district, and classroom levels.
- **Section II** reviews structural supports for student voice.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on our findings, Hanover suggests that WASA districts consider the following recommendations.



Use multiple strategies to elicit student voice across a spectrum of intensity. Because each strategy to promote student voice carries several advantages and disadvantages, the most effective approach to student voice adopts multiple strategies to meet specific goals.



Ensure students included in student voice initiatives reflects the diversity of the student body. Students' diverse backgrounds and experiences will influence their experiences and the feedback they provide. As such, equitable student engagement must include all students, particularly those from historically marginalized or underrepresented backgrounds.



Consider incorporating student voice into accountability measures. Including student voice metrics such as climate surveys in accountability measures enables accountability processes to include a wider range of outcomes and ensures that student voice meaningfully contributes to evaluations.

KEY FINDINGS



Student voice provides students with opportunities to influence aspects of their education such as curriculum and instruction, with the goal of promoting student engagement and aligning education to student needs. Schools frequently solicit student voice through surveys or other formal engagement processes such as student journalism or youth participatory action research (YPAR). Schools also directly engage students in decision-making processes by recruiting students to participate alongside adults on governing bodies such as school boards or school improvement teams, and by developing student advisory councils led by students with adult facilitators.



School districts can maximize the effectiveness of student voice by combining approaches to facilitate a continuum of engagement. Each individual strategy to promote student voice carries advantages and disadvantages, and districts can mitigate disadvantages by using multiple strategies. For example, including students in governing bodies or advisory councils allows for more intensive student voice and authentic influence on decisions, but can only include a limited number of students who may not be representative of the overall student body, while student surveys include all students but allow for only high-level input and do not directly involve students in decision-making process.



Classroom-level approaches to student voice such as student-led conferencing and democratic classroom practices are most effective when implemented as part of a school-wide structure. School leaders can support schoolwide student voice practices by providing teachers with professional learning and schoolwide protocols to support student voice. For example, Andover Public Schools uses the Responsive Classroom protocol as a schoolwide strategy to promote democratic classroom practices at the elementary school level and uses a schoolwide advisory program to facilitate social and emotional learning (SEL) at the high school level.



School leaders need district-level support to ensure sustained and consistent implementation of student voice. District support for student voice initiatives should include guidance to align student voice strategies with best practices. Districts should establish formal policies for including student voice in the decision-making process and ensure all teachers participate in professional learning focused on student voice and reciprocal dialogue.



Both students and adults need training to support effective student voice. For students, effective training includes specific skills needed for individual voice activities, such as research skills for Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR), and participating constructively on leadership teams or councils. School leaders need to engage teachers and other adults in schools to generate buy-in for student voice and provide adults with professional learning focused on specific skills, such as survey analysis and reciprocal dialogue designed to constructively engage students. Teachers also benefit from professional learning focused on strategies to support student voice at the classroom level, such as student-led conferencing.



School districts with successful student voice initiatives embed these initiatives into district policies which specify how student voice is included in decisions. For example, Pittsfield Middle High School's Site Council is officially recognized as the governing body of the school by school board policy, which provides it with the authority to make recommendations to the school board for modifications to the school's student handbook. Likewise, Washoe County School District developed a board policy committing to student voice and establishing a Student Advisory Council to structure student voice.

SECTION I: STRATEGIES TO ELICIT STUDENT VOICE

In this section, Hanover reviews strategies schools and districts can use to elicit student voice. This section begins with strategies designed for school- or district-level implementation before examining classroom-level strategies schools and districts can facilitate through professional learning.

SCHOOL AND DISTRICT-LEVEL STRATEGIES

Student voice provides opportunities for students to make contributions to their own education. The goal of student voice is to promote student engagement and align aspects of education (e.g., curriculum, instruction, social-emotional learning, character development) to student needs.¹ A 2019 report by the Center for American Progress (CAP), a think tank advocating equity in education, identifies strategies for student voice used by schools and districts across the United States. Figure 1.1 displays these common strategies.



Source: Center for American Progress²

Research on student voice conceptualizes voice as a spectrum ranging from activities that solicit student perspectives that inform adult-led planning process to activities where students lead improvement. Each approach to student voice carries advantages and disadvantages. For example, intensive forms of student voice such as participating in school governance or Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) create opportunities for students to exercise authentic leadership roles and provide extensive input and feedback, but the number of students who can participate in these activities at any one time is limited, and the students selected to participate may not be representative of the student body as a whole. In contrast, student surveys provide less granular data and do not directly support student leadership but enable schools to solicit feedback from all students. CAP recommends schools and districts combine multiple student voice strategies to meet specific goals.³

A recent survey of middle and high school principals conducted by the RAND Corporation finds school leaders use an average of three strategies to capture student voice. Figure 1.2 lists strategies by the percent of school leaders reporting them. Notably, the most commonly used strategy to elicit student voice is informal conversations with individual students. Informal student voice strategies are particularly common in middle schools and schools with high populations of low-income students. The authors suggest combining informal student voice strategies with more structured strategies helps school leaders overcome the limitations of each individual strategy.⁴

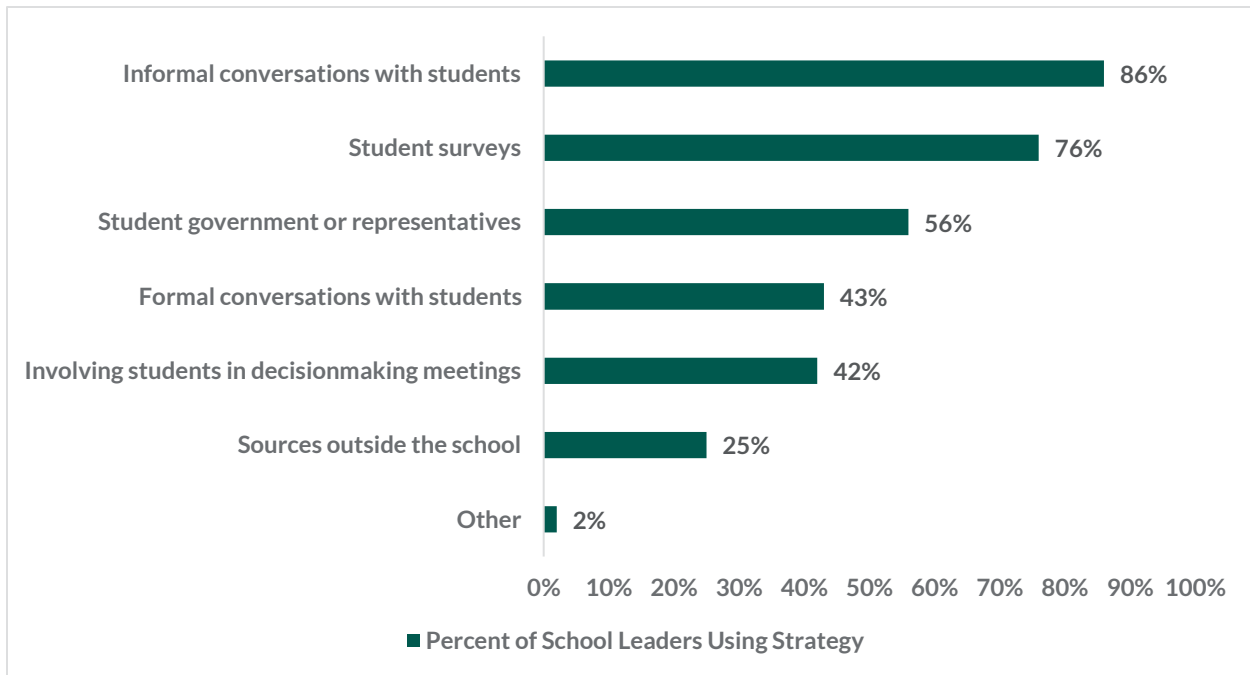
¹ Benner, M., C. Brown, and A. Jeffrey. “Elevating Student Voice in Education.” Center for American Progress, August 14, 2019. <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/elevating-student-voice-education/>

² Chart contents taken verbatim from: Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Fernandez, M.-P., S. Doan, and E.D. Steiner. “Use, Capture, and Value of Student Voice in Schools: Findings from the 2021 Learn Together Surveys.” November 17, 2021. pp. 2–3. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR827-4.html

Figure 1.2: Strategies Used by School Leaders to Elicit Student Voice



Source: RAND Corporation⁵

STUDENT SURVEYS

The 2021 RAND Corporation study finds that student surveys are the most frequently reported formal strategy to elicit student voice, with 76 percent of school leaders using the strategy.⁶ Student surveys allow schools to collect feedback or input from many students at one time. Surveys can support a variety of goals, including assessing specific programs or instructional practices. An increasing number of schools use standardized climate surveys to solicit student feedback on the current state of the school's climate and identify areas for improvement.⁷

Including data from these surveys in school and district accountability measures can help schools account for a wider range of student outcomes than traditional accountability measures and ensure student voice contributes to the evaluation process. A 2021 study using statewide data from Massachusetts finds that including climate survey data in accountability ratings would meaningfully alter ratings, suggesting climate surveys capture outcomes not currently included in school accountability processes. Notably, the study finds that including survey data slightly reduces the impact of student demographics on overall ratings, suggesting that using student voice through surveys could result in more equitable outcomes of accountability systems.⁸

In addition to measuring school climate, schools can use surveys to solicit student voice on aspects of academic performance such as the curriculum and the quality of instruction, which schools can then use to improve the quality of instruction. Because students have direct experience of instruction, their perspectives on the effects of instructional decisions provide a valuable supplement to the effects observed by teachers and other adults. In particular, students in the secondary grades have accumulated substantial experience observing instruction and can bring this experience to bear when evaluating the quality of specific

⁵ Chart contents taken verbatim from: Ibid., p. 3.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Benner, Brown, and Jeffrey, Op. cit.

⁸ Schneider, J. et al. "Adding 'Student Voice' to the Mix: Perception Surveys and State Accountability Systems." *AERA Open*, 7, January 1, 2021. pp. 5–7.

instructional activities.⁹ However, the use of student perception surveys to gain feedback on instruction is controversial due to concerns that students cannot provide accurate evaluations of instruction and that teachers will be unwilling to act on student feedback.¹⁰ A substantial body of research in the higher education sector finds that student perception surveys can reflect bias related to factors such as students' course grades, students' perceptions of the rigor of a course, and the instructor's gender.¹¹ Schools can improve the quality of survey results by implementing the strategies listed in Figure 1.3, such as the use of standardized survey instruments to collect feedback. Even when implementing these strategies, teachers and administrators should exercise professional discretion when interpreting student feedback, as students may provide feedback that reflects their personal concerns or biases rather than an accurate interpretation of instructional decisions.¹²

Figure 1.3: Strategies to Improve Student Feedback Quality

Explain the importance of providing honest feedback immediately before administering surveys.

Share survey results with students and discuss specific ways results will be used to improve instruction.

Solicit informal feedback through strategies such as exit tickets to make students more accustomed to providing feedback.

Consider using a standardized survey instrument.

Source: Harvard Graduate School of Education¹³

INCLUDING STUDENTS IN GOVERNANCE

Several of the strategies listed in Figure 1.1 above directly include student perspectives in governance processes. Many school districts appoint individual student representatives to the school board, while others establish advisory committees made up of multiple students. Schools can also incorporate student voice into existing student councils or student governments by empowering these councils to provide input on school decisions or lead improvement initiatives.¹⁴ Student advisory committees are most effective when they meet on a regularly scheduled basis with support from an adult facilitator to lead discussions.¹⁵

Schools with advisory or improvement teams focused on specific issues, such as social-emotional learning (SEL) or school climate should consider recruiting two to three student team members.¹⁶ Figure 1.4 presents a suggested process for incorporating student voice into school climate improvements that combines intensive engagement of a leadership team with six to eight students and less intensive surveys of all students.

⁹ "Giving Students A Voice in the Classroom." Jostens Renaissance Education, November 2016. p. 25.

<https://www.jostensrenaissance.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/November%C2%ADSearchInstitute-Voice.pdf>

¹⁰ Gehlbach, H. et al. "Questionnaires as Interventions: Can Taking a Survey Increase Teachers' Openness to Student Feedback Surveys?" *Educational Psychology*, 38:3, March 16, 2018.

¹¹ Geiger, T. and A. Amrein-Beardsley. "Student Perception Surveys for K-12 Teacher Evaluation in the United States: A Survey of Surveys." edited by S.-J. Chan. *Cogent Education*, 6:1, January 1, 2019.

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/2331186X.2019.1602943>

¹² Shafer, L. "Making Student Feedback Work." Harvard Graduate School of Education, November 2, 2017.

<https://www.gse.harvard.edu/news/uk/17/11/making-student-feedback-work>

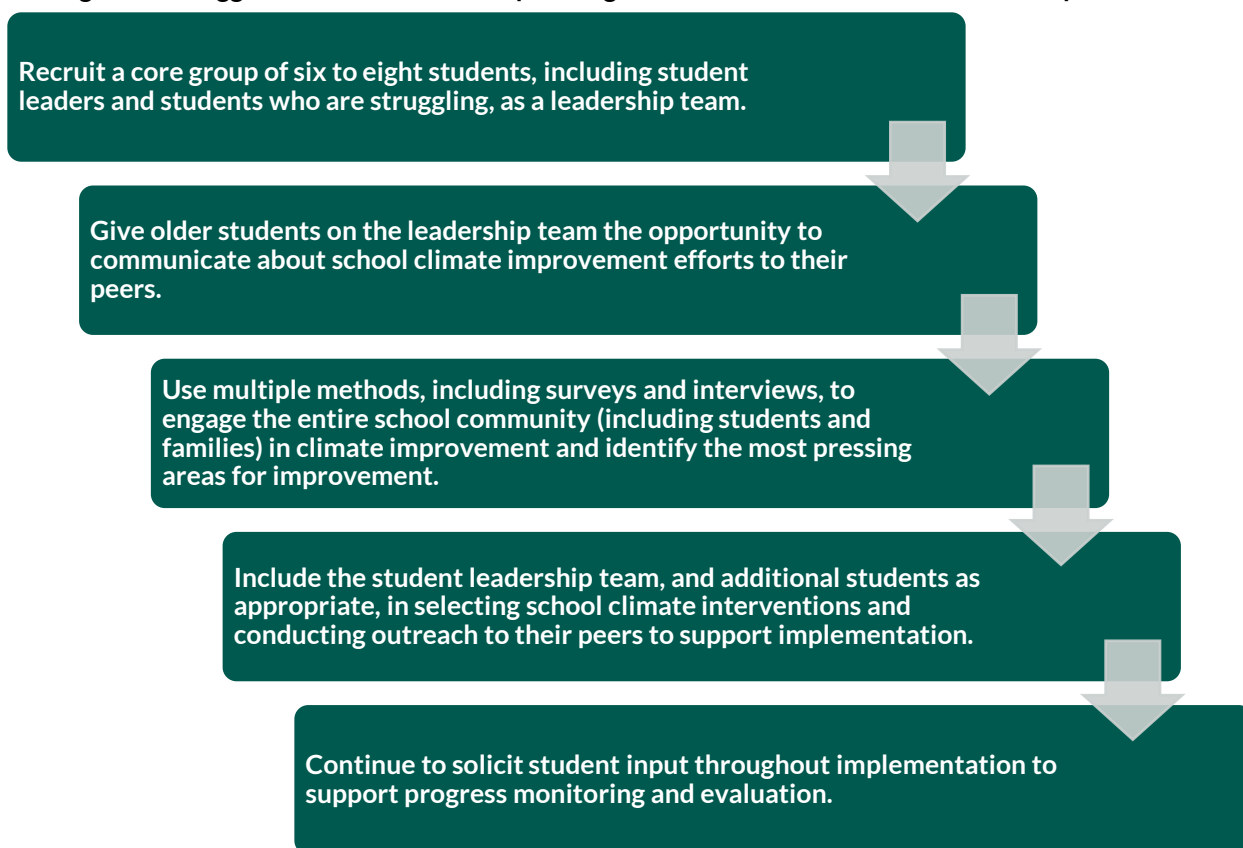
¹³ Chart contents adapted from: Ibid.

¹⁴ Benner, Brown, and Jeffrey, Op. cit.

¹⁵ Giraldo-García, R.J., A. Voight, and M. O'Malley. "Mandatory Voice: Implementation of a District-led Student-voice Program in Urban High Schools." *Psychology in the Schools*, 58:1, January 2021. p. 64.

¹⁶ "Guide to Schoolwide SEL: Define Team Member Roles and Responsibilities." Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning. <https://schoolguide.casel.org/focus-area-1a/create-a-team/define-team-roles-and-responsibilities/>

Figure 1.4: Suggested Process for Incorporating Student Voice into School Climate Improvement



Source: National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments¹⁷

Participation in these governance structures is inherently limited to a small number of students and is generally more effective at the high school level. Students who win election to a student board seat or student government may disproportionately represent those from privileged backgrounds, leading to inequities in student voice.¹⁸ Schools can expand student participation in governance by facilitating a continuum of participation that includes informal engagement. For example, formal student leaders can engage their peers in discussions around topics of concern that can then be brought to school leaders for action, or teachers can lead these discussions in schools without formal student leadership positions.¹⁹

CASE STUDY – PITTSFIELD MIDDLE HIGH SCHOOL

Pittsfield Middle High School in New Hampshire is an example of student representation in governance at the school level. The school's Site Council, established in 2010, includes ten students and nine adults.²⁰ Student members are elected by their peers.²¹ The Site Council is officially recognized by the school board as a governing body which provides authority to make recommendations to the school board for modifications to

¹⁷ Chart contents adapted from: "School Climate Improvement Action Guide for Working With Students." National Center for Safe Supportive Learning Environments, January 2017. pp. 1–7. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED580912.pdf>

¹⁸ Benner, Brown, and Jeffrey, Op. cit.

¹⁹ "Student Voice: How Young People Can Shape the Future of Education." Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy, 2019. p. 10. https://eric.ed.gov/?q=student+voice&ft=on&ff1=dtSince_2015&id=ED594106

²⁰ Benner, Brown, and Jeffrey, Op. cit.

²¹ Palermo, S. "They Do Have a Say." *Concord Monitor*, March 28, 2012. <http://www.pittsfieldnhschools.org/pmhs/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/Site-Council-Article.pdf>

the school's student handbook. This policy also specifies the Site Council's membership and voting procedures.²²

Pittsfield Middle High School's Site Council solicits additional constituent input through a form for students or staff members to bring issues to the council's attention. These issues are discussed during council meetings and contribute to policy initiatives led by the council.²³ The school district credits the Site Council in part for reduction in the dropout rate at Pittsfield Middle High School from 3.9 percent during the 2010-2011 school year to 0.6 percent during the 2016-2017 school year.²⁴

YOUTH PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH

YPAR allows students to function as partners in collecting and analyzing data to support school improvement efforts. Students participating in YPAR receive training in research skills which they apply to understanding challenges facing their community. Then they advocate for change based on their findings. YPAR is distinct from other forms of student participation research in that student participants, rather than adult facilitators, select research methods and questions.²⁵ According to the University of California, Berkeley's [YPAR Hub](http://yparhub.berkeley.edu/), YPAR supports the goals listed in Figure 1.5.

Figure 1.5: YPAR Outcome Goals

Redefine who has the expertise to produce knowledge to our world — not just professional adult researchers but young people who are living the issues they are studying.

Provide skills in inquiry, evidence, and presentation that are important to young people's development as students and agents of positive change in schools and communities.

Generate findings that provides insights into issues faced by young people that they themselves experience, as well as the resources that matter in helping solve those issues.

Promote young people's sociopolitical development and psychological empowerment such that they understand the roots of problems facing their communities and have the skills and motivation to take action.

Evaluate programs, policies, and practices that affect young people.

Source: YPAR Hub²⁶

Schools can leverage YPAR to engage students in leading improvement efforts. For example, an anonymous middle school analyzed by a 2017 article in the journal *School Psychology Forum* included Grade 7 students in an action research process designed to address bullying. At the outset of the initiative, school social workers and psychologists asked teachers to nominate students with leadership skills who were not believed to be involved in bullying either as perpetrators or victims. Teachers nominated 10 students, who represented an

²² "Board Policy: PMHS Site Council." Pittsfield School District, November 16, 2017.

<https://www.pittsfieldnhschools.org/sau/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/CE-PMHS-Site-Council.pdf>

²³ Palermo, Op. cit.

²⁴ Benner, Brown, and Jeffrey, Op. cit.

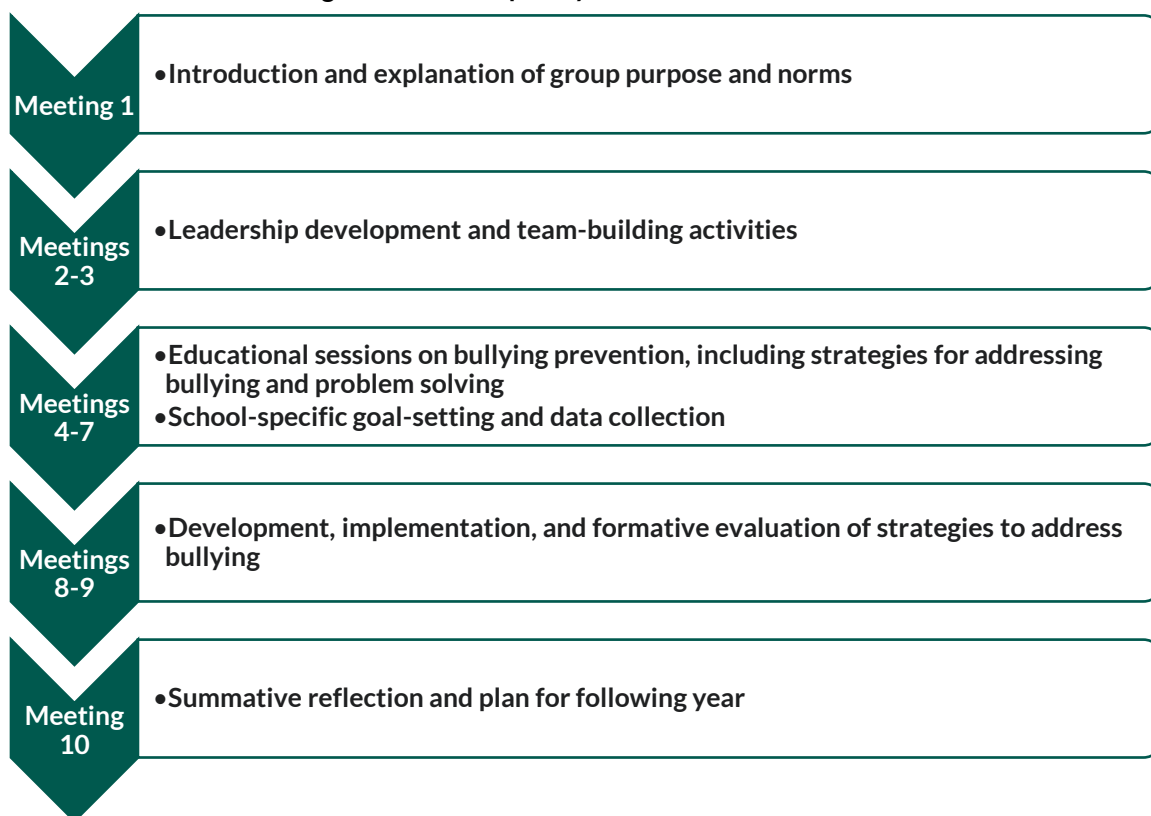
²⁵ Ozer, E.J. et al. "Youth Participatory Approaches and Health Equity: Conceptualization and Integrative Review." *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 2020. p. 3.

https://drive.google.com/file/d/10KnGfodjR5y3nXvNoc0USg6la56DvFDA/view?usp=sharing&usp=embed_facebook

²⁶ "Learn About YPAR." YPAR Hub. <http://yparhub.berkeley.edu/learn-about-ypar/>

even balance of male and female students and diverse ethnic backgrounds. Ultimately, nine students participated in the action research process.²⁷ The group developed and implemented a bullying prevention plan over meetings held two weeks apart, as shown in Figure 1.6. Between meetings, participating students worked with classroom teachers to refine and implement the ideas developed during meetings. An evaluation study determines that participating students had a positive experience and reported growth in both their own and their peers' leadership skills as a result of participating in the initiative.²⁸

Figure 1.6: Participatory Action Research Process



Source: *School Psychology Forum*²⁹

CASE STUDY – PHILADELPHIA STUDENT UNION

The Philadelphia Student Union is an example of a YPAR-focused organization aligned with a school district.³⁰ The organization was established in 1995 by students at magnet schools in Philadelphia, with support from Urban Retrievers, a local nonprofit organization. Participation expanded to neighborhood middle and high schools in 1997, and the organization began to focus on advocating for essential educational resources including learning materials and qualified teachers. In 2001, Urban Retrievers shifted its focus to exclusively supporting students and adopted the name Philadelphia Student Union.³¹ The Philadelphia Student Union currently consists of three main elements, summarized in Figure 1.7. Due to turnover of student participants, the Philadelphia Student Union relies on paid adult facilitators to provide training and maintain institutional knowledge.³²

²⁷ "Student Voice," Op. cit., pp. 23–24.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 27.

²⁹ Chart contents adapted from: Ibid., p. 24.

³⁰ Ozer et al., Op. cit., p. 8.

³¹ "Our Mission and History." Philadelphia Student Union. <https://www.phillystudentunion.com/our-mission-and-history>

³² Ozer et al., Op. cit., p. 8.

Figure 1.7: Philadelphia Student Union Main Elements



Source: Philadelphia Student Union³³

Since its founding, the Philadelphia Student Union has successfully advocated for several initiatives to align district policies and procedures with student needs. For example, a Campaign for Nonviolent Schools conceived by the Philadelphia Student Union secured changes to the student code of conduct that reduced exclusionary discipline and piloted a restorative justice program. The Philadelphia Student Union also led the design and implementation of Student Success Centers, which have been implemented at all schools in the district and served as a model for a similar program in New York City.³⁴

CLASSROOM-LEVEL STRATEGIES

Although school and district-level strategies have the potential to engage student voice in the improvement planning process, students engage with learning most directly at the classroom level. Therefore, it is essential for teachers to cultivate student voice at the classroom level.³⁵ Essential elements of classroom approaches are displayed in Figure 1.8 and detailed in the section below.

Figure 1.8: Common Classroom-Level Approaches to Student Voice



Source: Center for American Progress³⁶

STUDENT-LED CONFERENCING

Student-led conferencing modifies the traditional parent-teacher conference so students present their learning to parents and teachers and collaborate with them to brainstorm solutions to learning challenges.³⁷ The exact format of student-led conferencing varies depending on local school needs, but conferences typically include the presentation of a portfolio of student work.³⁸

³³ Chart contents adapted from: "Our Mission and History," Op. cit.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ "Student Voice," Op. cit., p. 7.

³⁶ Chart contents taken verbatim from: Benner, Brown, and Jeffrey, Op. cit.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Brodie, B. "Student-Led Conferences." *Principal Leadership*, 15:1, September 2014. p. 36.

Although individual classroom teachers can support student-led conferencing for their students, the practice is most effectively implemented as part of a schoolwide structure with consistent protocols and expectations across classrooms.³⁹ School leaders should provide teachers with the supports listed in Figure 1.9.

Figure 1.9: School-Level Supports for Student-Led Conferencing

Opportunities to learn from peers who have experience implementing student-led conferencing

Access to resources such as reflection and conference protocols and sample family letters

Dedicated time to prepare for student-led conferencing

Source: *Principal Leadership*⁴⁰

DEMOCRATIC CLASSROOM PRACTICES AND PERSONALIZED LEARNING

A democratic classroom empowers students to collaborate with teachers in making decisions about curriculum, instruction, assessment, and behavioral expectations. Teachers frequently apply democratic practices to behavioral expectations by collaboratively developing classroom norms with students at the beginning of the year and revisiting these norms periodically throughout the year.⁴¹ Figure 1.10 presents CAPS recommendations for maximizing the effectiveness of democratic practices at the school level.

Figure 1.10: CAP Recommendations for Maximizing the Effectiveness of Democratic Classroom Practices

- Adopt a building-wide democratic, problem-solving approach and shift school structures and processes to allow for schoolwide conversation.
- Help teachers develop the mindsets and skills to meaningfully implement this approach in their classrooms.
- Ensure administrators and teachers keep an open mind and adjust decisions based on student input.

Source: Center for American Progress⁴²

Democratic classroom practices also include instructional strategies that enable students to exercise voice within the instructional process and develop skills needed for civic engagement. For example, personalized learning modifies instruction for individual students to reflect their unique skills, learning needs, and interests. Personalized learning ranges in scope from individual teachers differentiating instruction within their classrooms to changes to district policies for earning course credit to support mastery-based learning.⁴³ Figure 1.11 presents instructional strategies for democratic classrooms recommended by the Rennie Center for Education Research and Policy, a think tank focused on educational improvement in Massachusetts.

³⁹ “Leaders of Their Own Learning: Chapter 5: Student-Led Conferences.” EL Education.
<https://eleducation.org/resources/chapter-5-student-led-conferences>

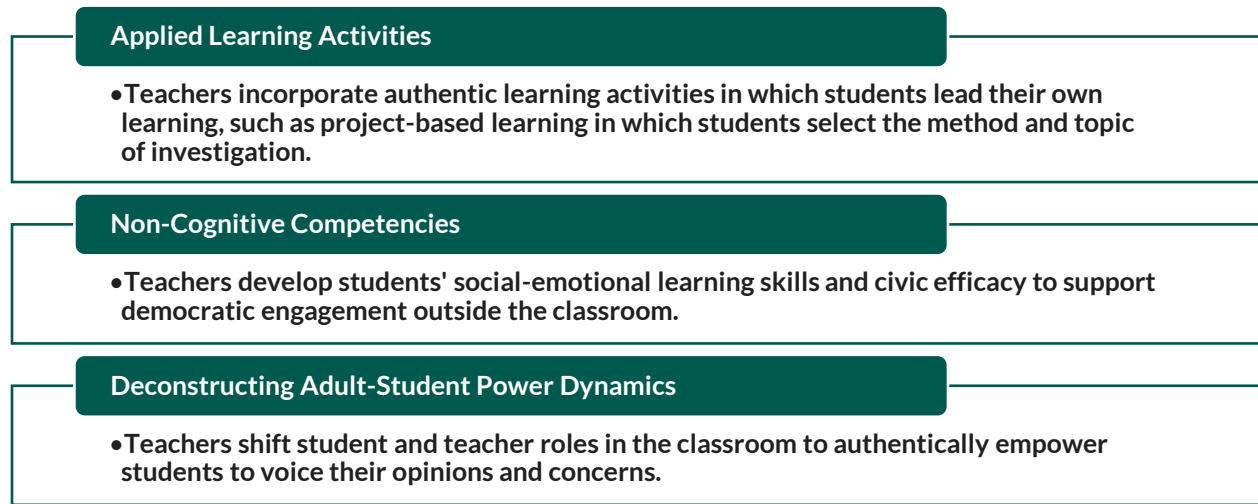
⁴⁰ Chart contents adapted from: Brodie, Op. cit., p. 36.

⁴¹ Benner, Brown, and Jeffrey, Op. cit.

⁴² Chart contents taken verbatim from: Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

Figure 1.11: Instructional Strategies to Support Democratic Classrooms



Source: Rennie Center for Education Research and Policy⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Chart contents adapted from: "Student Voice," Op. cit., p. 7.

SECTION II: STRUCTURAL SUPPORTS FOR STUDENT VOICE

In this section, Hanover reviews the structural supports needed for effective student voice. This section begins with a review of supports needed for authentic and equitable inclusion of all students before discussing strategies to institutionalize the use of student voice to drive changes in practice. This section concludes with a discussion of strategies to support student voice at the district and community levels.

AUTHENTIC AND EQUITABLE STUDENT VOICE

Regardless of the specific strategies selected, districts should work to ensure that student voice is authentic and meaningfully empowers students. Figure 2.1 presents supports identified by CAP as necessary for authentic student voice. These supports provide students and adults with the skills they need to collaborate for improvement and ensure that all participants understand student voice.

Figure 2.1: Supports Needed for Authentic Student Voice

Diverse Student Perspectives

- Schools should ensure that student voice activities represent the diverse student populations they serve

Clear Expectations, Goals, and Processes

- Students should understand in what areas the school is seeking student voice and how their input will be used

Adult-Student Trust

- Schools should foster trusting relationships among students and adults by dedicating time for collaboration outside academic classes

Scaffolding for Students

- Schools should provide students with developmentally-appropriate scaffolds for student voice

Scaffolding for Adults

- Schools should provide staff with professional development focused on mindsets for student voice and structures to support collaboration, including opportunities to observe student voice in practice

Source: Center for American Progress⁴⁵

Securing equitable representation of diverse student perspectives is particularly important for student voice initiatives designed to support school or district-level improvement. Because backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives of individual students within each school and district are diverse, student voice initiatives need to engage multiple students who reflect the overall diversity of the school or district.⁴⁶ Students with different backgrounds and experiences may provide substantially different input or have different priorities, and the student voice process needs to accommodate this diversity to avoid reinforcing inequities.⁴⁷ Schools can use the guiding questions listed in Figure 2.2 during the process of recruiting

⁴⁵ Chart contents adapted from: Benner, Brown, and Jeffrey, Op. cit.

⁴⁶ “Student Voice,” Op. cit., pp. 3–4.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 10.

students for formal governance roles or advisory bodies to facilitate equitable recruitment of diverse students.

Figure 2.2: Guiding Questions for Equitable Engagement of Students in Governance Roles or Advisory Committees

How many student members will be on the team or committee?

Which student groups should be engaged? Is there a demographic group that has been historically underrepresented or that has been struggling?

What will be the process for engaging students?

Should there be membership criteria?

What are the requirements for participation?

Will there be "term limits" for student participation?

Source: Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning⁴⁸

Equitable engagement of students in student voice activities requires an inclusive school climate in which all students feel welcome at school, have positive relationships with peers and adults, and feel empowered to voice their opinions. Research on student voice and school climate finds that these outcomes reinforce one another. Improving the school climate facilitates student voice, while initiatives to leverage student voice result in more positive school climates.⁴⁹ Building a positive school climate requires districts to engage a variety of constituents, including students as well as families and staff members.⁵⁰

CASE STUDY – ANDOVER PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Andover Public Schools in Massachusetts provides an example of a school district in which student voice and a positive school climate reinforce one another. The district began focusing on student voice and SEL as part of its strategic planning process in 2015.⁵¹ Andover Public Schools' current strategic plan includes a goal to "Create safe, caring, and culturally responsive classrooms and schools, and partner with families and the community to support students' academic growth and their social, physical and emotional wellbeing."⁵²

⁴⁸ Chart contents taken verbatim with minor alterations from: "Guide to Schoolwide SEL: Supporting Student Members of the SEL Team." Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning. <https://schoolguide.casel.org/resource/supporting-student-members-of-the-sel-team/>

⁴⁹ "Student Voice," Op. cit., p. 10.

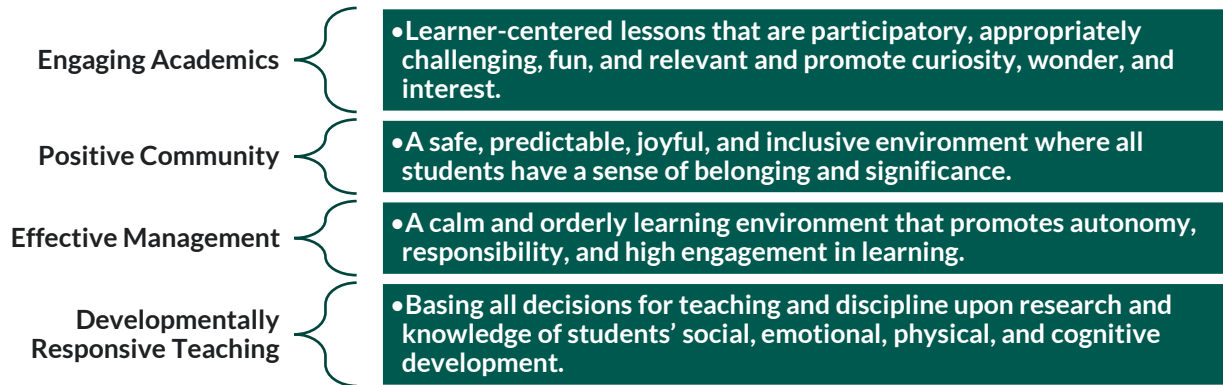
⁵⁰ "Creating Conditions for Student Success: A Policymakers' School Climate Playbook." Aspen Institute, January 2021. p. 16. <https://eric.ed.gov/?q=student+voice+school+climate&ft=on&id=ED613703>

⁵¹ "Student Voice," Op. cit., p. 10.

⁵² "The Andover Way: A Culture of Learning, Teaching and Leading." Andover Public Schools, 2019. p. 14. https://aps1.net/DocumentCenter/View/8701/Andover_Way

At the elementary level, Andover Public Schools uses the Responsive Classroom protocol to support SEL.⁵³ This protocol supports democratic classroom practices with a focus on SEL.⁵⁴ Figure 2.3 presents the key elements of the Responsive Classroom protocol.

Figure 2.3: Key Elements of the Responsive Classroom Protocol



Source: Responsive Classroom⁵⁵

In the middle grades, Andover Public Schools uses the Where Everyone Belongs (WEB) peer mentoring program to support SEL. This program assigns Grade 8 students as peer mentors to incoming students in Grades 6 and 7 to support the transition to middle school and prevent bullying.⁵⁶ Figure 2.4 presents the key elements of the WEB program.

Figure 2.4: Key Elements of the WEB Program



Source: The Boomerang Project⁵⁷

At the high school level, Andover Public Schools uses an advisory program to facilitate student voice and SEL. Advisory classes meet once every eight days and enable students to exercise voice through leadership and service activities. Students also have the option of designing a capstone project and presenting it to the community for course credit.⁵⁸

⁵³ "Student Voice," Op. cit., p. 12.

⁵⁴ Benner, Brown, and Jeffrey, Op. cit.

⁵⁵ Chart contents taken verbatim from: "About Responsive Classroom." Responsive Classroom.
<https://www.responsiveclassroom.org/about/>

⁵⁶ "Student Voice," Op. cit., p. 12.

⁵⁷ Chart contents taken verbatim from: "What Is WEB?" The Boomerang Project.
<https://www.boomerangproject.com/web/what-is>

⁵⁸ "Student Voice," Op. cit., p. 12.

Andover Public Schools monitors the outcomes of its school climate initiatives through periodic school climate surveys. Data from these surveys are presented on the district's website.⁵⁹

INSTITUTIONALIZING STUDENT VOICE

In addition to providing support for students and teachers to engage in student voice, schools and districts need to institutionalize channels for student voice to ensure that student input is authentically included in decision-making. Schools and districts should establish formal policies that promote student voice, such as scheduling meetings to allow students to participate, or requiring schools to solicit student input before changing policies.⁶⁰ Figure 2.5 presents policy actions recommended by CAP to support student voice at the school level.

Figure 2.5: CAP-Recommended School Policy Actions to Support Student Voice

School Climate
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide professional development to support classroom teachers in personalizing learning and aligning the curriculum to student needs. • Formalize student-led conferences and personalized learning plans in school policies.
Student Surveys
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Plan survey administration to maximize participation, for example, by having students complete surveys during class time. • Supplement state and district surveys with informal surveys at the school or classroom level. • Develop policies and procedures to include students in analyzing survey data and planning responses.
Student Newspapers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create school newspapers where they are not already present, and ensure that school newspapers have the resources and distribution needed to be successful. • Provide students with training and guidance, but limit restrictions on content. • Consider alternative communications platforms such as blogs or podcasts.
Student Governments
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review the scope of responsibilities for student councils and other student governments, and consider providing formal authority to provide input on issues such as scheduling, budgets, behavioral and dress codes, curriculum, and staffing. • Encourage student governments to lead school climate and other improvement initiatives. • Encourage diverse students to run for student government positions, and consider voting strategies that increase diversity in representation.
Professional Development
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide teachers and administrators with professional development focused on mindsets to support student voice. • Provide administrators with additional professional development focused on structures and communication strategies for student voice.
Scheduling
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dedicate time in the schedule for students and teachers to collaboratively review issues facing the school and develop solutions.

Source: Center for American Progress⁶¹

⁵⁹ "Climate Survey Results." Andover Public Schools. https://www.usd385.org/110893_2

⁶⁰ "Student Voice," Op. cit., p. 10.

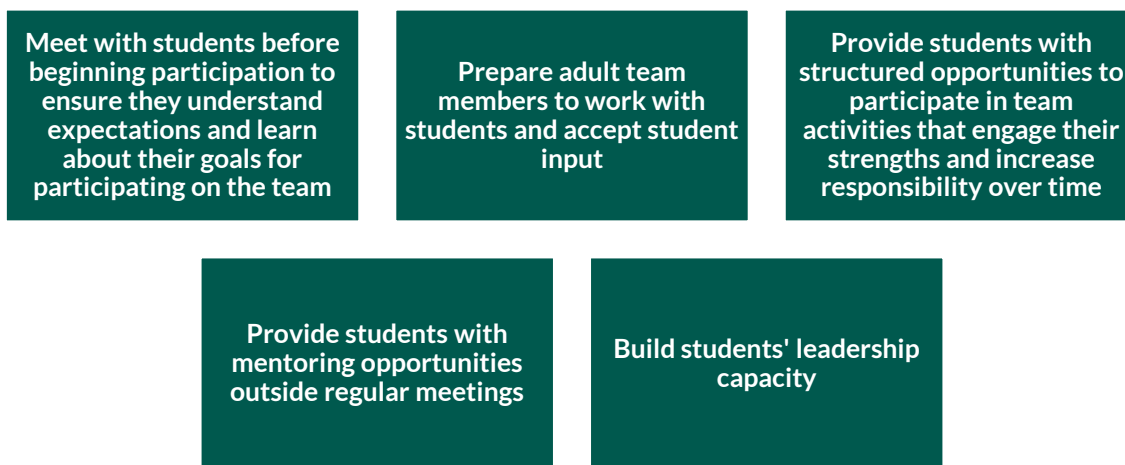
⁶¹ Chart contents adapted from: "Student Voice," Op. cit.

Professional development for student voice develops the skills adults need to engage effectively with students in an environment of shared leadership. These skills include general cultural competency, which adults need to productively engage students from diverse backgrounds. In addition, teachers and other adults need specific professional learning related to reciprocal dialogue, in which adults authentically reflect on student input and identify changes based on student input. In the absence of training in reciprocal dialogue, adults often ignore student input or engage with it on a superficial level that prevents the authentic inclusion of student voice in decisions.⁶²

Adults in the school may initially be reluctant to incorporate student voice authentically due to concerns about the validity of student feedback and the impact of student voice on their professional authority.⁶³ School leaders play a key role in gaining buy-in for student voice among teachers and other adults in the school community. Principals should lead discussions with teachers about the value of student voice, and model receptiveness to feedback by soliciting teacher input on their own performance.⁶⁴ A study of teacher attitudes toward student voice finds that teachers are more receptive to using student survey data in teacher evaluations when they are first asked about their opinion on using teacher survey data in evaluations of administrators.⁶⁵

In addition to providing professional development for teachers and other adults to support student voice, schools need to provide students with training and support to productively engage in collaborative decision-making processes. Students need training in the specific knowledge and skills needed to carry out student-led voice activities. For example, YPAR requires students to receive training on conducting research.⁶⁶ Students selected to participate in governing bodies, advisory councils, or improvement teams will need supports and scaffolding to participate effectively on a team or committee. Figure 2.6 presents recommendations for supporting student members of improvement teams developed by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL). These recommendations were initially developed for SEL teams with student members but may also be relevant to other leadership teams that include student members, such as school boards or advisory councils.⁶⁷

Figure 2.6: CASEL Recommendations for Supporting Students Improvement Teams



Source: Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning⁶⁸

⁶² Ibid., pp. 13–14.

⁶³ “Giving Students A Voice in the Classroom,” Op. cit., p. 6.

⁶⁴ Shafer, Op. cit.

⁶⁵ Gehlbach et al., Op. cit.

⁶⁶ Giraldo-García, Voight, and O’Malley, Op. cit., p. 53.

⁶⁷ “Guide to Schoolwide SEL: Supporting Student Members of the SEL Team,” Op. cit.

⁶⁸ Chart contents adapted from: Ibid.

School leaders should regularly review student voice activities and supports with students to ensure that supports continue to meet students' needs. Effective student voice initiatives employ a flexible structure that adjusts as student needs and interests evolve. Schools should also consider transition planning for adults involved in student voice initiatives to ensure that student voice is sustained through staff turnover.⁶⁹

DISTRICT-LEVEL SUPPORT FOR STUDENT VOICE

School leaders need support from district leadership and the broader community to create conditions conducive to student voice. Districts should establish formal policies for including student voice in the decision-making process and ensure that all teachers participate in professional development focused on student voice and reciprocal dialogue.⁷⁰ Figure 2.7 presents CAP's recommendations to support student voice at the district and community levels.

Figure 2.7: CAP-Recommended District Policy Actions to Support Student Voice

Student Surveys
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Support schools in administering any state-level surveys •Develop district-level surveys to measure school climate, instructional rigor, and teaching quality •Publish school-level survey data •Incorporate survey data into school improvement plans
Governance
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Consider appointing a student representative with voting power to the school board •Develop a student advisory group that uses youth participatory action research to develop recommendations for the school board
Equity
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Conduct targeted outreach to historically marginalized student groups, including students of color, English learners, and LGBT students
Scheduling
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Build time for personalized learning and student-teacher collaboration into school schedules
Student-Led Conferencing
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Support teachers and parents in implementing student-led conferences

Source: Center for American Progress⁷¹

District support for student voice initiatives should include guidance to align student voice strategies with best practices. A 2021 case study of an anonymous urban school district that mandated student advisory councils at its high schools finds that limited guidance from the district level led to wide variation in the implementation of advisory councils across schools. Many schools adopted strategies that did not align with best practices, such as recruiting only high-achieving students to advisory councils. The authors conclude that implementation would have been more consistent if the district had clearly defined the goals of the program and expectations for implementation at the outset and provided school leaders with professional development focused on best practices in student voice.⁷²

⁶⁹ Holquist, S. "Sustaining Student Voice in Decision-Making." Indexes; Offices. Regional Educational Laboratory Pacific, March 20, 2020. https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/pacific/blogs/blog24_uplifting-student-voices-sustaining-student-voice-in-decisionmaking.asp

⁷⁰ "Student Voice," Op. cit., p. 16.

⁷¹ Chart contents adapted from: Benner, Brown, and Jeffrey, Op. cit.

⁷² Giraldo-García, Voight, and O'Malley, Op. cit., p. 63.

CASE STUDY – WASHOE COUNTY SCHOOL DISTRICT

Washoe County School District in Nevada is an example of a district with formal structures to support student voice at the district level.⁷³ The district began focusing on student voice in 2012 as part of a strategy to improve school climates and engage students at risk of dropping out. In 2015, Washoe County School District assembled a committee at the district level to lead the implementation of a district-wide student voice initiative.⁷⁴ In 2017, the school board adopted a student voice policy formally committing to establishing a Student Advisory Council and encouraging students to participate on additional district committees. The student voice policy also outlines Washoe County School District's rationale for emphasizing student voice and identifies the goals for student voice listed in Figure 2.8.⁷⁵

Figure 2.8: Washoe County School District Goals for Student Voice

By ensuring and increasing engagement, students will benefit with increased achievement and higher graduation rates. This includes creating and maintaining a positive school climate and culture where all students are valued and respected.

Students provide a unique perspective to conversations surrounding all aspects of education. Such perspectives should be valued and considered as part of the decision-making process.

Schools will continue to search for opportunities to include student voice in the decision-making process.

By encouraging student voice, the District seeks to ensure a safe and respectful learning environment and increase student safety on campus and at District sponsored events.

Source: Washoe County School District⁷⁶

The Student Advisory Council collaborates with a Student Voice Coordinator employed by Washoe County School District's Office of Accountability, who supports student participants in collecting and analyzing data.⁷⁷ Individual students focus their participation on one of the topical committees listed in Figure 2.9. Each committee is led by a student chair.

⁷³ "Guide to Schoolwide SEL: Elevate Student Voice." Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning. <https://schoolguide.casel.org/focus-area-3/school/elevate-student-voice/>

⁷⁴ "The Key to Making Improvements: Ask the Students - Washoe County School District, Nevada." Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning. p. 2. <https://casel.s3.us-east-2.amazonaws.com/Youth-Voice-CASEL.pdf>

⁷⁵ "Board Policy 5310 - Student Voice." Washoe County School District. p. 2. https://www.wcsdpolicy.net/pdf_files/5310%20Policy%20-%20Student%20Voice%20v1.pdf

⁷⁶ Chart contents taken verbatim from: Ibid., p. 3.

⁷⁷ "The Key to Making Improvements: Ask the Students - Washoe County School District, Nevada," Op. cit., p. 2.

Figure 2.9: Washoe County School District Student Advisory Council Committees



Source: Washoe County School District⁷⁸

In addition to facilitating the district Student Advisory Council, the Student Voice Coordinator works with individual schools to support the establishment of site-level Student Advisory Councils.⁷⁹ The Student Voice Coordinator offers the professional development courses listed in Figure 2.10, as well as customized training to meet individual school needs.⁸⁰ The district has also partnered with WestEd to develop a [toolkit](#) that supports school staff in eliciting input from students.⁸¹

Figure 2.10: Washoe County School District Professional Development Courses Related to Student Voice

COURSE	DESCRIPTION
The Foundations of Student Voice	In this course, participants will learn the definition and elements of student voice, discuss the potential student voice has to transform the educational setting, and explore how student voice applies to their daily teaching practices.
Student Voice: The Missing Data Point	In this course, participants will learn about tools they can use to analyze data with students to gain a deeper understanding of school challenges and student-centered solutions.
Plan, Do, Study, Act: The Things We Do For Our Students and How to Do Things With Them Instead	In this course, participants will learn student voice practices that move beyond student engagement to student involvement and explore how Student Advisory Councils and other Student Voice groups can be a part of the school improvement process.
"But What's the Point?" Students' Perspectives on Chronic Absenteeism	In this course, participants will hear what students have to say about the daily decision to go to school or not and strategize ways to gain students' perspectives in their own schools then include them in the solutions.
Every Student by Name, Face and Story: Student Voice as a Trauma-Informed Practice	In this course, participants will learn student voice strategies they can implement in their daily interactions with students to build relationships, assure students feel heard, and better understand and work with the academic barriers students face.

Source: Washoe County School District⁸²

Notably, Washoe County School District works to facilitate student voice at the elementary level by adjusting student voice activities to be developmentally appropriate for elementary school students. Washoe County School District also holds an annual Strength in Voices Symposium at which randomly selected students from

⁷⁸ Chart contents taken verbatim from: "Student Voice Committees." Washoe County School District. <http://www.washoeschools.net/site/default.aspx?PageID%3D17128>

⁷⁹ "Student Voice / Educator Resources." Washoe County School District. <http://www.washoeschools.net/site/default.aspx?PageID%3D11380>

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ "Speak Up! Listen Up! Tools for Bringing Student Ideas into School Change." Washoe County School District and WestEd. <https://www.washoeschools.net/cms/lib/NV01912265/Centricity/Domain/647/Comprehensive%20Toolkit.pdf>

⁸² Chart contents taken verbatim from: "Student Voice / Educator Resources," Op. cit.

each school in the district attend workshops focused on specific issues such as equity or climate surveys and make recommendations for improvement.⁸³

Washoe County School District has used its student voice initiative to support its implementation of SEL and dropout prevention efforts. For example, students analyzed SEL lessons to ensure that they were culturally responsive and are participating in a statewide effort to align SEL standards with equity goals. Washoe County School District also used student voice to refine the district's approach to learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.⁸⁴

⁸³ "SEL Trends: Empowering Youth Voice." Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, July 2018. p. 5.
<https://casel.s3.us-east-2.amazonaws.com/SEL-Trends-Youth-Voice.pdf>

⁸⁴ "The Key to Making Improvements: Ask the Students - Washoe County School District, Nevada," Op. cit., p. 3.

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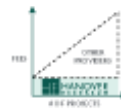
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