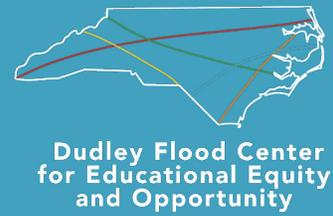


STUDENT VOICES

Student Partnerships that Matter through Inclusion and Self-Advocacy
for North Carolina Educators using the Framework for Change



JANUARY 2024

Introduction

When the term “student voices” is mentioned in education, one’s thoughts go immediately to representatives whose voice represents the student body as a whole in the form of peer-selected student government. These groups meet once a month to address concerns, questions, and upcoming events as the “voice” of the students they represent. In order to move our schools forward, student voices have to be more than just the thoughts of a collective few who have the discretion on what they share at meetings. Student voices have to represent every student, and the best way to do this is to start with educators getting to know every student, conferencing with them, and obtaining feedback on how they best learn in the classroom. The student voice initiative should not stop there but should also be utilized by school administration to gather vital information on best practices and effective strategies through student opinions on how to increase student and staff success. At the district level, the superintendent and their cabinet can assemble a student voice group that represents all students and intentionally plan consistent meetings that have a clear mission of including students in decision-making (Mosley & Valdez, 2022).

Student voice can not be minimized by simply asking students for input or feedback. It is an intentional and embedded community of learners where students are both experts of their experiences and essential partners in their own education (Mosley & Valdez, 2022). The student voices concept is complex and requires the acceptance of students as equals in the classroom and an open mind to listen to what students share about their school experiences, which includes the good and the bad. Student voice, when used in these ways and to explicitly ensure inclusion of all students in their learning plan, can propel student success forward with the foundation of equity, inclusion, and advocacy. “Students who shape their academic experience are more likely to succeed. Research from the [Quaglia Institute for School Voice and Aspirations](#) (QISVA) found that students who believe they have a voice in school are seven times more likely to be academically motivated than students who do not believe they have a voice.” (Mathias, 2023). Data from half a million students who took the Quaglia Student Voice Survey shows that:

What is Student Voice?

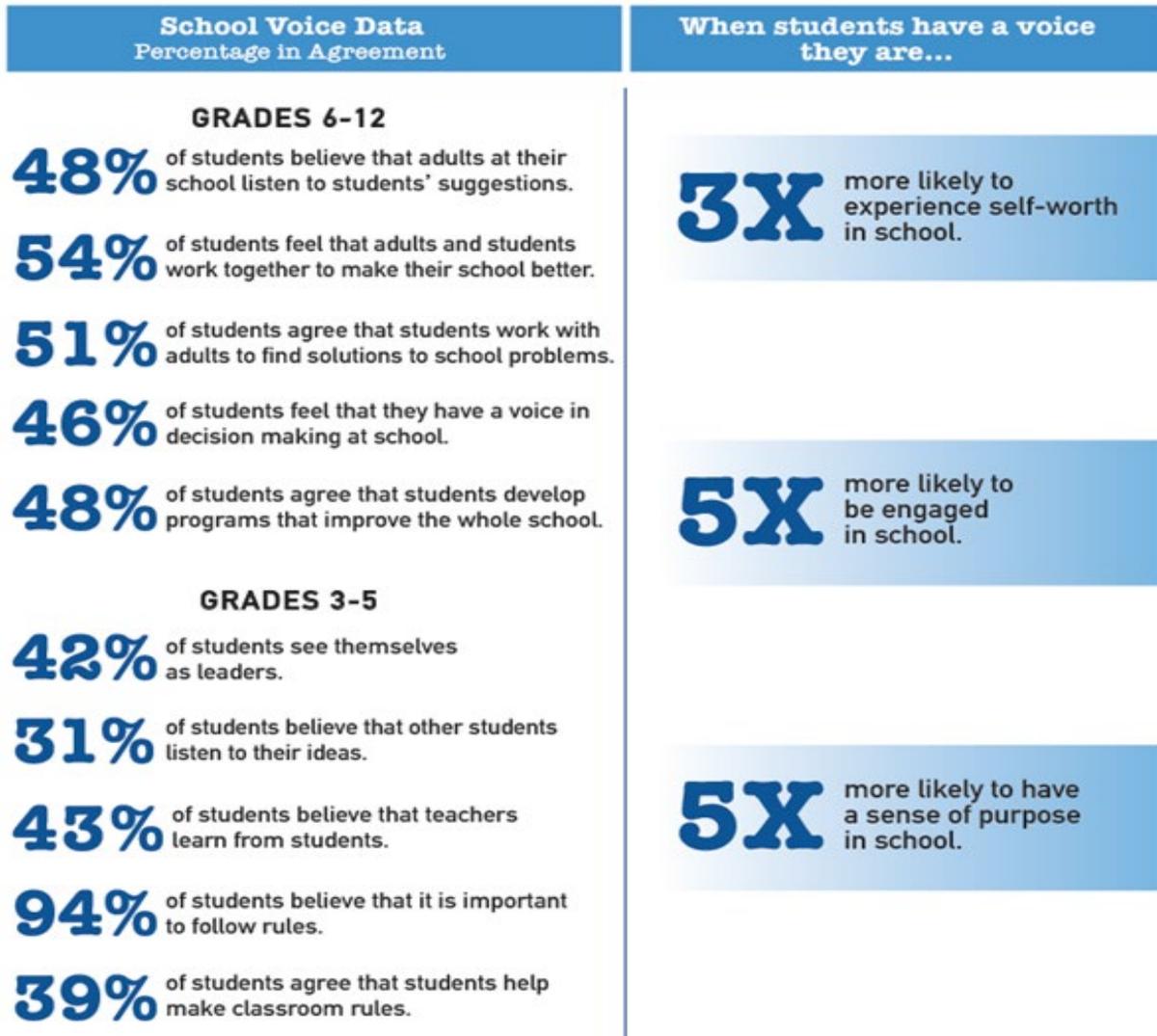
“Students being able to express themselves and tell what they need, that could possibly be improved, or anything that makes them comfortable in their current environment, and anything that can fix that environment and make themselves better learners.”

-Braden Smith, 2023 Dudley Flood Center Student Voices Participant



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(Why Student Voice Matters, QISVA)

Civic Engagement

This motivation can also be extended outside the classroom walls by engaging them in community activism and becoming a change agent. Student civic engagement is defined as working to make a difference in the civic life of one's community. It also involves developing the combination of knowledge, skills, values, and motivation to make that difference (Erlich, 2000). In order for students to become a participant in civic engagement, educators must give them opportunities to use their voice in discussion and decision-making. In order to carry this motivation of community change into the future beyond their K - 12 years, educators must make the skills necessary for civic engagement accessible to students. These skills can be found in the elements of 21st-century learning connected to educator growth in North Carolina.



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Student voice can be a process in educator growth. Through this process, the educator's mindset shifts to recognize that the learning process is reciprocal between teacher and student (Conner, 2021). Educators who utilize student voice understand that assumptions or information can not come exclusively through data or background but rather from the source themselves, the students. Every individual has different experiences and every experience is unique to that person. The same is true for students. We, as educators, can not compare and judge a student based on how someone else "learned" or how we feel is best. Keeping this in mind, students can help educators understand topics or problems and rethink practices that can be used for school improvement and moving toward equity in education.

Equity reflects a state in which every person's identity, power, opportunity, and potential are fully realized, and life outcomes are no longer predicted by characteristics such as race, economics, ethnicity, location, gender, sexuality, nor disability. In order to truly achieve equity in education, schools have to include students in impactful decision-making. The non-negotiable is that it has to include every student or a representation of the student population. Student representatives selected through popularity voting defeats the initiative to provide an opportunity for each individual to have equal access utilizing their student voice. By including students, it becomes a shared responsibility and moves away from the negative connotation of the power relationship of the educator and student.

System Benefits

When it comes to improving systems and achieving equity, Buckner quotes Christina Pate, Director of the Equity Accelerator, as saying:

"A paradigm shift that involves a shared vision of equity and a culture of co-creation is needed. A co-creation perspective affirms that value is created by students and that leadership and decision-making is shared with students. This requires a shift from doing 'to' or 'for' students to co-creating 'with' students."

A first step is engaging in authentic and actionable conversations with students about how to best design school systems that better respond to their hopes, needs, and aspirations (Buckner, 2021)."

Why is it Important for Educators to Include Students?

"I would say student voices are most important to be able to use the different tools and techniques they're used to. Tools, techniques and different devices that teachers implement as learning devices, because different students learn in different manners. So students decide what tools they want to keep and what tools they want to get rid of. I would say it's the most important because that affects how we perform."

-Hope Jackson, 12th grade student



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When it comes to improving teaching strategies and classroom procedures, student feedback is crucial. “When students share their views on what is and is not working in their school and classrooms, educators can come to a better understanding of how their students learn and how their needs as learners can be better met” (Conner, 2021). As North Carolina educators, we are evaluated on our effectiveness as an educator using the [North Carolina Educator Effectiveness System](#) (Public School of North Carolina, 2013), and many of these standards reflect directly or indirectly back to the 12 identified 21st-century skills that are explicitly mentioned in the description of educators’ standards and elements. These skills include:

- | | | |
|-----------------------------|--------------------------------|---|
| 1. Critical Thinking | 5. Information literacy | 9. Leadership |
| 2. Creativity | 6. Media literacy | 10. Initiative |
| 3. Collaboration | 7. Technology literacy | 11. Productivity |
| 4. Communication | 8. Flexibility | 12. Social skills (Stauffer, B., 2022) |

Reflecting on how to implement activities and expectations in the classroom in order to incorporate these 12 21st-century skills, how is it even possible without the student being directly involved in the process of learning?

Classroom Impact

Student feedback provides valuable viewpoints on what functions effectively and what needs to be changed. In order to create a more dynamic and inclusive learning environment, educators not only have to solicit input from students but also must make it evident that their voice has been listened to with direct follow-up and/or genuine changes connected to the input shared. Students have to see that their voice is valued through connected changes made by the teacher or school. Hearing what students have to say is not enough; in order for the full impact of student voice to be seen, it takes active listening and intentional student-led changes. Examples of these changes can be to daily and weekly lesson plans, teaching strategies, and the structure of the classroom/school itself. The feedback-fueled mind shifts result in a classroom or school that not only meets the needs of students through their own words, but it improves their educational experiences.

During focus group sessions, students were eager to share their ideas and opinions on a range of topics. Among the study’s findings: Almost all students shared their passion and desire to ask questions. Their seemingly insatiable desire to learn was supported by their overwhelmingly positive images of learning and school (Fox, 2016).

Improving the educational experiences of students leads to a deep appreciation and love of learning for the student.

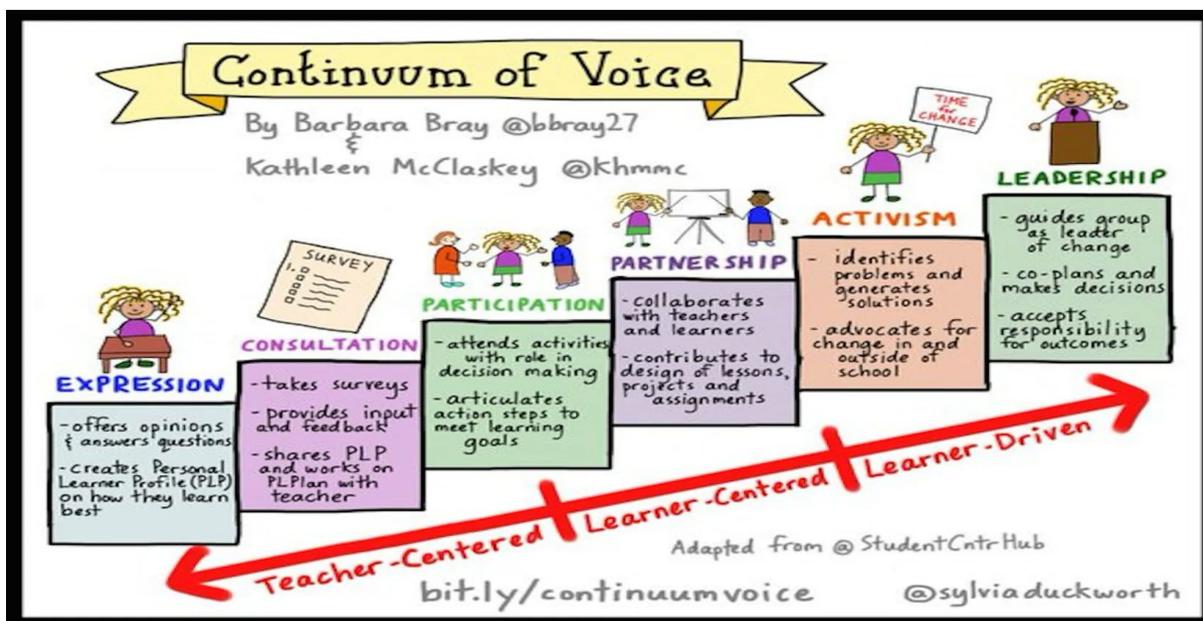


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What is the Issue?

It seems like using student voices is a no-brainer, right? That it is a given that with students being stakeholders that they should be a part of the learning process. The issue comes in with consistency and with genuine and authentic purpose. In many cases, student input is solicited in minimal decisions in the setting of a make-shift student government. These low-impact groups are tasked with spirit week planning, the theme for Prom, and what to request for snacks in the lunchroom. These student councils are student-driven but they are not student-led. An adult guides the agenda and maintains order under the guise of “monitoring” or “advising.” As seen in the illustration below, there is a continuum of voices that are failing to stretch the potential of our students by stopping short of reaching learner-driven classrooms and schools.



(Personalized Learning, 2016)

Most schools use student voice at the expression and consultation level. When you get into middle school and high school, you even dabble in the participation range. Very rarely do schools go beyond partnership and never make it to the range of the voice continuum that can bring about the most impactful growth and impact.

Power Struggle

So why do we stop short of implementing a system of collaborative partnership with our students that can lead to closing achievement gaps, creating educational equity for all students, and instilling 21st-century skills such as activism and leadership in our students? The answer is a simple relationship dynamic, but it is made far more complex than it really is: power (Robinson & Taylor, 2013). The idea of relinquishing “power” of decision-making to students who are children and who do not “know any better” is the barrier that holds many back from making this shift. Educators who see students as empty vessels to be filled with the knowledge they have to give have an issue with seeing themselves as the vessel who can also gain from students. They have a college degree, and they are an experienced educator; what could a student possibly teach them, and why would they trust a child to know how they learn? Isn't that why they went to college to get the knowledge to teach children to learn? There certainly were no classes in which students helped write papers, or there certainly were no students who were accountable to the state for test scores. It is all on them, and because of this, they will do it the way they feel is best. Unfortunately, this is the mindset of educators who are unwilling to change and are only comfortable under the reality that they maintain “power” in their classroom and/or school. Educational equity will remain a myth when there is a need to remain in control and only value student voice based on who is seen as benefiting their agenda and ignore those students who are seen as deficits. When considering the power struggle, the educator ultimately decides how they see their students, and more often than not, abundance is seen in students who share commonalities, and differences are seen as deficits.

How many times have we, as educators, preached the need for students to be problem solvers? So why are we holding them to the lower end of the continuum of voice by marginalizing their role in finding solutions to obstacles and taking away their opportunity to advocate for resources to mitigate these self-reflected barriers and become 21st-century learners?

So I think it's important to collaborate and to provide input from both sides of the table, those who have experienced, but then also those who are directly impacted from the decisions that are made.

-Jackson Bryant, 2023 Dudley Flood Center Student Voices Participant

What is the Pathway Forward for North Carolina Educators?

A larger, like school community, like my school does not have a lot of that community feeling and a lot of students are disconnected. And given they do vote on who they choose to represent them, but I don't know, I just, I feel like in order to ensure that all voices are heard, especially diverse voices, there has to be some broader sense of community and that falls on the leader as well."

-Paiden Castelblanco

Recommendations

The Dudley Flood Center's Framework for Change comprises six research-based core competencies to create and contribute to building and maintaining equity which is the ultimate goal for understanding the need for student voices in the classroom, school, and district. These six core competencies include modeling, examining, researching, investing, preparing, and convening. Recommendations for moving forward can be gleaned out of the guiding principles of dignity, respect, and well-being and these six competencies founded in care.

Recommendation 1: MODELING - Infuse and instill aspiration through representation

Modeling representation inspires students to become problem-solvers and to obtain the skills needed to interact with complex situations effectively. To become **critical thinkers** who can handle these deep questions, students must be given the outlet to systematically analyze their own learning style and needs. This is accomplished by educators getting to know their students and conferencing with them using their data, self-reflection, and representation (Edutopia, 2023). Students can demonstrate **creativity** when given the chance to create and design their own personalized learning plan. When they are allowed to do this, the fact that they are recognized for knowing themselves better than anyone fosters a sense of **dignity** and **well-being**. Being given the opportunity to express original thoughts and time to complete relevant tasks chosen by them aspires confidence in how they represent themselves and their thoughts.

Recommendation 2: EXAMINING - Collect, analyze, desegregate, and communicate data/outcomes

Students can show they understand true **collaboration** by being a stakeholder in decision-making in the classroom and in the school. This collaborative relationship begins with their direct participation in **examining** information. They should engage in collecting, analyzing, and desegregating school data and outcomes. An example includes allowing them to see data such as test scores and teach them how to find patterns by using multiple sources. Analyzing and desegregating the data together develops an additional side of understanding that an educator lacks when students are not involved. The understanding comes through **communication** of the implications of the data outcomes and what are next steps for improvement. A systematic approach to ensuring that this happens is including students on School Improvement Plan Teams where goals are set based on data. True **collaboration** is evidenced in the student's input is weighted equally in **value** and with timely follow-up through **communication**.

Recommendation 3: RESEARCHING - Increase historical awareness, current trends, and implications

In order to prepare students to utilize their voice for collaboration, communication, and civic engagement and to offer critical and creative thought into trending events is to build background knowledge and to prepare them through literacy proficiency. A clear pathway to

make this happen is to ask deep and probing questions to find out what they know and what they need to know. Students master **information literacy, media literacy, and technology literacy** by choosing what resources they need and knowing how to find them on their own with the purpose of **researching**. To become proficient in these areas, examples include educators giving students surveys on what literacy tools they prefer to use and how they are used to reach their goals. Understanding the differences between reliable and unreliable sources is important in this process as well and requires explicit instruction on how to use internet tools. The potential discovery of historical misconceptions that comes with increasing awareness through research literacy has to be handled with delicate preparation. Current trends need to be explored in classrooms for student voices to get their outlook on what is happening in real-time to show that their opinions matter and are **valued**. Both historical awareness and current trend exploration are important as a recommendation because it leads to implications that have a student-centered voice through their self-led **research**.

Recommendation 4: INVESTING - Provide equitable resource allocation

Equity and equality are different. Equality means everyone is treated the same exact way, regardless of differences. Equity means everyone is provided with what they need to succeed. In order to provide **equitable** resource allocation, educators need to keep these definitions in mind when **investing** time and money into resources. This recommendation of a mind shift for educators is centered around individual student needs and an ability to be **flexible** with **investments**. Examples of investing are when students can give educators a model for **flexibility** by hearing feedback on material preferences, learning styles, and even more specific items such as timelines and assignment expectations. Having a voice in their expectations, shows that the teacher is not in total control of all that happens in a classroom, and they can compromise. Knowing that they are in a place where they have choices increases a student's overall **well-being**. When educators model **flexibility** with their students, it diminishes the power struggle.

Recommendation 5: PREPARING - Provide multiple pathways to eliminate barriers to success

Preparing students for the 21st century and to become self-advocating **leaders** holds educators accountable to mitigate obstacles to student success as much as possible. The student is also responsible for eliminating these barriers in their own way, which happens when they have a problem-solving mindset. They are able to see various sides of a problem and think through multiple pathways to overcome it. The student takes the **initiative** to use the critical thinking skills modeled for them by educators to ensure their own success. Students, as **leaders**, share in the responsibility of decisions and outcomes. Examples include allowing students to co-author agendas and not just participate in meetings and assigning them specific tasks to complete. Another example is having students self-select the process of how leaders in student government are appointed. Students show **initiative** when the power struggle is no longer an issue. When this happens, students become more comfortable

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with starting and suggesting new ideas. They do not wait for someone to tell them how to be successful but they seek it out for themselves because they have been made to feel that they are **valued** enough to do it.

Recommendation 6: CONVENING - Engage a diverse and representative stakeholder group

Students understand **productivity** when they feel they are an equal part of what is happening and they are trusted to get the work done. By **convening** a student voice group that truly represents each voice, genuine work can be produced for the betterment of the educational setting. Ensuring equity in stakeholder voices increases **productivity** and effectiveness of decision making through maximizing time due to the significant buy-in that occurs from established trust. Students exhibit **social skills** when they are in a safe, equitable environment and treated with **dignity** by having the freedom to advocate. Social skills are the tools that enable people to communicate, obtain resources, and connect with others. These skills are necessary for effective and meaningful stakeholder **conventions**. Examples of how to implement these for student voice would be to prepare action research projects, student-led publications, and Socratic dialogue.



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