



LEARNING AGENDA ELEVATING STUDENT VOICE

Student voices are too often absent in the decisions of organizations advocating for student-centered learning models. At KnowledgeWorks, we aim to spark conversation and exploration among educators, student advocacy organizations and adult-led student-centered organizations on elevating youth voice in decisions about education systems. We hope to inspire action in those who want to make an authentic effort to elevate student voice by showing what it could look like as we engage in our own learning process.

While our commitment to student-centered learning and outcomes has not wavered, our work in this space has evolved as we learn from our experiences, and as the political and social context shifts.

With our most recent forecast on the future of learning, [Imagining Liberatory Education Futures](#) we invited people to imagine future liberatory education systems that are, in the words of educational activist [Raphael Randall](#), “rooted in self-determination, derived from an understanding that all human beings have the right to participate in shaping a world that is constantly shaping them.” Student voices – particularly those of historically marginalized yet resilient students, and those who have not been successful or well-served in the traditional school model – must be an integral part of the decisions that affect them.

For KnowledgeWorks to fully realize our vision for the future of education and to advance equity principles, we cannot only talk and write about the importance of student voice and agency. We must embody it in our work.

Learning Agenda, *defined*

The term “learning agenda” is used in a variety of contexts by different stakeholders. For the purposes of this document, we define a learning agenda as:

A set of questions - contextualized in what we have learned, what we are unsure about and descriptions of proof points - that identifies what stakeholders need to learn, what questions they should ask and which barriers they will need to overcome, to effectively elevate student voice in conversations about education systems transformation.

Recognizing that we are not the experts on this topic, KnowledgeWorks consulted with partners who are working to elevate student voice in decisions about education systems. We convened leaders from student-, intergenerational- and adult-led organizations who are engaging student voices in policy and decision-making. We interviewed the following individuals, to whom we are deeply grateful for sharing their wisdom and experience. All advisors were offered compensation for their time and expertise:

- » Rachel Belin, Andrew Brennen and Ramona Pierce, Kentucky Student Voice Team
- » Alex Ames, Georgia Youth Justice Coalition
- » Taylor Kahn-Perry, CYCLE
- » Cyrus Driver, Partnership for the Future of Learning
- » Lydia Burns and Sandy Boyd, Seek Common Ground/Student Action Network for Equity (SANE)

How to Engage Student Voice: Organizational Considerations

Any efforts to engage students should happen at an organizational level.

Adult-run organizations often attempt to engage student perspectives through conference panels, lobby days or advisory groups. When these initiatives are not reciprocal, they can be performative at best and exploitative at worst. There is a reputational risk for organizations that use youth voices but fail to meaningfully share power and decision-making or to compensate students for their time. Students are savvy networkers and communicators and may share information with each other about the organizations that are most worth their time to collaborate with.

Four clear themes emerged from our conversations with student voice leaders as critical to the success of their movements and organizations:

- » Intergenerational co-creation
- » Succession and continuity
- » Compensation
- » Scaffolding

Authentically including student voice in the fabric of an organization requires a radical shift in mindsets. Organizations should be prepared to allocate resources, both human and monetary, to engage student voices.

INTERGENERATIONAL CO-CREATION

When youth partner with adults, both can learn from each other and bring different strengths to the table. Adults bring experience, historical knowledge, relationships and the ability to enter into financial, contractual and legal agreements. Youth bring their point of view, first-hand experiences, communication savvy, their hopes for the future and the strength of their convictions.

Example: The Kentucky Student Voice Team (KSVT) has an adult staff and young adult KSVT alumni who support the approximately 100 self-selected Kentucky students who act as research, communications, policy and advocacy partners to co-create more just and equitable schools and communities. Initially conceived as an initiative of the adult-run Prichard Committee, KSVT recently spun itself off into an independent nonprofit organization that is jointly governed by students and their adult allies. Adults were critical to being able to apply for 501(c)(3) status, open a bank account and enter into contractual relationships. Rachel Belin, KSVT's adult managing partner, has been a consistent presence since its inception at the Prichard Committee. She sees her job as one that examines, evolves and co-designs the organization to reflect and respond to the needs of engaged youth. It's about "building and circulating power and enacting organizational norms where young people are centered as collaborative leaders and adults work as partners with complementary capacities to support them," said Belin.

COMPENSATION

Young people should be compensated for their time and expertise just as adults should be. Adults working in the education space are already being paid to collaborate with youth as part of their job, and it may not occur to them to pay young people. They may even view it as doing a favor to students by offering them a leadership opportunity. However, if that expertise helps to bring credibility and funding to the adult-led organization but no direct benefit to the student, the relationship can become exploitative and a reputational and organizational risk. Compensation ensures that a wide range of voices will be heard and that finances are not a barrier to participation. Many students need to work to support themselves or their families, or to save money for college. When organizations fail to offer compensation to students for their input, they leave out the voices of students who need to work. Organizations may need to think creatively about compensation, and not rely on past precedent as a barrier. To avoid complications, organizations who intend to solicit youth feedback and engagement should budget for these expenses in advance.

Example: There is always a way to compensate students for their time and expertise. CYCLE's Taylor Khan-Perry emphasized the importance of collaborating with adult allies who are able to navigate organizational challenges to compensate students. CYCLE compensates students, whether they are participating in a focus group or presenting at their annual Youth Leadership Institute conference. They have used consulting agreements, gift cards and even payments to the student's parents in order to comply with rules governing payment.

SUCCESSION AND CONTINUITY

Student time can seem to move at a more rapid pace than adult time when it comes to the rhythm of the school year, with the multiple demands of family, school, extracurriculars and jobs. Adults looking to engage students' voices must cater to student and school year schedules and provide support and resources for young people to hit the ground running. Governance structures that foresee, support and accommodate annual student representative turnover, as well as consistent adult allies with institutional

knowledge, helpful relationships and fiduciary rights, help ensure continuity. Succession planning and sustainability efforts can help provide youth with meaningful on-ramps from youth to adult status. Organizations can offer board leadership, mentorship, internships, alumni networking and other ways to maintain the human connections and organizational memory while offering continued opportunities and benefits to youth and the organization overall. Movements that rely too much on specific individuals can collapse when their leaders move onto other things – for many students, this happens when they go to college or enter the workforce.

Example: Georgia Youth Justice Coalition’s Alex Ames, who started her community organizing work in high school, is prioritizing cultivation of new leadership and a solid and diverse governance group as she graduates from college and steps further away from her involvement. She sees the most important role of a leader as coaching others into succeeding them. Prior experience is not necessary; GYJC takes a values-based approach to onboarding and educating new student organizers. Students are encouraged to tap into the issues they care about in their own communities to tell authentic stories and share how decisions directly impact them. Relationships are built with care – in-person rather than relying on more tenuous social media-based connections. It’s an approach that builds trust and confidence, helping to better sustain the movement. Another important element to GYJC’s momentum is being able to point to prior successes, which in turn provides a blueprint for future organizing efforts.

SCAFFOLDING

Training, supports and accessible opportunities and information that meet students where they are in their ability and learning are essential to engaging a diverse and equitable array of student voices. Adult allies and learning networks can play an important role in co-creating and maintaining scaffolding to ensure equitable access and representation by youth voices. This includes equitably-scaffolded recruitment efforts to ensure a diverse range of perspectives.

Example: While Kentucky Student Voice Team’s membership is largely composed of high school students, they recently introduced project-based work to bring in more middle school students, too. “The rationale was that the longer the runway we could provide, the deeper capacity students would have to co-design our programming and the more equitable we could be. In the context of our education journalism work, for example, we targeted mainly eighth grade students for a journalism fellowship in which we brought them together in person for a full-weekend summer institute and then provided targeted, paid support, beyond what other students were receiving, throughout the school year,” said co-founder Andrew Brennan. “Working with middle school students required a lot of attention and also much more adult support for the necessary scaffolding than we had originally anticipated. The experience has us thinking about other ways to bring younger students in and also questioning whether it makes sense to shift our age target slightly to younger high school students.”

Example: Scaffolding can also be more systemic in nature, helping youth voice organizations and movements build the knowledge and capacity to achieve their goals in sustainable ways. The Student Action Network for Equity (SANE) of Seek Common Ground, was established one year ago to provide both student-led and intergenerational organizations elevating student voice with resources, funding, material and support. Functioning as a traditional network, members can share information and facilitate introductions with each other to advance shared goals.

Learning Reflection Questions

- » How does our organization integrate young people as a stakeholder team that we are attentive to?
- » How are young people engaged as research, policy and storytelling partners with true agency?
- » Who do we go to when we need youth input, and is it an equitable and diverse cross-section of the population we serve? How are we scaffolding the experience so it is accessible to the most marginalized students?
- » How are young people integrated into our structure as an organization – e.g., boards, coalitions?
- » How are we partnering with youth on advocacy efforts and identifying authentically shared goals?
- » How are we considering the school year calendar, school day schedules and competing responsibilities that may be a barrier to participation by youth? What are we doing to mitigate those barriers, including through compensation?
- » What responsibility are adults taking to shield students from harm when they are targeted for expressing their views?
- » How are we partnering with youth on developing policy priorities and advocacy agendas?
- » What internal policies and procedures need to be in place for intergenerational collaboration, e.g., employee background checks and mandatory child abuse reporting?

Issues, Functions and Outcomes

Student voices can be meaningfully engaged in any area and by any education organization. Done thoughtfully, stakeholders will benefit regardless of the success of a research project, advocacy campaign or communications strategy.

To the extent their age legally permits, students can be full participants in democracy. They can also develop their leadership in authentic and meaningful ways, and build knowledge, skills and connections not possible in a traditional school environment. They can gain experiences and credentials that will open doors of opportunity as they move through their education and their adult life.

Adults can realign their policies and practices to better serve students. They can strengthen themselves and their organizations with fresh, relevant perspectives that position them for future sustainability. They can build a pipeline of current and future constituents, supporters, interns, employees and leaders. Having student voices at the table lends greater credibility to partners and funders, and when it is done authentically, it will not be performative or exploitative. Adults wishing to authentically engage students should consider what strengths they offer and what they wish to achieve.

Creating egalitarian, intergenerational partnerships asks each partner to bring their talents and interests to the table, ready to learn from the other generations and help each other grow. To that end, it is important for individuals and organizations in the student voice space to think about what role they are able and willing to play.

Student Roles

POLICY AND ADVOCACY

Policy exists at every level of the system – in classrooms, schools, communities, organizations and government bodies. Policy impacts students within school and out of school, and it is important to note that policy does not only include state and federal legislative advocacy and testimony, or with school boards. Youth-led movements are not just organizing to change local school board policy– they are getting students elected to school boards. Truly intergenerational partnerships are not one-way. Including a non-voting student representative on a principal’s advisory council or school board is a step in the right direction, but the ultimate goal should be sharing power. Policy and advocacy strategies, governing bodies and decision-makers at every level should examine the extent to which they are truly accountable to incorporating student perspectives.

Example: The Georgia Youth Justice Coalition can point to over two dozen policy wins that came out of student-led political organizing efforts, including stopping legislation that would have harmed LGBTQ+ students, securing school funding and defeating all efforts to ban books. GYJC is entirely student-led and collaborates with adult allies and advisors. They train and pay organizers and develop leadership to ensure the organization can be sustained after current leaders age out.

RESEARCH

There is no better stakeholder to design and conduct studies on student experiences than students themselves. Research and data are critical tools to inform decisions. It is harder for policymakers to brush off student perspectives when they are armed with data. Young people are more likely to divulge information about their experiences and perceptions to their peers, especially when they know the information will be used to advocate for their point of view.

Example: Youth-led research is a cornerstone of the Kentucky Student Voice Team’s (KSVT) work. They collect, analyze and share data about a range of student experiences with policymakers and the public. KSVT has published research on student experiences of school COVID recovery efforts and has shared findings from their Race, Ethnicity and School Climate Student Survey.

STORYTELLING AND COMMUNICATIONS

Students are the most authentic storytellers of their own experiences and perceptions. Student journalism, whether through a school newspaper, blogs or local and national news outlets, get their experiences and ideas out to a broader audience. Non-school-sponsored publications may also be a necessity when freedom of speech at school is an issue. Students can serve as spokespeople for organizations and movements. They can advise on or create communications and media strategies, particularly when the message needs to reach their peers. Students can also share their stories at conferences, with policymakers during legislative testimony and with peers and other student voice advocates in coalitions and networks. They can also share their perspectives in focus groups and collaborations to influence an organization’s strategy or issue positions.

Example: Kentucky Student Voice Team (KSVT) launched an independent education journalism platform that is supported and sustained by adult journalists and educators and for which students are paid to write and learn.

Example: The Partnership for the Future of Learning is an adult-led network of primarily adult-led organizations that is exploring what engaging student voice could look like. They have partnered with CYCLE and engaged with a number of youth organizing groups to find out what they want out of a network like theirs and to participate in the governance and issue groups.

LEADERSHIP AND ORGANIZATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Intergenerational and adult-led groups must be intentional about giving over and scaffolding roles for young people across the organization. Students can serve on governance committees and boards, lead fundraising and development, recruit their peers and other stakeholders to the work and design and lead training and leadership development. Recruiting is a particularly important element for equity, as the students who may be easiest to recruit may not be the ones who have the most at stake.

Adults and students alike should consider how inclusive they are to perspectives and experiences different from their own, including students who are disengaged from school and who are less likely to be tapped for a leadership role. Historically marginalized yet resilient youth are precisely the voices that decision-makers most need to hear from about how they can make education more inclusive, relevant and student-centered.

Example: As a student-run organization, young people at Georgia Youth Justice Coalition carry out all functions of the organization, from serving on the board, recruiting and training new and existing organizers, determining the compensation structure, communicating with media and external stakeholders and developing new leaders as students age out of the organization. A fiscal sponsor handles finances and contractual relationships that require an adult's involvement. The leadership has been intentional in recruiting new members who have the most at stake in the outcomes of the policies they seek to impact in their communities. The result has been a more racially diverse board and organizing bench that is more closely representative of Georgia students.

Adult Roles

Adults can amplify student voice by serving as facilitators, guides, sponsors and supporters. Adults can help open doors, facilitate introductions, share historical and institutional knowledge, break up the work into smaller, more scaffolded projects, provide funding and advocate for students to be heard. Students need to lead, with adults working behind the scenes as much as possible.

There is no one way for adults and adult-run organizations to elevate youth voice, but intergenerational co-creation is key. Students are taught to value the wisdom and experience of adults even as their own voices are often discounted - but students are the wisest and best experts about their own experiences. Adults can pave the way for this expertise to be heard and taken seriously in decision-making by leveraging their own relationships and professional credibility.

Students transitioning into adulthood can play a unique role as mentors and historians of the work they recently engaged in as students, while more experienced adults can facilitate opportunities to grow through the work. For example, adults could offer internships to students in college and early career fellowships to create a strong multigenerational foundation that will sustain the work and help it evolve long into the future.

Learning Reflection Questions

- » What are the different areas of your work in education where student voice could add value – e.g., research, policy, and storytelling
- » Where can we open doors for youth to speak in spaces where they would not normally be heard?
- » What mindsets need to change among adults about where students should be seen and heard in the organization?
- » What process will we use to authentically co-create policy and issue positions so that everyone feels heard and valued?
- » How can organizational functions and projects be chunked and scaffolded to allow entry points for students of varying ages and abilities?
- » Are student representatives on our policy advisory committee, school board or principal's cabinet there as token voices, or do they have a vote or veto power with enough of a critical mass to make a difference in the outcome?
- » What proportion of our advisors, consultants, board members or committee members bring a first-person student perspective?
- » What types of data and analysis relevant to our mission are young people uniquely positioned to collect and reflect on?
- » How can more experienced adults provide a runway to younger adults (past or current collaborators who are aging out of their youth or student status) into the role of advisor, sponsor and co-creator with youth?
- » Where can we get out of the way? What ways of doing things can we let go of so that youth can lead?
- » What level of support and power-sharing are we prepared for? For example: Are we ready to delegate key decisions? Do we want to consult with young people on selected decisions? Do we want to be a resource for youth-led organizations and movements to help scaffold the work? Are we being up-front when we recruit students to collaborate with us about the degree of support, compensation and power we will be sharing?

Conclusion

Students are the experts on their own experiences and will provide the most up-to-date and relevant data on conditions in their schools and communities. Adult-led organizations should consider how they can become more intergenerational in their work to transform education, and KnowledgeWorks is no exception. We want to ensure that our work is done in collaboration with, not to students.

One thing we are sure of is the necessity to more authentically engage the voices, perspectives, expertise and talents of the students who will ultimately be impacted by KnowledgeWorks' educational transformation and policy change work. In sharing what we have learned from the youth-focused organizations and individuals that generously shared their time and expertise, we are taking a first step in our own examination of our practices and mindsets.

KnowledgeWorks is a national nonprofit organization advancing a future of learning that ensures each student graduates ready for what's next. For more than 20 years, we've been partnering with states, communities and leaders across the country to imagine, build and sustain vibrant learning communities. Through evidence-based practices and a commitment to equitable outcomes, we're creating the future of learning, together.