MAKING THE CASE FOR
STUDENT VOICE

For students, experiences in school *are* life experiences.

According to the [Funder's Collaborative on Youth Organizing](), education consistently ranks as the top issue among youth-driven movements, campaigns and public action initiatives. School experiences shape the way students will think, learn and live into adulthood. Centering and elevating student voices in education cultivates personal growth and a sense of civic responsibility, which has significant and lasting benefits to both the individual and community.

Organizations that elevate student voice gain thought partnership and internal advocates from those that are directly impacted by the policies and practices adopted. When students' voices are ignored or suppressed through established channels, they will find alternative opportunities to express themselves, typically in opposition to the establishment. Students have historically organized classroom and school walkouts to draw attention to social and academic inequities and local, state and national policies that disproportionately affect underrepresented student populations.

Three Elements of Intrinsic Motivation

All people, especially students, have three fundamental needs that support a general sense of well-being and intrinsic motivation: autonomy, competence and relatedness.

AUTONOMY
The need to assert control over one's decisions and actions
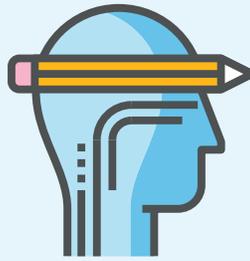
COMPETENCE
The drive to develop skills needed to navigate the challenges of daily life and achieve desired outcomes

RELATEDNESS
The desire for meaningful connections between oneself and others, and between individuals and their daily tasks[1]

Ohio's organizational leaders have a decision to make: Find ways to meaningfully engage and elevate student voices from within, or prepare to respond when those voices are raised in opposition from the outside.

Most recently, the City of Toledo hosted a series of facilitated discussions on youth violence. The Youth Be Heard events created space for youth to share their own experiences with violence and their opinions on how to address issues of rising youth violence in the community. City officials and nonprofit leaders gathered insights from these listening sessions to make recommendations for programmatic and policy changes around education and public safety.

Policies, programs and practices that support these fundamental student needs are associated with improved school attendance, reductions in violence, increased academic achievement and numerous other positive behavioral outcomes. Students who feel heard also feel cared for, and will find school more engaging and enjoyable, which in turn leads to increased academic efforts.[2]

1. Anderson (2018); Beattie, H. and Rich, M. (2018). Youth-Adult Partnership: The Keystone to Transformation; Baroutsis (2016); Fielding (2001, 2004); Levin (2000); Smyth (2006); Taines (2012)

2. Conner, Jerusha, Michael Posner, and Bright Nsowaa. 2022. "The Relationship Between Student Voice and Student Engagement in Urban High Schools." The Urban Review 54 (5): 755–74.

Learning Agenda Considerations

Elevating student voice within Ohio's educational settings will involve a multifaceted approach. For adults looking to foster genuine student involvement, the [Elevating Student Voice](#) learning agenda highlights four primary considerations: intergenerational co-creation, compensation, succession and continuity and scaffolding. These factors represent the cornerstones of a strategy aimed at centering and amplifying student perspectives and ensuring a sustainable and impactful integration of their voices in decision-making.

Intergenerational co-creation

When youth and adults partner in planning, both learn from each other and bring different strengths to the table. Students bring unique insights and perspectives and a greater capacity to engage their peers. Adults bring experience and institutional knowledge, and they can leverage their authority to support initiatives in ways that students may not.

Compensation

Compensating youth for their participation and expertise is not just a matter of fairness; it's an investment in the future. When young people engage in shaping policies and strategies that impact their education and well-being, they contribute valuable insights and perspectives that can lead to more informed, effective and equitable decision-making. Offering compensation to young people acknowledges the significance of their contribution and places value on their time while encouraging continued involvement. Additionally, compensation can help break down socio-economic barriers that might deter some youth from participating, ensuring that a diverse range of voices are heard.

Succession and continuity

Organizations must foresee, support and accommodate student turnover with consistent adult allies. Even in situations where students have complete autonomy, new student leaders will need intentionally integrated opportunities to learn from and collaborate with older students who are transitioning out of their roles, and from adults who can share institutional knowledge.

Scaffolding

Meeting students where they are is essential to ensuring a diverse and equitable array of student voices. Readily available information, training and other support services are just a few of the many ways Ohio organizations can support widely accessible opportunities for student engagement. Existing student leaders and adults should assist new learners in grasping their new tasks, offering a step-by-step approach, where adults provide temporary assistance and guidance, gradually reducing support as students gain confidence and grow into their roles. This process ensures a smooth transition and empowers students to thrive in their responsibilities.

Organizational Levers of Change

In Ohio's ever-evolving education landscape, the opportunities for adults and other education leaders to spearhead transformative change and center student voices are profound. These opportunities hinge on four pivotal levers for change: policies, practices, programs and people.

Policies

Creating a policy that requires the solicitation of student voice through surveys or focus groups is a great first step for organizational leaders looking to have an immediate impact. A deeper, more systemic change would involve including students in the review and revision of all policies that impact them. Though students may not have the ability to vote on policies, they can meaningfully engage in discussions and make recommendations for improvement.

Practices

Policies and guidelines are the written expectations of an organization and practices represent the extent to which policies are carried out or ignored. Organizations and systems that have not historically elevated student voice will need to offer training and support to change adult practices. Part of such training and support may require a change in perspective. Additionally, adults will benefit from practical examples, opportunities for reflection and reasonable timelines if change is to be effectively integrated and sustained.

Programs

If systemically elevating student voice in organizational policies and practices is the destination, programs are the implementation steps that take us in the right direction. Programs have clearly defined goals and outcomes. And because they operate with a clear beginning and ending point, there are built-in opportunities for evaluation and revision. Programs provide the opportunity for incremental change and small victories that can build momentum toward larger, longer-lasting systemic changes.

People

An adage in organizational change is "If everyone is responsible, nobody is responsible." Organizations committed to elevating student voice should identify specific personnel who will have responsibility for shepherding the work forward and adjusting as needed. Identifying a person or persons responsible for elevating student voice does not necessarily require adding new positions. Champions of student voice can be identified from within but are necessary in order to maintain focus and momentum.

Reflective Questions

» How are we meaningfully engaging students in the review and revision of policies and practices that directly affect them?

» How are students empowered to recommend, develop, lead or evaluate programs we offer?

» Who in our organization is directly responsible for elevating student voice, and how are we monitoring and reporting progress?

» How are we working to engage students who represent the diversity of our population?

Perspectives: Understanding Explicit and Implicit Student Roles

A dominant mental model of schooling is that adults *deliver* education and students receive it. This mindset minimizes the importance of student voice in the learning process because it positions students as passive recipients rather than active agents. Elevating student voice requires adults to expand their beliefs about students' ability to think, speak and advocate for themselves.

Adult perspectives significantly affect when and how student voice may be elevated. While many opportunities exist to elevate student voice, individuals and organizations must consider the ways in which students are incorporated and how those roles are defined within student voice efforts. Understanding the implicit roles assigned to students provides insight into the varying degrees of responsibility and ownership the process affords students. One question leaders can ask themselves to deepen their awareness is, "Are we doing this to students, or with students?"

Students as **Consultants**

Students as **Partners**

Students as **Collaborators**

Students as **Leaders**
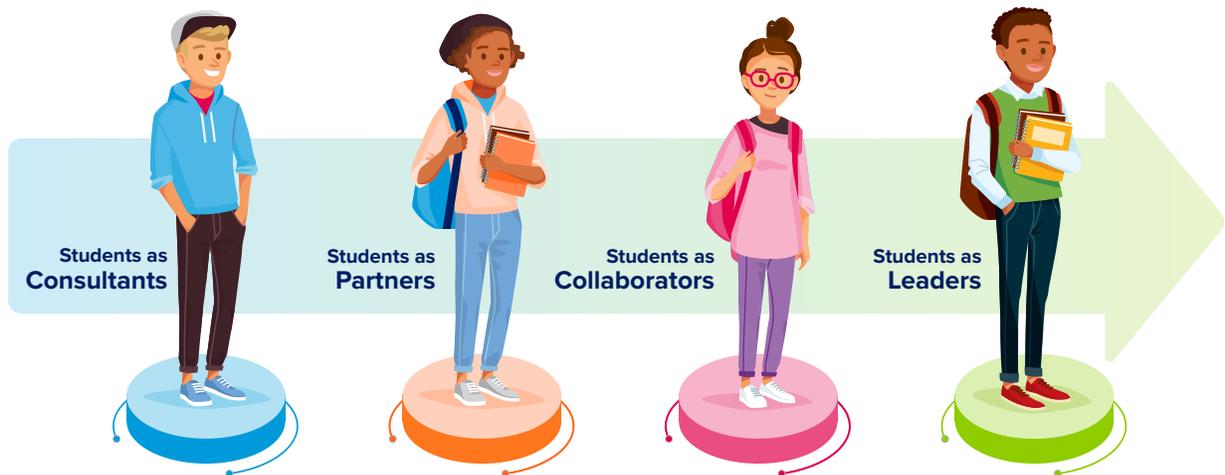
Students as consultants
When adults view students as consultants, students provide feedback or insights on specific topics or initiatives but maintain little to no control over the topics or initiatives discussed. Control remains with the adults, who may use their positions of power to orchestrate a desired effect or outcome.

Students as partners
In a partnership, students collaborate with adults throughout a project or initiative. Students share equal responsibility, autonomy and decision-making authority in all aspects of the work from conception to completion.

Students as collaborators
When adults view students as collaborators, they share some of the decision-making responsibilities and authority with students. Students may have control over specific aspects of a project or initiative but have limited autonomy. Students have more ownership as collaborators than they do as consultants, but the impetus for the work is still initiated by adults.

Students as leaders
Students lead initiatives based on concerns or challenges they identify with their peers. When this happens, adults play a limited, supporting role and students have control over all, or nearly all of the work, including the design, implementation, completion and evaluation of outcomes.

Reflective Questions

» In considering the various roles of students – consultants, partners, collaborators, and leaders – how might the distribution of control and autonomy impact the depth and effectiveness of their contributions in different educational settings?

» Under what circumstances are we treating students as consultants, collaborators, partners or leaders?

» What opportunities exist for us to engage students as partners and leaders where we are currently treating them as consultants or collaborators?

» To what extent are we willing to share authority and control with students when developing or reviewing the policies, practices and programs that directly affect them?

Methods for Elevating Student Voice

This section provides practical methods and working examples from Ohio for educators, student advocacy organizations and adult-led, student-centered organizations interested in elevating student voice. This is not an exhaustive list of all the great work happening to elevate student voice in the Buckeye State but provides insight into the things that have been accomplished locally. The goal is to help Ohio leaders move from theory to practice and to encourage student voice efforts that are transformative, not performative.

Listening sessions

A listening session is a facilitated discussion designed to gather insights and experiences from a small group. Participants in a listening session share what they know and offer perspectives on a specific topic of interest. Facilitators gain insights into students' lived experiences when they listen to understand, rather than respond. When the process is approached with appreciation for student contributions, meaningful conversation and valuable insights can be captured.

Cleveland Metropolitan School District

Mayor Justin M. Bibb and Cleveland Metropolitan School District CEO Eric Gordon met with a group of students to share the results of a summer listening tour that directly engaged hundreds of parents, families, educators, students and community members about the needs and opportunities for supporting Cleveland's youth.

Benefits: In a listening session, facilitators work with groups of five to six students. Adults can gain perspectives from a large, representative sample of students in a short amount of time through listening sessions with a limited number of trained facilitators.

Discussion panels

Discussion panels bring experts together to discuss a specific topic in front of a live audience. After a brief introduction, a moderator invites panelists to share their perspectives on the topic, followed by a question-and-answer session with the audience. Discussion panels in which students are invited to speak as experts elevates student voice and helps adult audience members view an issue from the student lens.

Benefits: Audience members have a shared experience, which encourages understanding across a large group of people without the need for additional analysis or presentations. Adults, who have their own points of view and lived experiences, can leave a discussion panel with a perspective they would not otherwise have.

Advisory councils

Student advisory councils are standing bodies that represent the perspectives and lived experiences of the general population in a school or region. Students, elected or appointed to serve on the council, meet regularly with adults who have authority within an organization or system. Adults benefit most from advisory councils that reflect the diversity of the general population and when topics to be discussed are shared with students in advance of meetings. This gives students the opportunity to carefully consider issues and consult with their peers.

Springfield City School District

Superintendent Robert Hill engages student voices regularly in the Springfield City School District near Dayton, Ohio, through the Student Lighthouse Team, an integral component of the district-wide adoption of The Leader in Me program. Student members of the Lighthouse Team take on leadership roles, act as ambassadors for the Leader in Me program, and advise building and district leaders on matters that affect their school environment. The Lighthouse Team also takes on specific projects throughout the year in partnership with district leaders that address student or community needs.

Benefits: Advisory councils offer adults a reliable source of student insight and feedback on current or future organizational issues. Over time, as involved students become more familiar with common or pressing issues facing the organization, they may begin to anticipate future challenges and share them with leadership proactively.

Board and committee membership

Students can serve as committee members or board members at local, regional and state levels. In these situations, students have the same rights and responsibilities as adults in similar positions, barring any existing legal or legislative limitations. When students serve as committee or board members, their voices carry the same weight as adult voices, and adult leaders benefit from hearing student perspectives prior to adopting or implementing policies.

Across Ohio: One in Five Schools

The Ohio School Boards Association administered a survey of member districts during the 2022-23 school year. Roughly one in five school districts in Ohio reported having a student or students who serve as unelected representatives to their local school board. Student school board representatives gather input from peers and engage in public discussions with elected board members and community members. As this practice has become more widespread in southwest Ohio, student representatives from several different school districts in the region formed their own group to identify and address common issues affecting students across the region.

Benefits: Integrating students directly into committees and boards is a proactive way to amplify student voices. When students have an equal say at tables where ideas are developed and decisions are made, adults benefit from being closely connected to the source of student perspectives.

Storytelling

Students have a unique ability to express their own perspectives and experiences and can more effectively connect with peers. When more students are encouraged to share their stories, it provides adults with numerous opportunities to gain insights from the diverse voices and lived experiences among students. Additionally, peer-to-peer communication can be an impactful approach for fostering organic momentum within student communities. Students can directly relate to their peers, making the exchange of vital information more compelling. This method of interaction is not only a potent tool for disseminating crucial information but an effective way to tap into the collective energy of student populations.

Our Ohio School Documentary Film Festival

The [Our Ohio High School Documentary Film Festival](#) project encourages students to explore Appalachian cultural identity and to find their voice through independent documentary filmmaking. Area high school teachers, WOUB Public Media journalists and professors at Ohio University's Media Arts and Studies program provide guidance, support and equipment so that students can develop compelling stories from their own point of view. The stories are showcased through public media broadcasts. To date, students from across Southeast Ohio have created and shared more than 50 short films.

Benefits: Student stories can be archived in a variety of formats to be shared with audiences synchronously and asynchronously. Archiving stories is one way to store collective knowledge and preserve past successes as student leaders graduate or move on to different phases of life.

Youth Participatory Action Research

In Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR), students design investigations to improve their lives, the lives of their peers and to strengthen their communities and schools. YPAR results help students and adults develop solutions to challenges that affect students directly. YPAR can inform policy and practice changes, which in turn leads to new opportunities for research and evaluation.

Cuyahoga County, Northeast Ohio

The [First Ring Student Leadership Institute](#) in Cuyahoga County empowers students to identify issues impacting their lives, conduct research and make recommendations for change. Student experiences are facilitated by educators from Cleveland State University's Center for Urban Education and the Educational Service Center of Northeast Ohio. In their first year, high school student teams conducted a YPAR project and shared their findings. In the second year, returning students put the recommendations into action and mentored other students who were just beginning their YPAR experience.

Benefits: Students are more likely to respond to surveys and engage in discussions when research is conducted by their peers. This gives student researchers and adults a more representative sample of perceptions and feedback on specific issues. Because students lead nearly all aspects of a YPAR project, they have greater ownership for the work and become advocates for the change and improvements they want to see.

Reflective Questions

» How are we listening to understand students' experiences and perspectives, regardless of format or approach?

» To what extent do the voices that are being elevated reflect the diverse experiences and perspectives of all students?

» How can we engage students in every aspect of a process, empowering them to plan, develop, lead, reflect and share alongside adults or independently?

What's Next

While it is encouraging to witness instances of elevated student voices across Ohio, it is critical that we move beyond isolated examples of success. We must scale and disseminate these approaches across the state. By embracing a diverse array of student participation methods that are already working in schools and districts across Ohio, we can chart a course towards a statewide education system that serves the evolving needs of Ohio's learners.

Socializing Student Voice in Ohio
Opportunities for partnership and engagement

Ohio School Boards Association (OSBA)

OSBA is a state-wide, member-driven advocacy organization that represents over 700 school boards and 3,500 board members in Ohio. The annual OSBA Capital Conference, held in early November, is the largest gathering of educational leaders and school board members in the state. OSBA has four regions; each region has semi-annual conferences. Jeff Chambers, the Director of Communication Services, can be reached at jchambers@ohioschoolboards.org.

Ohio Educational Service Center Association (OESCA)

OESCA represents the 51 educational service centers across Ohio that are connected with every school district in Ohio. OESCA hosts an annual fall conference in September attended by over 300 ESC educators from across the state. OESCA provides legislative updates, coordinates member lobbying efforts, organizes communications across Ohio's ESCs and offers professional development for ESC personnel. Communication Coordinator Allyson Robinson can be reached at robinson@oesca.org

Ohio Association for Student Leadership (OASL)

OASL provides training and support to middle school high school student council advisors and other student leadership development staff members in around 300 Ohio schools. OASL hosts virtual and in-person leadership development programs for Ohio students throughout the year, with their largest event being a multi-day summer workshop. Anthony Paletta has been involved in conversations and can be reached at anthony.paletta@oasc-oh.org

Ohio PTA

The Ohio PTA has over 48,000 members, 450 units and 39 councils in 12 districts across the state. All members of the leadership team are volunteers. The Ohio PTA hosts a state-wide conference in April each year. The Ohio PTA president for the 2023-25 term, Angela Rvay, can be reached at angelarevay@yahoo.com

Resources

Listening Sessions
The Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) Office of Population Affairs developed the Listen Up! Youth Listening Session Toolkit and an accompanying workbook with 18 ready-to-use templates, forms and sample documents.
https://opa.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/2020-10/OPA_Youth_Toolkit_Final_508.pdf

Discussion Panels
UNICEF has an approach for engaging children, adolescents and youth called Youth Active Talk. The published methodology also includes examples from past UNICEF events.
https://www.unicef.org/media/60596/file

Youth Advisory Councils
GenerationOn is an enterprise sponsored by Points of Light, the world's largest organization dedicated to volunteer service. Game Changers is a comprehensive guide for organizations seeking to establish, grow and sustain a youth advisory council.
https://www.youthpower.org/sites/default/files/YouthPower/resources/game_changers_yac_toolkit.pdf

Board and Committee Membership
The State of New Hampshire requires every school district that operates a high school have at least one student member from each high school on its school board. Reaching Higher NH, a nonpartisan nonprofit, published a toolkit to help school districts elevate student voice in school and district governance.
https://reachinghighernh.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Student-School-Board-Member-toolkit-3.pdf

Storytelling
826 National, a nonprofit organization that helps students improve their writing skills and amplifies their voices through the written word, is the largest youth writing network in the country.
https://826national.org/

National Public Radio (NPR) hosts an annual Student Podcast Challenge and provides guides for teachers and students interested in elevating student voices through podcasts.
https://www.npr.org/2018/10/30/662116901/teaching-podcasting-a-curriculum-guide-for-educators

Youth Participatory Action Research
The Berkeley YPAR Hub features an expansive curriculum and resources to enrich YPAR projects. https://yparhub.berkeley.edu/home

The John W. Gardner for Youth and Their Communities at Stanford University published Youth Engaged in Leadership and Learning (YELL), a handbook that provides structured agendas and planning resources to support youth leadership development.
https://gardnercenter.stanford.edu/publications/college-career-and-civic-readiness/youth-engaged-leadership-and-learning-yell-handbook

In Ohio, School-Based Youth Participatory Action Research (SchYPAR) partners with school districts and provides resources to incorporate YPAR into existing curricula.
https://www.schypar.org/

KnolwedgeWorks published the Youth Participatory Action Research: A Guidebook and Curriculum for high school educators who want to implement a course dedicated to student inquiry and leadership.
https://knowledgeworks.org/resources/ypar-youth-participatory-action-research-guidebook-curriculum/

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.

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