

## USABLE KNOWLEDGE

# Giving Students a Voice

Five ways to welcome student input and bolster your school's success

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BY **Leah Shafer**

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Among the many things young people have to do to succeed in school is learn to respect procedures they haven't created or approved. Just think: A teenager sitting in class follows a lesson formulated by her teacher and a curriculum written by distant policymakers. On the walls, posters she didn't choose inform her of her school's goals and values. Throughout the day, she eats, talks, and even

dresses according to rules determined by her principal. Her day begins and ends at times the school board and superintendent established.

That's just the way it is, right? Not so right, says [Gretchen Brion-Meisels](#), a faculty member at the [Harvard Graduate School of Education](#). When schools find ways to welcome student opinions — to partner with students “as stakeholders in their own learning,” especially at the secondary level — they do more than equip students with tools for lifelong success. They also wind up creating programs and policies that are more effective at meeting the schools' own goals for supporting young people in their healthy development.

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As in other partnerships, collaborating with students requires a willingness to listen, share authority, and generate goals together — all of which can make adults wary. But “listening to young people doesn't mean unilaterally considering their perspective,” Brion-Meisels says. Instead, “it means recognizing that young people have a perspective on the world that adults can't share, and that their perspective should be welcomed alongside the wisdom that adult perspectives bring.”

## Five Ways to Welcome Student Input

To begin incorporating youth voices, educators should think beyond the student council, welcoming a range of student opinions in decisions about academic content, discipline, school culture, free time, the physical space of the school, and family partnerships. They should even consider an individual student's wishes about which adults in the building will best teach and counsel him.

Brion-Meisels offers **five ways schools can integrate student voices**:

- 1. Regularly solicit student feedback.** Educators can use surveys and other research methods to routinely gather data or ask students what's happening in the hallways and bathrooms, how they feel about the content and structure of classes, and for suggestions on school policies, culture, and climate.
- 2. Engage students in studying and assessing their school.** Beyond asking for feedback on questions created by adults, schools can train students in collecting and analyzing data. These youth researchers can then create their own research questions and use observations and feedback from peers to draw conclusions about what's going right, what could be improved, and how to help.

Beyond asking for feedback on questions created by adults, schools can train students to ask their own questions, then collect and analyze the data.

**3. Include authentic student representation on leadership teams.** Principals should leave space for students on school leadership teams, improvement teams, or equity and diversity teams. In meetings, participants should treat students as full members of the team, not just observers.

**4. Invite students to any discussion related to their own learning.** Individual students need to be included in parent-teacher conferences, IEP meetings, student support meetings, discipline hearings — any discussion in which they are the main topic.

**5. More broadly, consider young people as stakeholders and partners in their schools.** When school leaders set new goals or make a major decision, they should expect students to contribute. At the same time, educators should be willing to help students as they shape and achieve their own aspirations for their learning.

To make this work, schools need to equip students with the tools to provide nuanced, constructive suggestions. According to Brion-Meisels, this means building a school culture that:

- exposes students to different ways of learning and approaching problems;
- normalizes the giving and receiving of feedback;
- gives students the time, space, and power to construct and test their own ideas.

## Student Voice — and Organizational Success

When schools give students the agency and the tools to speak out, the effects can resonate across students' lives. The process of becoming engaged as active partners can give young people a set of strategies they can use to create positive change in future classrooms or communities. And when they form authentic partnerships with teachers and school administrators, it can set the stage for lasting bonds and important mentoring relationships.

Schools benefit, too. Reforms initiated with student input are likely to improve the learning environment for all students, not just those involved in the reforms. And students who feel appreciated and supported typically feel more connected to their school community. "The evidence is pretty clear that when organizations, including schools, give young people agency and voice, and integrate their perspectives into decision-making processes, those organizations are more effective in the work they're trying to do," says Brion-Meisels.

# Additional Resources

- [Student perspectives on cheating and collaboration](#)
- More on participatory research from [Youth-Led Participatory Action Research](#), the [Public Science Project](#), and [Research for Organizing](#)
- More on the importance of youth voices with [What Kids Can Do](#), [Youth on Board](#), and the [Washington Youth Voice Handbook](#) [PDF]

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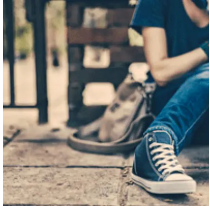
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