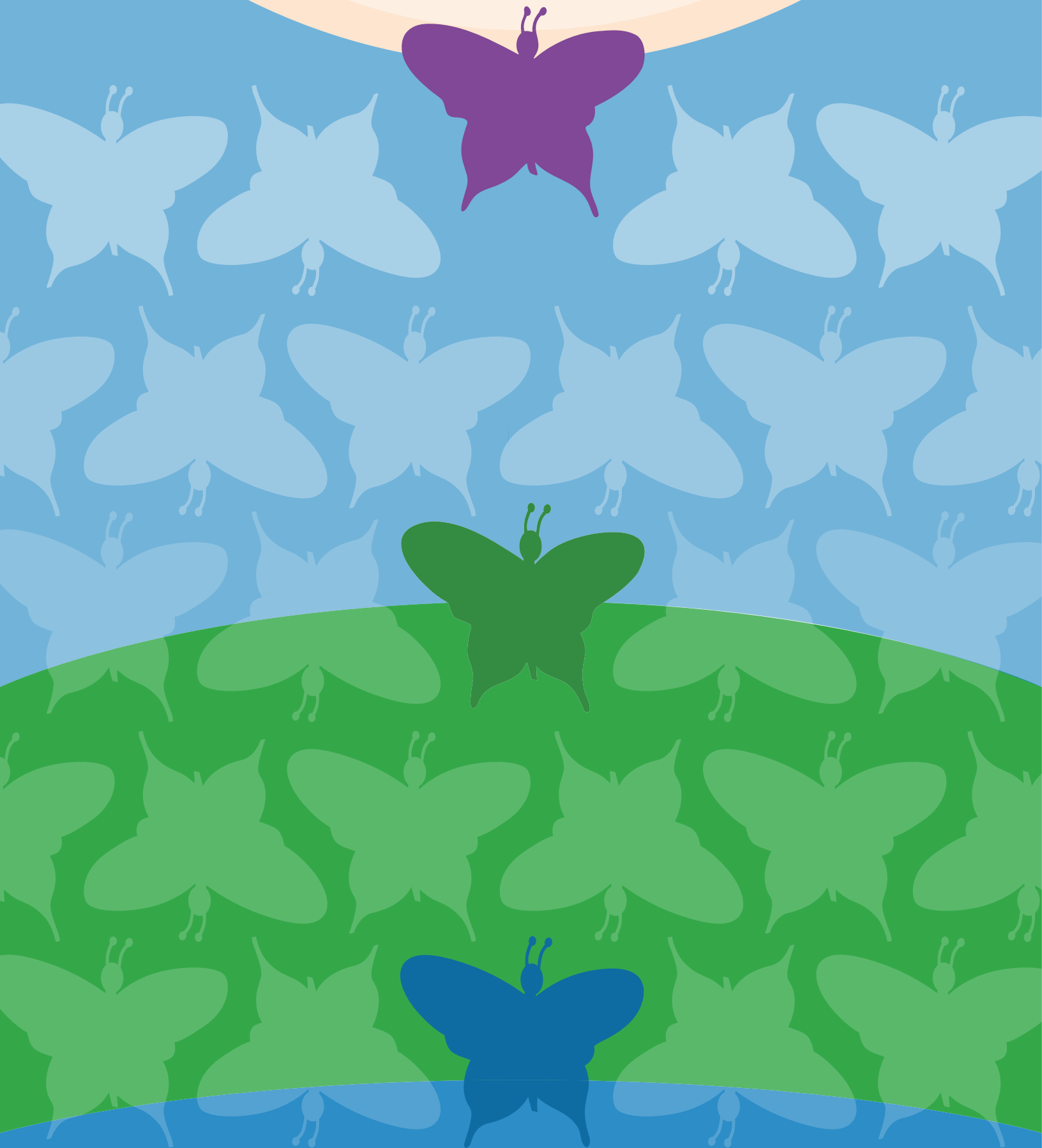


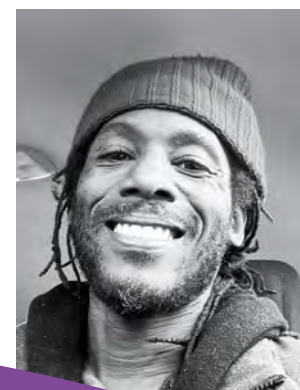
MY DREAM VOICE

AMPLIFYING STUDENT VOICE
IN THE CLASSROOM



Designing Together

Here are the faces of the people who helped create this workbook. They are students, educators, and leaders in schools—and their voices shaped everything you'll find inside.



Everyone has a story—and those stories matter when we create tools, spaces, and ideas meant for real people. **That is what participatory design is all about: listening, sharing, and building together.**

Thank you

This process was made possible by generous funding from the Communities Foundation of Texas.

To our team of student and educator experts who co-created, co-authored, and co-designed this resource, we offer our sincerest appreciation for sharing your stories, knowledge, ideas, feedback, creative genius, and leadership. It was an honor to work alongside you! This workbook would not be possible without your participatory engagement and co-creation on all aspects of this process:

Core Team Members:

Giselle Palmer, Educator
Edith Ramirez, College Student
Yash Sharma, College Student
Felix Wilson, Education Expert

STEM School Team Members:

Jaiden Asberry, Student
Megan Dean, Student
Boston Drake, Student
Quinn Holland, Student
Adeem Mustafa, Student
A'mya Underwood, Student
Rodnesha Wade, Student
Jason Hubbard, Student
Anna Wineland, Educator

Content Contributors:

Alison Yaretzy, Elementary Student
Dustin, High School Student
Cheyenne, College Student
Irma, College Student
KK, College Student
Eleanor, Student
Kash, Student
Jacob, Student

School Supporters:

East Side Elementary - Hamilton County, TN
STEM School Chattanooga

We offer further gratitude to the entire East Side Elementary School student body who participated in engagement workshops which supported design elements for this resource.

To our student participants who, while remaining anonymous, offered essential perspectives featured throughout this workbook, you have our appreciation.

Thank you to facilitators and co-creators Rondell Crier and Alea Tveit. Artist, activist, and maker, Rondell Crier, served as the creative consultant leading the facilitation, design work, and participatory engagement experience for this process. NAPE Grants and Program Specialist, Alea Tveit, served as a workshop co-facilitator, project manager, researcher, and lead author of the non-student generated portions for this workbook. Thank you both for your deep commitments to center student decision making at every stage of this process.

To John Adams, visual storyteller, who provided photography and videography for this process, thank you for your expertise and support in showcasing the amazing work of our participants.

Thank you to the NAPE Programs Team - Nakeia Alsup, Ashley Conrad, Silvia Ramos, and Kayla Santana-Linares - for your guidance, leadership, and feedback. Additionally, we would like to thank our CEO Brittany Brady and NAPE team members Carol Clippinger, Nicole Fritz, Daphne Berwanger, Tegwin Pulley, and Audrey Selden who were instrumental in the application, organization, presentation, publication, and financial administration of this project.

Table of Contents

Scope of Projects	A-B
Letter to Our Community	06
Grounding Intention	07
Introduction	11
My Dream Voice	17
It's My Classroom Too	26
Excel Because	40
Spark of an Evolution	53
This is How We Do It	63
Laying It All Out	72
Conclusion: Seeing is Believing	81
Resource Kit	82
Sources	95



*"A better learning experience for students
at school is students and teachers working together."*

- Irma, College Student

Scope of Projects

This quick-view index highlights all the student voice projects featured in this workbook. For more detailed information, refer to the specific pages listed. Each project was co-created by students and educators offering powerful models for student-centered engagement. These projects can be utilized as they are or adapted to meet the unique needs of specific classrooms. **Projects with an asterisk* have implementation support materials available in the Resource Kit section.**

Creating Courageous Spaces

Pages 14-16

Goal: Foster trust and shared responsibility by co-creating classroom agreements that reflect collective hopes, expectations, and values.

Final Outcome: Student-signed agreements with creative display and space for reflection and updates year-round.

Sometime About You *

Pages 20-22

Goal: Facilitate deeper connections and empathy among peers through structured conversations.

Final Outcome: Stronger group relationships, increased trust, empathy, and collaboration.

EmpowerArt Student Comic *

Pages 23-25

Goal: Support students in expressing identity, encouraging reading, and building confidence in using your voice through comic-making and storytelling.

Final Outcome: A personal comic shared at a public showcase, demonstrating student creativity, voice, and cultural identity.

Collaborative Solutions

Pages 31-33

Goal: Empower students to collaborate on solving classroom challenges and take ownership of their learning environment.

Final Outcome: A solution-focused classroom culture with stronger teacher-student relationships and a repeatable model for addressing challenges.

Student Spotlight

Pages 34-36

Goal: Empower students to lead and teach lessons they are passionate about, strengthening leadership and ownership of learning.

Final Outcome: Monthly student-led classes with high peer engagement and school-wide celebrations of student contributions.

It's My Classroom Pizza *

Pages 37-39

Goal: Help students reflect on and express what they value in a classroom environment, using the metaphor of a pizza to spark imagination and dialogue.

Final Outcome: Collaborative "classroom pizzas" with visual toppings representing student needs and dreams, displayed or compiled into a class-wide wishlist.

Portray Your Voice *

Pages 47-49

Goal: Amplify experiences, personal customs, and ideas of students, particularly immigrant and EB/ELL students through storytelling, art, and resource sharing newsletter.

Final Outcome: A student-created newsletter (digital or print) featuring personal narratives, creative works, and helpful resources for the school community.

Carry Your Voice

Pages 50-52

Goal: Create wearable symbols of student voice designed by students, for students, to foster school-wide expression and visibility.

Final Outcome: A collection of student-designed buttons worn and shared across the school to promote student voice and identity.

Who Decides *

Pages 55-59

Goal: Empower students to explore and engage with governing structures, encouraging them to take an active role in decision-making processes and fostering a deeper understanding of civic responsibility.

Final Outcome: Students will complete a comprehensive project that includes research on governing bodies, professional outreach to representatives, and a firsthand field trip experience.

Student Stakeholders Collage *

Pages 60-62

Goal: Empower students to advocate for school board representation through research, action, and creative design.

Final Outcome: A student-created Representation Guide, advocacy tools, and a visual or digital artifact highlighting the process and impact.

Let's Paint Together

Pages 66-68

Goal: Celebrate house identity and school pride through a collaborative, creative process that includes every student.

Final Outcome: Mounted mural composed of student-painted tiles, with school pride symbols, installed permanently as a vibrant expression of school community and pride.

Voice to Vision

Pages 69-71

Goal: Empower students to amplify their voices through data-driven, student-created artwork that fosters community engagement.

Final Outcome: A public mural that reflects student voices and enhances school culture, demonstrating that student input shapes the environment.

The Ongoing Conversation

Pages 74-76

Goal: Empower students to craft and lead meaningful conversations through peer-generated prompts.

Final Outcome: A curated set of student-created conversation prompts organized for ongoing use and reflection.

Letter to Our Community

Dear Students, Educators, and Community Partners,

We could not have been more honored to be the container supporting the incredible students and educators who worked throughout 2024 and 2025 to co-author, co-design, and co-create this workbook. The goal of this resource is to share educator and student-led strategies for amplifying student voice in the K-12 classroom.

We deeply believe that schools should be a safe and courageous space that provides every student and educator with a supportive learning environment that encourages them, creates a feeling of connection and community, and celebrates their strength, experiences, and historical backgrounds. In the face of challenges, there is nothing more essential than providing students with the support they need to embody their own power and participate as active leaders in their learning. No one is more expert in the experience of our school system than students and educators. Supporting educators, honoring student expertise, disrupting traditional exclusionary decision-making models, and providing students with opportunities to co-create a school environment where they feel understood, valued, and fully supported to succeed, is an essential part of actualizing sustainable, transformative institutional changes centered around student success.

This workbook was co-authored alongside a student and educator team spanning the country. We are confident that the strategies, ideas, and engagement projects supporting student voice that were created by this expert team will apply to students, educators, and classrooms no matter where this workbook finds them. This team took intentional steps to ensure the projects in this workbook can be adapted to support students of all grade levels, even beyond K-12. In crafting these projects, the team also remained mindful of the financial and time constraints facing many of our institutions and classrooms and worked to provide adaptations to projects that required materials. This workbook is not intended to add more to the already full workloads we know that educators face - we simply hope that this resource can be a tool of solidarity for supporting students and educators in whatever way they need and provide ideas that can be expanded upon or recreated to fit the local contexts of classrooms.

To students and educators everywhere - we see you, we hear you, and the work you are doing is not going unnoticed. You are our heroes and we hope this workbook will support you in building upon your current work, creating a supportive community that is enriching and authentic, and crafting an environment where you can continue to share your expertise and wisdom.

In Solidarity and Gratitude,

Rondell Crier and Alea Tveit

"When I read a snippet of how this workbook was going to start, I got the idea of teachers holding up a bridge with students walking across it and teachers just supporting students across their educational journey."

- Rodnesha Wade, STEM School Team Member/Student

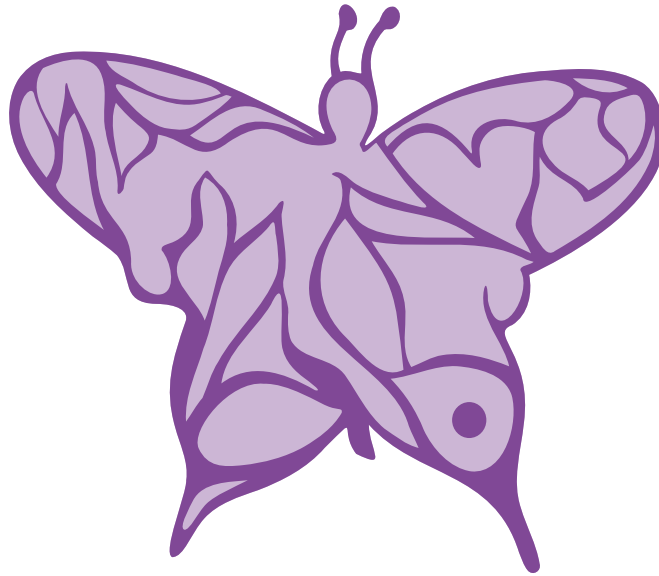
Rodnesha Wade, a high school student, was part of the co-creation team for this workbook. Initially involved to support the development of student-voice projects, she eventually shared that she identified as an artist. **When asked if she had any interest in creating artwork for the workbook, she responded, "Sure!"** After reading and learning more about student voice and the workbook's concept, she sketched a fitting set of visuals that now serve as the foundational design components: a butterfly, abstract patterns, and a landscape of success.

"Jasmine The Butterfly" was created to represent the idea that **student voice should always be at the center of educational planning and development**. When contemplating what educational success looks like, it's best to consider this from the student's perspective. Who are the teachers, and what responsibilities do they have in teaching toward successful outcomes? What is the school environment like? Is it set up in the best way possible to support students' educational goals? And finally, what secured resources are in place to allow every student to excel toward their dream careers and pathways?

Rodnesha embedded her responses to these questions into Jasmine's wings through abstract lines and shapes—visual representations of success. She envisioned a body of water, a field of grass, a blue sky, and the sun to symbolize a supportive school environment, which appear in the background of the cover art. **Jasmine, the butterfly, carries three meanings: a successful student, a successful teacher, and a strong bridge to the best educational resources.**

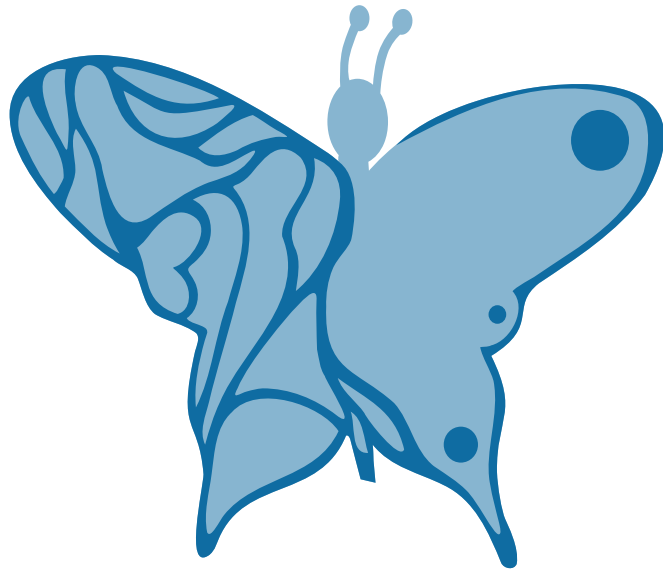
In the following grounding intention, what are your thoughts when imagining "Success"?





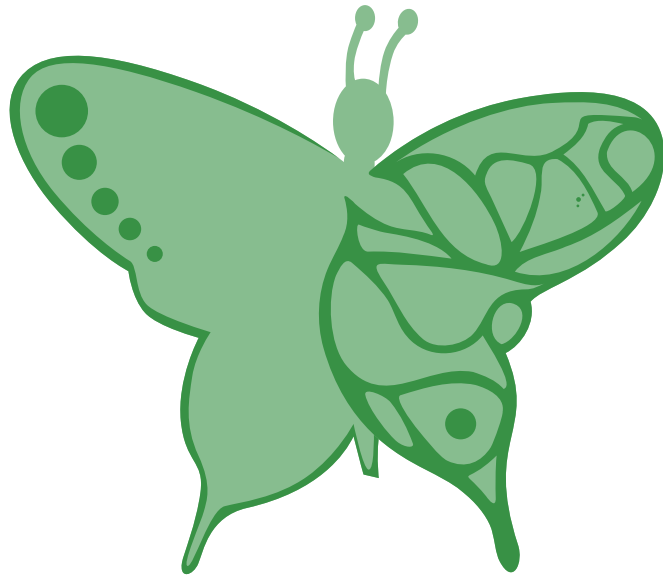
Define what a student is to you.

Student



Define what a teacher is to you.

Teacher



Defines some bridges toward a successful education.

Introduction

The My Dream Voice: Amplifying Student Voice in the Classroom workbook was created to share strategies to authentically engage student voice and strengthen community within classrooms to optimize the learning environment. **To model authentic participatory community building, every aspect of this resource - from art, design, and layout, to written content and engagement projects - was co-created alongside students and educators most impacted by disparities within the K-12 and postsecondary education systems.**

At its core, this workbook is designed for an audience of K-12 educators to support the incorporation of student voice and participatory decision-making within their classrooms. However, many of the strategies and research suggestions outlined in this workbook can apply to students of all ages, including post-secondary, and can serve as a tool for educators, faculty, administrators, or students who want to amplify student voice efforts.

Within this workbook there is: best-practice research and theory describing what student voice is and the environments in which it can thrive; student and educator generated content, qualitative research, and suggestions scaffolding best practice research in the field; stories from students describing their experiences within their learning environments; and student-created projects that can be used to incorporate student voice in the classroom. At the suggestion of the core team of student and educator participants, the projects impact different engagement spheres on a spectrum of micro-level (classroom) to macro-level (school-wide or school system-wide).

Each chapter of the workbook includes an opening section of best practice and student-generated research, followed by corresponding projects related to the theme of the section.

While there is no set order to complete these projects, and all sections can be read in isolation, the core team of creators were excited by the idea of all the projects working together to create a transformative participatory process that could encourage trust and community building among students over the course of the school year, grounding institutional level changes from a foundation of individual level care and support.

Goals and Objectives

- An increased understanding or excitement about why student voice is important in the learning environment.
- Actionable strategies to support increased student engagement and success in the classroom through the use of the created projects.
- The ability for educators using this resource to better understand individual student needs.
- A pathway for students to co-create a positive classroom learning environment alongside teachers.
- Actionable strategies to build trust and positive relationships between students and teachers or students and their schools.

Grounding in Participatory Theory: Hart's Ladder

NAPE's organizational approach to authentic student engagement and participatory design is the utilization of Roger Hart's Ladder of Participation as adapted from his 1992 article "Children's Participation from Tokenism to Citizenship" (11). Originally introduced to NAPE at its 2023 National Summit by Keynote Speaker Kathy Tran, Senior Policy Analyst for Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP), Hart's Ladder describes the spectrum of decision-making power (or participation) of youth or children in projects that impact their lives or the life of the community in which they live (11). It intersects heavily with themes of building trusting relationships between youth and adults, honoring children as whole people, strategies for youth-led movement building, advocating for equal rights for youth, and supporting youth civic participation in society (11).

Hart's Ladder illustrates how the lowest rungs of (non) participation - manipulation, decoration, and tokenism - all contribute to a culture of exploitation and harm of young people within initiatives or projects. These rungs do not allow for genuine community building, participation, or authentic power-sharing with young people. However, ascending each rung of the ladder creates models of increasingly genuine participation with the highest rung illustrating youth ownership and co-decision making alongside adult allies.

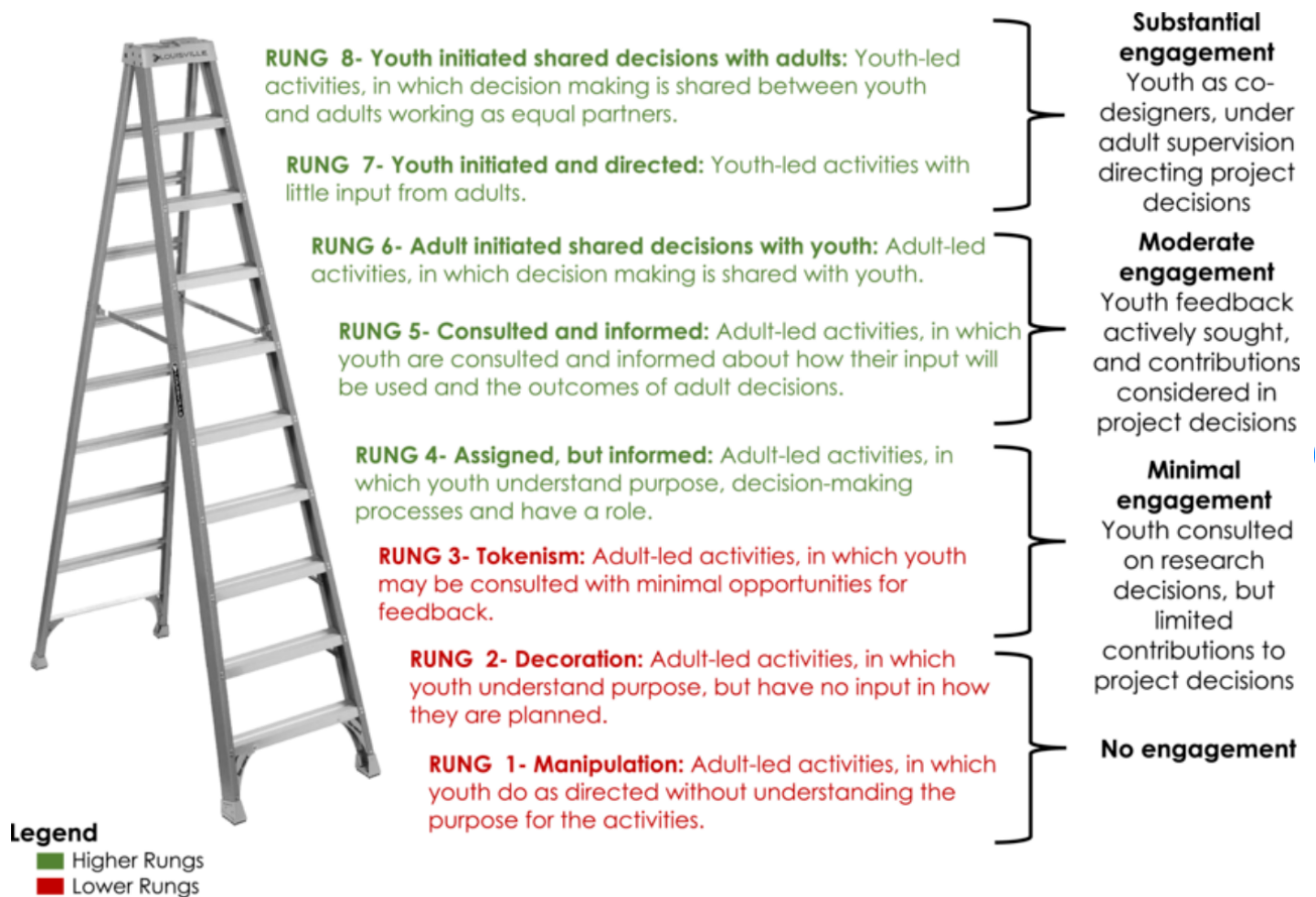


Image 1: Hart's Ladder (cited from source 20)

While students created project content and were key architects in the writing and design of this workbook, this process was originally conceived through a grant application that did not involve collaboration with students due to factors such as time and limited funding. Additionally, facilitation for this process was not student-led. For these reasons this process would not align with the top two “student initiated” rungs of Hart’s Ladder. However, because of NAPE’s values, and the facilitators’ participatory community design expertise, there was an intentional effort to ensure students were able to lead as much of this process as possible. **This workbook’s creation is grounded in the rung 6 “shared decision-making with youth” level. This rung aligns with participatory design and participatory action research models in which participants co-create, co-design, and make decisions about a chosen project.** In specific workshops and opportunities working with the lead facilitator, however, students were able to participate on higher rungs of the ladder, by creating presentations and initiating facilitation of their created projects to fellow peers and classmates. All participants were informed before the process began about the level of Hart’s Ladder at which they would be participating in order to be transparent about their level of decision-making power and gain their informed consent.

Facilitation Structure

A core team of student and educator experts were recruited as co-creators and co-authors in the making of this workbook. **This team included three educators, five postsecondary/adult students, thirteen high school students, and twenty elementary students.** This core team participated in workshops and participatory engagement sessions to create art elements, content, research, projects, and supplemental video components for the workbook. These engagement sessions allowed for group consensus building, group accountability and feedback, and the creation of a trust-building process so each participant could learn alongside each other and have a courageous space to share their experiences and stories. Each workshop or engagement session focused on a different aspect of amplifying student voice - from sharing what was important to include in a classroom environment and ideas for how students could be better heard, to developing art components to ensure the workbook was designed in a way that modeled student decision-making.

Outside of the workshop series, an additional 550 students were engaged in creative design sessions or interviews to gather more student-created content for the workbook. The workbook underwent a review process where participants and NAPE staff were brought in to provide feedback on design and content to ensure it fully represented those involved in the process. This process was particularly helpful in crafting adaptation recommendations on the projects to support their use by different grade and resource levels. All participants in this process were compensated for their time and expertise. In order to increase accessibility of this workbook, a free digital copy was launched on the NAPE website in May 2025.

Creating Courageous Space

Starting with Trust, Growing with Collaboration

"Each person is a universe with unique ways of thinking, being, and communicating. I think building schools where people can bring their whole selves and feel safe, understood, and celebrated starts with creating a shared story of community - one that honors the needs and individuals that are apart of it."

- Alea Tveit, NAPE

Overview

Creator: Alea Tveit

Goal: Foster trust and shared responsibility by co-creating classroom agreements that reflect collective hopes, expectations, and values.

Audience: Elementary, Middle & High School Students; Teachers and School Staff.

Final Outcome: Student-signed agreements with creative display and space for reflection and updates year-round.

Project Details

Description

This project establishes **a foundation and first step for building trust between students and educators** through the co-creation of community classroom agreements. Students and educators can **collaborate on a shared vision** (or "why") for what respect, goals, accountability, and relationships look like within their classrooms.

This project aims to have students collaborate with their peers and teachers to begin the process of building a classroom community. By allowing students and teachers **to share what their hopes, desires, and expectations are for engaging** with each other in the classroom, a more positive environment can be created where every member of a classroom feels seen and heard and challenges are more easily addressed.

Ideal Participants

- Ideal for all students - younger students may require more support from teachers
- Classwide effort alongside teachers - students can work in small groups or as a whole-class
- Could be done at a single classroom level, or expanded out to whole grades or whole school
- Ideal for a homeroom class that students may spend a lot of time in

Timeline

- Complete during the first week, ideally as a first-day icebreaker
- Revisit throughout the year with short check-ins to keep agreements relevant

Materials

- Large sticky note paper or white board
- Markers or something to write with
- Optional: stickers or sticky notes



PROCESS

Preparation:

- Students create small groups
- Large sticky paper is placed around the classroom so each small group has a workstation
- Teachers and students create categories they want to address and build agreements around
- ex -Split large paper into 4 quadrants labeled: How students want to treat each other, how students want teachers to treat them, how teachers want students to treat them, how does everyone want to treat the classroom space

Action:

- In small groups, students reflect on the chosen categories
- Groups work together to brainstorm with one or two ideas of agreements or “norms” that go into that category
- ex -Under the label “how students want to treat each other” students may come up with the norm of “do not use harmful speech or name calling when talking to each other”
- Each group writes down the agreements they come up with on their large sticky paper

Creation:

- Each group presents their sticky paper for the teacher and other students to review
- After each group presents, students discuss the agreements as a whole group with their teacher to consolidate and vote on their final list of agreements
- Finalized agreements are written on a whiteboard or sticky paper and all students and teachers sign their name to consent to the agreements
- This remains visible throughout the year

Reflection:

- Check in throughout the year, and ask “do the agreements we came up with at the beginning of the year still meet our needs and expectations today?”
- Ask students to reflect at the end of the week or month if they think any agreements should be added or subtracted from the list as they put them in practice throughout the year

Considerations

When initially doing a community agreements exercise, students and educators may struggle to reach a consensus, especially if trust hasn't been built yet. Students may also feel the agreements no longer reflect their needs over time. To address this, teachers can wait until later in the year when students know each other better. Teachers should explain that the purpose of the community agreements is to ensure the classroom culture works for everyone, making consensus-building important. Teachers and students can discuss how to build consensus (e.g., majority vote, drafts with reflection periods, rephrasing agreements, etc.). Check-ins for feedback on the agreements as students practice them can help ensure they remain relevant. Regular reflection or feedback processes can allow for creating new norms as needed, keeping the culture adaptive.

Adaptations

- Some students may feel left out due to a dislike of public speaking. To address this, the exercise can be adapted for personal reflection by having students write anonymous sticky notes for each category and place them on shared paper. Students can then quietly read the notes and mark those they believe should be included class-wide. Educators can read aloud the popular agreements and finalize the list with the whole class.
- This can be replicated for each class period, with each set of norms presented in a specific area so students know where to find them.
- With more time and preparation, this can be expanded to the whole grade or school. If students are comfortable, they can complete the exercise as a full class instead of splitting into smaller groups.

Creative Evolutions

- **Decorated Poster Board** - Students can print or write the agreements and decorate a large poster board with symbols and images that are meaningful to them.
- **Wall Art or Mini Mural** - Students can create banners or paint large pieces of butcher paper to display the agreements and art that reflects them.

Outcomes

Creating a shared community of **respect between educators and students**, as well as among students themselves, **is essential for fostering a positive and supportive classroom environment**. This mutual respect encourages students to collaborate not only with each other but also with their teacher, **promoting a sense of teamwork and unity**.

When challenges or conflicts arise, both students and educators can look to the community agreements they consented to, **using these guidelines as a foundation for resolving issues**. By referencing the agreements, they can "call each other in," ensuring that conversations remain respectful and productive. This approach helps to maintain a collaborative atmosphere **where everyone works together to solve problems from a place of mutual respect**.



My Dream Voice

"As an immigrant and adult English learner in this country, it has been incredibly empowering and validating to realize that my voice as a student truly matters. This understanding has significantly helped me navigate the challenges I've faced while pursuing higher education here. This journey it has not been easy; it has required courage, perseverance, and humility, but above all, a strong belief in the power of education to unlock opportunities, social mobility, and foster positive change in the world, both for personal growth and for the greater good of society. Every student's voice deserves to be heard, as we each have a unique story to share. When our voices are heard, and when there is a system that values the authenticity of every student, the likelihood of student success will undoubtedly increase."

- Edith Ramirez, Core Team Member/College Student

What is Student Voice?

It is impossible to separate student voice from larger theoretical conversations around pedagogy, practice, participation, and community-building. **Therefore, finding a single agreed upon definition of “student voice” that is universally shared across educational institutions can be difficult.**

Some institutions may define the concept of student voice as “participation” or involvement in decision-making at the classroom or school level in collaboration with other decision-makers such as administrators or teachers (13). Other institutions can define it as a leadership strategy that supports students in creating meaningful change in policy or practice within their schools (13).

One study examined literature reviews in an attempt to define the essential components of student voice and found, while there were differences in how student voice was actualized between schools, its “definition” related strongly to how a school ultimately defined its structures and relationships (13). These varying definitions all included some mention of 1) what sphere of decision making a student had influence on - at the micro level (classroom) or macro level (school-wide or school system-wide) - and 2) how students formed relationships with their peers, teachers, and administrators (13). **Because there is no single way all schools operationalize their decision making structure or community building frameworks, this can provide educators with the flexibility of creating a definition of student voice in collaboration with students that is responsive and adaptive to the needs of their local contexts.**

Because of variations in how a school or community may define student voice, actualizing student voice can encompass a broad range of engagement or participation strategies. At more micro levels, having a voice can mean students have the freedom in their classroom to express their opinions on aspects of their learning environment. Educators may seek student input to create classroom norms, use surveys or weekly check-ins to see how students feel they are meeting their educational goals, collaborate on ways assignments can creatively be completed (e.g. project-based learning), co-create lesson plans, or find ways for students to learn about and celebrate each other through sharing books or stories that are meaningful to their lived experiences (14).

At a more macro transformational level, honoring student voice can mean supporting students as they embody their inherent power to influence decisions related to their classroom or educational experiences. Students may decide to join a student-led council, lead a youth participatory action research project, meet regularly with administrators, champion the addition of student voting power at school meetings, choose instructional materials, or support a cause that is important to them within their community. **At this level of the spectrum, students are shared decision-makers, leaders, and co-authors of what their learning looks like in a way that impacts the very educational system in which they participate (1).**

As an example of creating something shared and specific to context, NAPE's definition of "student voice" acknowledges and uplifts the idea that students should have ownership over and in their learning. Students from across the country participating in previous NAPE programming created this definition of student voice that serves as a model and set of outcomes centered on four core areas:

- **Expression of Needs:**
 - Around decisions that could affect them or their fellow students
 - Express the needs of the students at the institutions
 - Be as honest as possible
- **All Student Backgrounds Heard:**
 - Consider the different aspects of all student backgrounds
 - Every person has the right to their own opinion and the right to voice their perspectives
 - We should create processes that allow for the debate of differing perspectives with an aligned lens rooted in fairness
- **Action:**
 - Students having their voice heard makes a difference
 - Make sure that what is being said is put into action and results in change, small changes matter
- **Result:**
 - School spirit
 - Culture building
 - Community support
 - Fairness and Representation
 - Collaboration - between students and institutions
 - Academic and professional success

Regardless of how a group of students define their own vision for student voice or what dimension of education that students are lending their expertise, input, and power to, **the result can be a strengthened community in which students, educators, families, and school leadership all thrive and engage with learning with enthusiasm, trust, and belonging.**

Something About You

Seeing Each Other Beyond the Surface

"Even if its not necessarily a teacher or someone who's older than you.. there is still someone who will listen to your voice, you just have to be determined enough to continue to seek out and figure out who that person is."

- Rodnesha Wade, STEM School Team Member/Student

Overview

Creators: Jason Hubbard, Boston Drake, Adeem Mustafa, and Rodnesha Wade.

Goal: Facilitate deeper connections and empathy among peers through structured conversations.

Audience: Teens aged 14–17; small groups of 2–6 participants.

Final Outcome: Stronger group relationships, increased trust, empathy, and collaboration.

Project Details

Description

This project is a small-group activity aimed at **fostering deeper connections between participants through structured conversations**. It provides a platform for teens to move beyond surface-level interactions and engage in meaningful discussions. By using student-generated questions, participants can share personal insights, reflect on their experiences, and **connect with one another on a more authentic level**.

This activity is ideal for **promoting empathy, trust, and collaboration among students**. Whether in classrooms, advisory groups, or youth leadership programs, it helps create a supportive environment where students can see one another—and themselves—in new ways.

Ideal Participants

- Best suited for teens aged 14–17
- Designed for small group settings (2–6 participants)
- Works well in classrooms, advisory groups, clubs, or youth leadership programs

Timeline

- Best used during the first quarter of the school year for relationship-building
- Flexible timing: 20–40 minutes, depending on group size and depth of responses
- Can be incorporated into class, morning meetings, advisory sessions, or informal group settings

Materials

- Paper and pencils or sticky notes
- Printed or projected list of conversation-starter questions (can be student-created)

PROCESS

Preparation:

- Students form small groups (3-5 participants is ideal)

Action:

- Each group uses the provided list of questions to start sharing. Students take turns answering, listening, and responding to one another
- Groups or the entire class may choose to create something visual or artistic to represent what they learned during the conversation (see Creative Evolutions section)

Reflection:

- Participants reflect, either silently or as a group, about what stood out, surprised them, or helped them feel more connected to their peers

Considerations

To create a supportive and emotionally safe space, it's important to provide a variety of questions—ranging from lighthearted to reflective—and offer students the option to choose the questions they feel comfortable answering. It's also crucial to establish community agreements such as "speak to your comfort level" and "listen without judgment." In case difficult or emotional topics arise unexpectedly, the facilitator should be available to offer support. Offering alternative activities such as drawing, journaling, or 1-on-1 sharing can also help engage those who may prefer less verbal interaction.

Adaptations

- For larger groups, the activity can be split into smaller teams that each focus on different sets of questions.
- For younger or less experienced groups, facilitators can offer simpler questions or prompts.
- The activity can also be adapted for virtual settings using online collaboration tools where students can share their responses asynchronously or in live sessions.

"My dream voice says fight for your dream and never give up. My inner voice can change my outer world because the power comes from my soul."

- Irma, College Student

Creative Evolutions

- **Repurposed Book Journals:** Each group adds visual or written pages to a shared "empathy book" that captures the stories and insights they learned about each other.
- **Group Pendants or Tokens:** Create small objects, such as pendants or tokens, that symbolize the connection or shared experiences of the group.
- **Connection Collage or Visual Wall:** Display student-created artwork, quotes, or reflections that highlight their discoveries and shared moments, fostering a visual representation of the group's journey.

Outcomes

The outcome of this activity is the creation of deeper connections between students, **fostering a sense of belonging and empathy**. Students walk away with a greater understanding of their peers, having learned something meaningful about each other in a supportive environment. This leads to increased trust and collaboration within the group. As the group's culture evolves, **participants feel seen and valued, making the classroom or community more open, kind, and inclusive**. Over time, the activity strengthens peer relationships, boosts group cohesion, and cultivates a sense of shared identity that enhances the overall environment for learning and interaction.

Please see support tools to implement this project in the **Resource Kit** on pages 83-84.

EmpowArt Student Comics

Empowering Youth Through Visual Storytelling

"A successful student is one who can achieve his/her dream, is a good person, helpful, open to listening, smart, and cheerful."

- **Alison Yaretzy**, Elementary Student

Overview

Creator: Alison Yaretzy

Goal: Support students in expressing identity, encouraging reading, and building confidence in using your voice through comic-making and storytelling.

Audience: Middle and high school students (adaptable for all age groups)

Final Outcome: A personal comic shared at a public showcase, demonstrating student creativity, voice, and cultural identity.

Project Details

Description

This project invites students to create their own comics **as a way to explore identity, encourage literacy, and build creative confidence**. Meeting monthly with an artist ally, art teacher, or student mentor, students can learn storytelling and illustration techniques to express their unique perspectives.

This project supports students in developing their voices **through accessible, visual storytelling and culminates** in a summer showcase or school-wide presentation.

Ideal Participants

- Middle and high school students
- Adaptable for all ages with proper support

Timeline

- Monthly club-style sessions throughout the school year, during the school day
- Each session focuses on one comic page or storytelling concept
- Culminates in a final presentation before summer break or during a summer showcase

Materials

- Paper and art supplies
- How-to videos on comic-making
- Comic templates, guides, and panel page handouts

PROCESS

Preparation:

- Identify guest artists, art teacher at the school, community volunteer, or student mentors interested in art to support the process
- Host a kickoff session introducing the project and its goals at first club or class meeting.
- Distribute comic templates and basic art materials
- Introduce foundational storytelling elements found in comics (character, setting, panels, dialogue) and explore plot structure, pacing, and visual storytelling techniques - utilize mentors or online videos to help with this process
- Set monthly goals for comic progress

Action:

- Hold club or class sessions where students can work at a comfortable pace
- Encourage brainstorming, sketching, and peer collaboration to fill panel templates with content
- Incorporate identity-based written activities, such as asking students to share responses to personal reflection questions, to support the creation of plots and dialogues for comic panels
- Student can receive feedback on their comic's structure and process through group sharing or one-on-one mentor check-ins

Creation:

- Combine individual elements such as written plot, storyboards, dialogue, and sketches to finalize their comics using drawing, collage, or digital formats
- Encourage experimentation with style and layout
- Compile finished pages into individual comics
- Students can work together and with their mentor to edit, format, and present comics

Reflection:

- Host a final showcase or community presentation of student work
- Facilitate group reflection conversations or written responses about the process
- Encourage students to share personal growth and what they learned
- Invite families and school community members to celebrate the final product

Considerations

Younger students may benefit from parental support in the storytelling and art process. Some students may not feel confident in their drawing abilities; they can be encouraged to use alternative art forms such as collage, photos, or digital clip art. Mentorship from peers, older students, or artist volunteers can strengthen both creative and technical development. Flexibility and encouragement are key to helping students explore expression in a way that feels authentic and accessible.

Adaptations

- Partner with local artists, art teachers, or illustrators for mentorship.
- Incorporate digital storytelling platforms for students who prefer working online.
- Translate comics into multiple languages to reflect the diversity of the student community.
- Use pre-made panel templates for students who need structure to get started.
- If a club or monthly meeting are not possible, consider using comic panel templates as a short in-class art reflection exercise or a week-long classroom assignment.
- Encourage students to come up with topics or reflections that can be done within a single class period or week-long process.

Creative Evolutions

- **Animation:** Comic panels can be digitized or turned into flip books or short animations using simple video tools.
- **Anthology or Zine:** Student comics can be compiled into a printed or digital collection and distributed during a showcase or as part of a literacy initiative.

Outcomes

This project **supports identity development, literacy growth, and creative expression**. Students build confidence by sharing personal narratives through comics while developing skills in storytelling, art, and reflection. **For introverted students or those who prefer quiet, individual work**, the project offers a space for meaningful engagement.

The final showcase is **a celebration of student voice and creativity**, highlighting the richness of diverse stories and perspectives within the school community.

Please see support tools to implement this project in the **Resource Kit** on pages 85-86.



It's My Classroom Too

"Beyond comfort, in my opinion it is absolutely essential that students feel like they are both stakeholders and learners in their education. When students are not seen as a part of their own educational process their words are taken to mean much less. Class environments in which students can help derive activities and teachers have flexibility in teaching styles to cater to a diverse array of students are best. Along with this, students in classroom environments where they feel like stakeholders are often tied to higher levels of meaningful engagement because they feel as if their education is not one size fits all and therefore credible."

- Yash Sharma, Core Team Member/College Student

What environments promote authentic student voice engagement?

Each classroom, school, and local context is different from one another. Therefore, when amplifying student voice, there is no one single perfect strategy to creating an environment in which student voice thrives that universally applies to every classroom. One classroom may have just begun their journey of creating an encouraging space for student input. An educator in this classroom may decide to start smaller and incorporate a short feedback survey asking students their opinion on how to decorate a classroom or what books they want to read. On the other hand, a different classroom may have already undergone a feedback session and feel ready to incorporate student-identified care strategies - for example allocating time for quiet reflection, snack breaks, or stretching - into the classroom.

While the vastness of strategies to accomplish a student-voice centered environment can feel overwhelming, it provides an excellent opportunity to engage in authentic community building alongside students within the specific school or community context in order to create an environment that promotes safety, belonging, and a culture of care. No matter how small, opportunities for students and teachers to collaborate on building a respectful, caring, and understanding classroom environment can jumpstart a trust-building process that encourages students to generally feel safe in bringing up their ideas, concerns, passions, and perspectives.

Creating an environment - classroom - that works for everyone, connects to consensus building practices which are derived from models of Indigenous knowledge, participatory community engagement or action research, community-ownership and power-sharing, and disruption of traditional hierarchical models of leadership (3, 10, 11, 19, 30). The core components of these models generally include:

1. Creating a team of community members (partners)
2. Establishing agreements for shared decision-making, community care and respect, and honoring the humanity of participants
3. Engaging in a process of listening, asking questions, and identifying problems that a community wants to address
4. Collaborating on solutions
5. Holding the group accountable to clear, transparent communication and expectations in order to establish trust

This type of collaboration and work focuses less on quantitative, extractive, or performative solution building but, rather, deep relationship building, intentional time, and adaptability. Found in the "Sources" section of this workbook for further investigation, some specific models of community building processes that align with NAPE values include:

- a. Roger Hart's Ladder of Participation as adapted from "Children's Participation: From Tokenism To Citizenship" (11, 20)
- b. Organizer, facilitator, and author adrienne maree brown's Emergent Strategy framework for social change and community building (3)
- c. The University of Kansas' Community Toolbox (30)
- d. Movement Strategy's "Spectrum of Community Engagement to Ownership" (10)

Using these models, the facilitation team worked with the core student and educator team to understand what classroom conditions felt important to amplify in service of creating an environment that could best honor student voice. **The core team emphasized how the physical, social, and cultural “space” of a learning environment all deeply impacted a student’s ability to feel safe in exercising their power. They all agreed that one critical component, no matter what, was simply asking students for their feedback because oftentimes students are not directly asked for feedback.**

Their suggestions for creating a physical environment that felt encouraging for students were a mixture of instructional resources and spacial accommodations. Some ideas included:

- a. **Books** - of all types that were representative, reflective of the historical backgrounds and contexts of students, and engaging on all different types of topics
- b. **Art and Visuals and Maps** - that are encouraging, inspiring, and reflective of the personal histories of students
- c. **Basic supplies** - like writing tools, clocks, technology that accesses the internet (if available), a projector
- d. **Organization** - having a clearly outlined agenda for the week so students can be aware of the expectations, clean and organized environment with places to put things away
- e. **Comfort/Spacial Makeup** - having a calm/comfortable area in the class for de-stressing or for students receiving special education services, area to move around between desks to support students using wheelchairs, warm or low lighting, comfortable temperature, soft items like a comfortable chair, space for students to listen to music

Some suggestions for the social environment of the space included:

- a. **Reflection periods** - students and teachers talking with each other to bond and build trust, invitations for more peer to peer interactions, allowing transitional moments between activities so students can reset
- b. **Collaboration** - reframing moments when addressing classroom issues as an invitation for students to identify ways that they can take ownership of behaviors within their control, students working together as a collective to complete assignments and build classroom solutions to classroom issues
- c. **Relationship** - intentional conversations between students and teachers on topics, creating a relationship of respect and belonging between students and teachers, students feeling welcomed and that their teachers are happy to see them, having an adult in the classroom that celebrates the unique strengths of each student

Some suggestions for encouraging a positive classroom culture included:

- a. **Agreements** - collaborating on the creation of classroom community agreements for behaviors between teachers and students/students and each other
- b. **Vibes** - finding ways to encourage curiosity for learning, students inspiring themselves to learn, a sense of belonging, creative ways for extroverted and introverted students or Bilingual Emergent Learners to express themselves, encouraging respect for who a student is and for the teacher (whole person/humanizing)
- c. **Cultural Responsiveness** - honoring many cultures, working with students to identify how to make the environment feel representative and inclusive, having training for adults on bias interruption, opportunities to bring in stories
- d. **Accountability** - exploring models of accountability that center collaboration and restoration, reducing harm, and fostering community instead of harsh punitive models that focus on exclusion and demotivate students

Note: see "Sources" 4 and 16 which offers some introductory information on Restorative practice models - incorporating these models effectively takes time, clear intentionality, staff training, and shared understanding.

Finally when asked for what their big dreams were for a classroom environment, the student and educator team included:

- a. Other adult allies available for classroom visits - having a teaching assistant, coach, therapist, and so forth who could support a busy teacher, help with individualized support for students, and provide wrap-around support for students.
- b. Classroom set ups that included easy access to a sink or water so students could get a drink or easily clean their environment.



Many of the suggestions the core team compiled for creating a school or classroom environment that was conducive for belonging, safety, and encouraging student voice were in alignment with what other students across the nation identified. The national organization, Student Voice, organized students across the United States to vote on a “Student Bill of Rights” as a framework for what should be “guaranteed to every student, in every school” (26). These rights included: access to an affordable and fair education; schools treating students as citizens with full rights; the ability to shape the decisions and institutions that affect their future; an education tailored to individual students needs that prepares them for life beyond K-12; the ability to learn in an environment that doesn’t promote unfair treatment against them and reflects the variety of personal histories in the student body; the opportunity to understand existing rules in their school and address unfair treatment; access to expressing themselves within an educational context; access modern technology to use for their education; and access to feeling mentally, physically, and emotionally safe in school (26).

While it is important to co-create a safe and welcoming environment alongside students, creating institutional and structural changes in alignment with community building takes time. In addition, especially in traditionally underfunded areas, many educators have limited budgets related to physical space, resources, or classroom supplies and may not easily be able to accommodate every student suggestion. Further, many decisions in the construction of a classroom, school space, or culture are outside the realm of control for many educators. Incorporating change that is rooted in student voice, therefore, can be met with varying levels of response. Using curriculum as an example, some school contexts may be less receptive to centering student voice through the incorporation of more representative teaching materials. A teacher and student existing in this type of environment may need to collaborate more on finding creative solutions to feel represented - perhaps by encouraging students to create art they feel reflects their personal histories to use as classroom decoration, having students bring in examples of oral histories, and holding space for students to do more group work where they share media, literature, or stories from their own experiences as a way to learn about other perspectives.

Navigating receptivity challenges to incorporating student voice in a classroom can be a difficult balancing act. Trusting educators to determine what is feasible within their own classrooms and local contexts is of utmost importance, especially when navigating building communities and addressing challenges that may feel outside of one’s direct control. Professor and author Angela Davis offers a framework for community care when facing challenges: “it is in collectivities that we find reservoirs of hope and optimism” (6). While there are larger structural challenges at play within local classrooms, focusing on establishing clear, trusting, intentional, and accountable communities between students and educators can open many doors to responding to local contexts in creative and affirming ways at the classroom level.

Collaborative Solutions

Personal Reflections, Shared Understanding

"Any time that kids/youth can have a voice, then they are going to feel that they're important--that they matter--and then they'll be more invested in whatever the project may be."

- **Giselle Palmer**, Core Team Member/Educator

Overview

Creator: Giselle Palmer

Goal: Empower students to collaborate on solving classroom challenges and take ownership of their learning environment.

Audience: Middle and high school students (adaptable for all age groups)

Final Outcome: A solution-focused classroom culture with stronger teacher-student relationships and a repeatable model for addressing challenges

Project Details

Description

This project engages students directly in the problem-solving process, **giving them a stake in creating solutions for classroom issues**. By involving students in identifying, discussing, and solving challenges, they gain a sense of ownership over their learning environment and behavioral expectations.

The project can address a range of concerns such as chronic tardiness, classroom participation, or group conflicts, and can be done in small groups (for conflict resolution) or with the entire class to address shared challenges. Rather than imposing solutions from the top down, **this model fosters collaboration and student agency, promoting a proactive and solution-focused classroom culture**.

Ideal Participants

- Adaptable for all age groups, from younger children to teenagers
- Particularly useful for middle and high school students, who may benefit from a more collaborative approach to solving problems
- Can be implemented with both small groups and entire classes

Timeline

- Flexible and adaptable to various classroom structures
- Morning meetings or circle time (for elementary students)
- Homeroom, seminar discussions, or Socratic seminars
- In-the-moment interventions when needed, allowing time to address recurring issues

Materials

- No required materials; the activity is adaptable to the situation
- Optional: Reflection prompts, guides, or visuals (posters, boards, or digital tools) to support discussion and track solutions

PROCESS

Preparation:

- Define the Problem: The group leader (teacher, student, or administrator) presents the issue needing resolution and explains why it's detrimental to the community.
- Define Consensus: Decide as a class how a decision will be made, including what voting will look like, how ties will be broken, and if/when the teacher may need to exercise "veto" power.
- Share Current Feelings: Group members (including the leader) share their thoughts and feelings about the issue to build buy-in and help everyone understand the need for change.

Action:

- Brainstorm Solutions: Group members work together to generate solutions to the problem.
- This can be done using methods like popcorn sharing, round-robin sharing, or individual reflection before sharing aloud. For larger groups, smaller teams can brainstorm ideas.
- Ensure All Voices are Heard: Based on student preference, students can also use anonymous sharing techniques like writing ideas down and using the "snowball method."
- Refine Options: The group discusses the feasibility of proposed solutions and elevates the most effective ones - encourage students to evaluate ideas based on likelihood of success, not on personal popularity (anonymous idea share outs can help). The group leader or teacher can guide this discussion but should ensure all ideas are considered and heard.

Creation:

- Discuss Implementation: Once solutions are chosen, students determine how they will be implemented. Teachers can offer options and allow students to choose the best path.
- Plan for Contingency: A backup plan is created in case the initial solution fails. Agreement and cooperation from the majority of the group are necessary for success.

Considerations

Time constraints can be a significant challenge, as teachers stay on track with curriculum. To address this, the process should remain concise and use flexible time slots such as morning meetings or the last ten minutes of class. For classrooms where this activity feels like a major shift in classroom management, educators and students may want to start out with smaller, low-stakes focuses such as deciding what text to read next or building a playlist for background music during individual work time. The trust built over time with smaller experiments can demonstrate to both educators and students that student-guided decision making does not mean educators give up their role as an adult responsible for ensuring a safe, appropriate, and respectful environment. Rather, students are viewed as leaders capable of co-creating what that environment can become.

Adaptations

- This project can be tailored to different age groups, from younger children to older teens, by adjusting the complexity of the issues discussed and the level of guidance provided.
- For younger students, simpler problems and guided solutions might be more effective, whereas high school students may benefit from more open-ended discussions and greater autonomy in problem-solving.
- Teachers should also be flexible with implementation methods, tailoring activities to the unique dynamics of their classrooms.

Creative Evolutions

- **Classroom Quilt:** Each student contributes a unique "patch" that represents their role in the classroom community. This quilt serves as a visual representation of collective problem-solving.
- **Puzzle Poster:** Students create individual puzzle pieces symbolizing their identity and interests. These are then joined to show how every student contributes to the larger classroom dynamic.
- **Visual Commitment Board:** Students collaborate to illustrate or write out agreed-upon classroom norms and solutions. This can be displayed prominently in the classroom as a visual reminder of the group's collective commitments.

Outcomes

The ultimate outcome of this project is a classroom environment where students take ownership of their shared space, behavior, and norms. By engaging students in the problem-solving process, the project fosters a solution-focused mindset and reduces reliance on punitive measures. Over time, the classroom culture becomes more respectful, collaborative, and proactive. **Teacher-student relationships are strengthened through mutual trust and collaboration, creating a positive feedback loop where students feel empowered to address future issues more independently.**

This project creates a repeatable model for classroom management, shifting from reactive discipline to proactive, student-driven problem resolution.

Student Spotlight

Where Students Teach, Share, and Inspire

"If students could teach other students about things that they liked or were interested in, it could help them be able to express themselves better."

- **Jaiden Asberry**, STEM School Team Member/Student

Overview

Creators: Jaiden Asberry, Eleanor, and Kash.

Goal: Empower students to lead and teach lessons they are passionate about, strengthening leadership and ownership of learning.

Audience: Middle & High School Students, Teachers, Staff.

Final Outcome: Monthly student-led classes with high peer engagement and school-wide celebrations of student contributions.

Project Details

Description

Student Spotlight is a recurring event—ideally one Friday per month—where **students take on the role of teachers**, leading interest-based sessions for their peers. These sessions are driven by student choice and participation, with topics selected through surveys or voting.

From anime drawing to coding basics to soccer drills, the day offers a platform for students to share what they love while others **get to explore new topics in a fun, peer-led setting**.

This project empowers students **to step into leadership, build communication skills, and shape the learning environment** with their voices and talents. It creates a collaborative, joyful, and student-owned culture of learning.

Ideal Participants

- Best suited for middle and high school students, though younger students can participate with strong teacher support
- Works well across grade levels or in mixed-age groups depending on schedule and supervision
- Students interested in teaching, presenting, or sharing a skill will thrive
- Adult supervision in each session is essential for support and safety

Timeline

- Suggested Frequency: Once a month, ideally on a Friday
- Session Length: Can range from a few hours to a full day, depending on the school schedule
- Ideal alignment: Club days, early release days, or specially scheduled flexible learning days
- Planning begins 2-3 weeks in advance to gather interest and prep student leaders

Materials

- Flyers or surveys (paper or digital) to gather student ideas and votes
- Sign-up forms or spreadsheets for scheduling
- Classroom supplies as needed for student-led activities
- Contingency materials like games, drawing prompts, or mindfulness activities for backup use
- Optional: Certificates, posters, or photo display materials for recognition

PROCESS

Preparation:

- Gather student input on topics they want to learn about through interest surveys or brainstorming sessions
- Invite students to apply or sign up to teach a topic
- Hold a prep session for student-teachers with templates or coaching to guide them in creating their lesson or activity
- Organize a master schedule and ensure each room/session has an adult present

Action:

- Host the day! Student-teachers lead their sessions, peers attend the ones they signed up for, and adult facilitators ensure things go smoothly
- Encourage documentation—photos, quotes, or reflections—to highlight the energy and impact

Creation:

- Capture the experience through visuals, writing, or displays
- Create posters, digital slideshows, or a zine to reflect on what was shared and learned
- Display certificates or student names to celebrate leadership

Reflection:

- Debrief with both student-teachers and participants. What worked well? What could be improved next time?
- Gather ideas and feedback for future Student Teacher Days

"A better learning experience for students at school is students and teachers working together."

- Irma, College Student

Considerations

Not all students may feel confident teaching—some might be unsure or nervous. Offering planning tools, co-teaching options, and staff support can ease the process. It's helpful to have backup plans if a student forgets materials or doesn't attend. Framing the day as a celebration of student voice and leadership encourages participation and helps both students and staff see its value.

Adaptations

- For younger grades, students can co-teach with a buddy or plan sessions with a teacher's help.
- Families might assist students with planning or gathering materials at home.
- Student-led sessions could be incorporated into already existing structures like school assembly times or club blocks.
- If space or scheduling is tight, rotate sessions throughout the month in smaller groups or create a "show and tell" structure where students can sign up for a 15-minute block at the end of the week to present on a topic in their class.
- Pair older students with younger ones for mentoring and collaborative art-making.

Creative Evolutions

- **Photo Collage Wall:** Display photos of student-teachers and their sessions each month.
- **Zine/Digital Magazine:** Capture and publish session titles, quotes, and visual highlights.
- **Certificate Display:** "Student-Teacher of the Month" recognitions, with student photos and info.
- **Posters:** Encourage students to create artwork about their lesson to decorate the classroom.

Outcomes

This project allows students to shine in ways often **untapped in traditional academic settings**. It promotes leadership, boosts self-esteem, and encourages curiosity across the school. **Students see their peers as capable leaders, and teachers gain insight into students' interests and strengths.**

As the project continues over time, it fosters a school culture that **values student voice and ownership of learning**. It becomes more than just a fun day—it's a consistent opportunity for students to express themselves, connect with others, and contribute meaningfully to the community.

It's My Classroom Pizza

Co-Creating Learning Spaces That Feel Right

"I think student opinions, thoughts, voices, and perspectives should be considered as very important in any process related to education."

- Rondell Crier, Creative Consultant

Overview

Creator: Rondell Crier

Goal: Help students reflect on and express what they value in a classroom environment, using the metaphor of a pizza to spark imagination and dialogue.

Audience: Grades 3–5 Students, Teachers, Counselors.

Final Outcome: Collaborative "classroom pizzas" with visual toppings representing student needs and dreams, displayed or compiled into a class-wide wishlist.

Project Details

Description

This project uses the universally loved concept of pizza to open up a playful and powerful conversation about classroom culture and student voice. **By thinking of a classroom like a pizza**—complete with regular toppings, yucky toppings, and dreamy extras—**students are guided through an imaginative process** to reflect on what makes a classroom feel good to them.

This activity **supports students in identifying what they value**, what feels standard, what they don't like, and what they wish for in their learning space. As they connect pizza ingredients to classroom elements, students begin to define the kind of environment they want to co-create. At its core, this project reinforces the idea that classrooms aren't just for students—**they belong to students too**.

Ideal Participants

- Perfect for elementary students in grades 3–5.
- Adaptable for middle or high school students with more reflective prompts
- Great for individual classrooms, small groups, or larger student voice events
- Ideal for classroom teachers, counselors, or art educators focusing on student agency and culture-building

Timeline

- Recommended for implementation once students are familiar with classroom routines
- Can be completed over 2-3 class sessions depending on group size and depth of discussion
- Also a great fit for the beginning of a new semester or a classroom reset moment

Materials

- Paper and pencils
- Sticky notes (square for “regular” toppings, circle for “dreamy” toppings)
- Poster boards cut into large circles or pizza wedges
- Markers, crayons, or paints
- Optional: T-shirt templates, wooden pizza boards, rubber stamps, or sticker materials for expanded versions
-

PROCESS

Preparation:

- Introduce the concept using something fun and familiar—pizza! Prompt students to answer
- What are the main ingredients of a pizza? What are your go-to toppings? What are your yucky toppings? What’s your dream pizza topping?
- Then shift the conversation toward the classroom
- What are the main ingredients of a great classroom? What are “regular toppings” in most classrooms (e.g., desks, pencils, books)? What are things you’d take out (“yucky toppings”)? What dream toppings would you love in your ideal classroom?

Action:

- Students form small groups to discuss their answers
- Each group receives a cardboard pizza slice or circle
- Using sticky notes:
 - Square notes = standard/classroom “regular toppings”
 - Circle notes = dreamy additions or wishes
- Groups design their “classroom pizzas,” arranging toppings on the board in creative ways

Creation:

- Groups present their pizzas to the class
- As a class, identify recurring themes or top priorities
- Create a collective “classroom wishlist” to share with teachers or school leaders, sparking student-led advocacy and classroom co-creation

"Make your life what you want it to be. Don't stress about what you don't know in life, we all learn it in the end."

- Cheyenne, College Student

Considerations

Some students may feel hesitant to speak up or unsure how to dream big. Emphasize that all ideas are welcome—there are no wrong toppings! Support participation through group conversations and visual examples. Teachers and staff may need encouragement to shift mindset toward shared ownership of the classroom space.

Adaptations

- Use a different food metaphor like:
 - Smoothies – blending different ingredients into a balanced learning environment
 - Sandwiches – layers of essentials and extras
- Students can design T-shirts that say "I want ____ on my classroom pizza" and wear them.
- For older students, build off this metaphor into journaling, structured reflection, or school improvement proposals.

Creative Evolutions

- Painted pizza boards or wooden slices that symbolize classroom features
- Toppings Stamp Station – use custom stamps to decorate paper pizza slices
- Interactive Wall Display – allow sticky toppings to move around over time as class needs evolve

Outcomes

This project **helps students see their classroom as a space they help shape**—not just a place they show up. Through imagination and collaboration, students reflect on their learning environment and what makes it feel right.

Educators gain meaningful insight into what students value, opening new pathways for connection, co-creation, and student agency. **It's a fun, symbolic, and tangible way to spark deeper conversations** about classroom culture and what it means to belong.

Please see support tools to implement this project in the **Resource Kit** on pages 87-88.



Excel Because

"I think having a voice means believing your voice matters: believing the things you say and the things you feel are important to the greater community--and that those in authority are listening to you. That is something I've tried to instill in my students and make a part of my classroom--just because you're a child makes no difference; you still have a voice and your opinions matter. Your thoughts and feelings about the world and the way things should be are important. Having a voice, no matter your age, gives you a feeling of "What I say matters." That leads to autonomy and efficacy in the projects you work with or act upon. When you don't feel like you have a voice, you may feel like you want to give up or that you don't want to try to make change or participate. You could feel that it doesn't matter whether you speak up or participate because nobody's going to listen. But having a voice is important because then you do feel listened to, and you believe that your voice, opinions, thoughts, feelings, and ideas do matter and make a difference in the world."

- Giselle Palmer, Core Team Member/Educator

What does success look like?

Schools intersect in so many areas of a student's life - outside of its primary function of helping students learn, grow, and realize their full potential, schools often serve as a community hub for resources and a landscape for critical social and emotional development. Particularly in rural areas or areas of concentrated poverty, schools can meet critical needs from healthcare and affordable meals to career readiness, mentorship, and access to extracurricular opportunities. **It is no surprise, then, that when considering what makes a student, teacher, or school "successful" or effective, traditional measures solely focusing on academic or standardized testing achievements do not capture the true spirit of what makes a great school.** While it is true that a student, a teacher, and a school all have independent roles to play in contributing to personal and collective success, **research has shown that an essential component of the holistic success of everyone in a learning environment is a positive school culture and climate (15).** Some of the factors found to be important in contributing to a positive school climate include adults treating students with respect and showing care about what impacts them, inviting students to collaborate in decision making, administrator supporting and collaborating with teachers as decision making experts, creating intentional familial and community involvement opportunities, and establishing a commitment from leadership to support the co-creation a shared school vision with the learning community (15, 31). Furthermore, educators modeling excitement for learning, classrooms taking care of the physical environment, and creating norms that support the emotional, cultural, physical, and social safety of students and educators is essential for defining the "success" of a school (5, 26, 31).

In thinking about climate and culture, the core team collaborated in identifying some elements of what "success" and "excellence" looks like for students, teachers, families, and schools. These can be explore below in the following interactive section.



Elements of Success in Students

Review the list and choose two elements you believe are top priorities for students in your community. Consider whether local schools are setting goals that support student success.

Dedication, consistency, motivation, curiosity, and engagement in the learning process.

Resilience and being gentle with themselves if they face failure.

Awareness for what is happening in communities outside of the classroom and finding opportunities to learn outside of school.

Developing critical thinking skills and foundational academic skills in subjects like math and reading.

Manages time well and balances learning between practical skills and the things they love.

Application of their learning and understanding the deeper intentions behind concepts they learn in school.

What else does a successful student embody?

Elements of Success in Teachers

Which of these teacher qualities most impact learning in your community and why? Reflect on whether teachers are receiving the professional development and support needed to sustain this success.

Empathy - making sure students feel seen, heard, a sense of belonging, and safe

Having an authentic connection so students feel supported and taking a genuine interest in who they are.

An excitement for learning, inspires students to love what they are learning, joyful, warm, and helpful

Patient, resourceful, provides structure, and elicits feedback from students while being willing to adjust.

Showing respect for students as people, not making assumptions that students will not understand lessons, not engaging in bias.

Motivates students, guides them to reach their full potential, trust and belief that student will succeed, never giving up on a student..

What additional support might make a difference?

Elements of Success in Schools

The core team identified the following list of what a successful school system should embody.

- Create synergy and a sense of belonging for educators and staff so they can work well as a team; build a team that is creative, respectful, flexible, and supportive.
- Support teacher retention by listening to teachers and their needs to prevent turnover.
- Holistically look at a school so all students—regardless of age, race, or socioeconomic background—are given the resources they need to succeed.
- Create an environment that prioritizes safety, cultural belonging, welcomeness, mental health support, and encouragement of people being their whole selves.
- Provide holistic support by reducing gaps in opportunities—work with communities outside of school, offer counseling, and address daily issues like hunger or health.
- Create a network for students to gather, socialize, and grow through soft skills, play, restorative practices, and connection to the outside world; engage families with opportunities like parent groups, classes, or multilingual resources.

What are ways to create a better school environment?

Select and discuss two elements from the list above. Do you think your school system is currently embodying these elements? If yes, how? If not, what could shift leadership toward greater success in these areas?

Identify and discuss an area in your school that could benefit from more attention to increase its chances of success.

What are three actionable steps to create success?

Elements of Success in Families

List the ways in which you are connected to education. Are you a student, teacher, administrator, family member of a student, volunteer, school board member, etc.?

In most cases, we all are—or have been—connected to schools in some way. This means we each carry lived experience, and our opinions on school-related topics can be valuable in educational planning. Name a few things that you can personally do to help the schools in your life become better for students:

Core Team Ideals of Successful Family Champions

- Engages in conversation with their child, asking them about their day, what they learned, how they feel about school, and what they think about different topics.
- Does the best they can and tries to support learning outside of school, at home, or in concepts outside of school.
- Shows respect for students as people, does not make assumptions that students will not understand lessons, and does not in bias.
- Supports early education.

Which of the above ideals resonates most with you, and why? What are some ways to take an interest in student success? How do you stay informed about schools and show up for students?

List names of family members or friends in your life who personally support or supported your educational journey inside or outside the classroom.

Reflecting on the interactive section, it may bring up feelings of excitement or perhaps overwhelm. For example, there are many barriers such as disconnection, spoken language, income and work schedules, health, time restrictions, school policies, funding restrictions, testing requirements, and so forth that may impact a student's ability to be fully present, a family's ability to participate in their child's school, a teacher's ability to deviate from state-approved lesson plans, or a school's ability to provide enough resources for the needs of every child. Educators in particular are often expected to exceed their own capacity and budget in order to meet the immense expectations of their curriculum while trying to stay focused on supporting the needs of their students.

However, one thing is abundantly clear from the research and provided student feedback which can act as a guiding framework for the true "success" of a school - centering the humanity of every person involved in the school community must be the foundation. What mattered the most to the students working on this process was not high cost equipment or standardized test proficiency - it was care. Care for self and care for others. In a landscape of ever changing budgets, requirements, policies, and superhuman expectations on educators with little support or compensation, care is an achievable, possible, and hopeful standard for supporting successful students, teachers, families, and schools.

"During my second year in this country, I decided to enroll in a public speaking class, hoping to improve my English-speaking skills. It was very challenging, as I was surrounded by native English speakers, and at that time, even understanding the basic structure of English sentences felt like a struggle. I remember having to memorize everything word by word.

I recall the experience of preparing and delivering a 10-minute speech, which felt like a monumental task. When I finished, I was deeply touched when my teacher approached me and said, "You are one of my favorite students." Looking back, I believe his comment was particularly meaningful because he recognized the immense effort it took for me to stand there and communicate, given the challenges I faced. I had poured my energy into preparing that speech and doing my very best. His words were incredibly encouraging and have stayed with me."

- Edith Ramirez, Core Team Member/College Student

Portray Your Voice

Centering Stories That Shape Us

"I want to express how encouraged and motivated I feel knowing that a newsletter serves as a valuable bridge connecting students and teachers. It's wonderful to see this platform fostering a stronger sense of community and engagement within a school."

- Edith Ramirez, Core Team Member/College Student

Overview

Creator: Edith Ramirez

Goal: Amplify the experiences, personal customs, and ideas of students, particularly immigrant and EB/ELL students through storytelling, art, and resource sharing newsletter.

Audience: Middle & High School Students (especially immigrant or multilingual learners), Teachers, School Leaders.

Final Outcome: A student-created newsletter (digital or print) featuring personal narratives, creative works, and helpful resources for the school community.

Project Details

Description

This project centers on **amplifying student voices**—particularly those **of immigrant and Emergent Bilingual (EB)/English Language Learner (ELL) students**—through artistic expression, storytelling, and creative media. The heart of the project is a student-created newsletter that blends personal stories, reflections on identity, and practical resources for navigating school life.

Students explore their own experiences and personal customs **through multiple creative formats** including collage, photography, comics, journalism, and digital design.

This project is both a voice-sharing platform and a resource hub **that celebrates different communities and builds school community**, with students taking the lead in shaping the narrative.

Ideal Participants

- Designed for students ages 8–18 (late elementary, middle, and high school)
- Adaptable for college-level students with slight modifications
- Particularly impactful for immigrant students, EB/ELL students, and students from areas of historic underfunding
- Can be done as a small-group effort or large school-wide collaboration

Timeline

- Best as a once-per-semester or annual project, depending on depth and scale
- Ideal release of the newsletter mid-year or just before a school break or midterm
- Publication can coincide with a community event or student voice week, with school leaders and families receiving copies

Materials

- Paper, writing tools, and art supplies for various mediums
- Computers for digital layout and design
- Art supplies for collage, drawing, or comics
- Recording tools (optional, for audio or video interviews and transcription)
- Access to publishing software or printers for newsletters

Note: The project can be fully analog, digital, or a hybrid.

PROCESS

Preparation:

- Introduce the purpose of the project and show examples of visual storytelling like zines, other newsletters, story boards, etc.
- Form student teams or allow individual contributions
- Brainstorm topics: identity, belonging, challenges, hopes, advice, and community customs

Action:

- Guide students through writing prompts or art exercises
- Facilitate interviews among students or with school staff to include diverse voices
- Support EB/ELL students in drafting responses—peer or teacher support encouraged

Creation:

- Students create visual or written pieces to reflect their lived experiences
- Assemble selected works into a newsletter layout (print, digital, or both)
- Include helpful school and community resources gathered by students

Reflection:

- Host a student-led session where participants share what they created or learned
- Encourage reflection on the power of storytelling and visibility
- Provide opportunities to offer feedback or ideas for future issues

"I know that some people might be shy, I'm shy too, and even though you might be shy, you should still try to speak your mind as much as you can. Feel bold and proud that you did that because that could be a big accomplishment for somebody."

- A'mya Underwood, STEM School Team Member/Student

Considerations

Some students may feel hesitant to share personal stories or unsure of what to contribute. Offer options for anonymous submissions and emphasize personal choice. Provide clear guidance and examples to help students find their voice. Celebrate each student's contribution, no matter the format or length.

Adaptations

- Create a visual storytelling zine instead of a full newsletter.
- If time is limited, create smaller groups within a single class where students can contribute small art pieces or written reflections in a mini-newsletter assignment
- Develop a podcast or video series with translated subtitles.
- Host a gallery walk in the school hallway showcasing printed contributions to the newsletter.
- Pair older students with younger ones for mentoring and collaborative art-making.

Creative Evolutions

- Comics Project - Students create comics that reflect their personal stories and identity.
- Photo Essay Wall - Display photo collages of student life with captions about their experiences.
- Newsletter Launch Event - A school-wide event with student readings, music, and artwork on display.
- Workshops - Invite artists or community storytellers to lead creative sessions on identity and expression.

Outcomes

This project results in **a published, student-led newsletter** that blends art, story, and support resources—raising awareness while building empathy. Students feel seen, empowered, and proud of their voices and identities.

The newsletter serves as a meaningful and lasting product, **encouraging more open dialogue around student needs and school community**. It can grow into a recurring, evolving platform for student voice, helping to shift school culture toward representation of all voices and student leadership.

Please see support tools to implement this project in the **Resource Kit** on pages 89-90 .

Carry Your Voice

Centering Stories That Shape Us

“Students can wear things and know that their voice can be heard both physically and symbolically.”

- Adeem Mustafa, STEM School Team Member/Student

Overview

Creators: Jason Hubbard, Boston Drake, Adeem Mustafa, and Rodnesha Wade.

Goal: Create wearable symbols of student voice designed by students, for students, to foster school-wide expression and visibility.

Audience: Middle and High School Students, Educators, School Staff.

Final Outcome: A collection of student-designed buttons worn and shared across the school to promote student voice and identity.

Project Details

Description

This project centers on a symbolic and wearable design: **a button that represents the power of student voice**. The button serves as a reminder that everyone’s voice matters and should be heard—always. Inspired by an image along with a powerful message to amplify voices, this project turns the concept of a simple button **into something tangible, personal, and shareable across the school**.

This project aims to support **students who may often feel unheard or disconnected from decision-making**. Many symbolic school culture pieces are adult-created; this one puts design and messaging in students’ hands. Students need visible reminders and encouragement to speak up and engage.

Ideal Participants

- Designed by students, for students
- Can be created in small groups or as a whole-class design and production effort
- Ideal for middle and high school students, though younger students can participate with support

Timeline

- This project can be completed in a few class periods or over several days depending on the size of the group
- Best done at the start of the year or during a student voice campaign/spirit week
- Could be tied to larger school or community events

Materials

- Button parts (fronts, backs, and pins)
- Paper for printed or hand-drawn designs
- Button press machine
- Design software (optional: Tinkercad or other digital design tools for icons and layout)

PROCESS

Preparation:

- Students organize and build small groups

Action:

- In small groups, brainstorm and develop a short-statement or sentence related to student empowerment that guides the group (for example a statement that one group of students came up with was: "Everyone Has a Voice")
- Brainstorm a way to visually represent the statement by creating a symbol or identifying an image

Creation:

- Combine the chosen symbol/image with the message to create a design for a button sample
- Experiment with different materials, layouts, and button sizes to create something that feels meaningful
- Once making a button design sample, check in with other students and groups to get feedback on design, message, and layout
- Consider feedback and finalize a design
- Make as many buttons as needed to spread the message in your class, school, or beyond!

Considerations

Initial designs may feel too simple or lack impact, and time and resources (such as button presses and materials) may be limited. Additionally, students might not immediately connect with the symbolic intention behind the project. To address these challenges, allow for creative design freedom so students can customize their buttons within the theme. Partnering with an art or tech class can provide access to tools or support that may be otherwise unavailable. Including a reflective piece, such as asking students, “What does voice mean to you?” and encouraging them to share their thoughts when they wear or receive the button, can help strengthen the connection to the project’s meaning.

Adaptations

- If you do not have a button maker, consider using cardboard, safety pins, glue, or other readily available materials to DIY your own button shape.
- Instead of drawing, you can collage using found objects or objects from nature.
- Teachers and Administrators can wear or support distribution of buttons as a symbol of allyship. Buttons can be shared with families at student-led events or given as part of showcases, open houses, or recognition ceremonies.

Creative Evolutions

- **Button Gallery Wall:** Showcase designs with artist statements.
- **Student Voice Installation:** Display the buttons in a public space, connected together on string or ribbon to form a garland.
- **Zine or digital display:** Capture the process, from sketches to final button press, with quotes from student designers. This can be shared with families and the wider school community.

Outcomes

This project offers students a chance **to feel proud of their contributions**, wearing their buttons as symbols of self-expression and empowerment. These **buttons can become conversation starters, sparking dialogue about student voice** throughout the school. As more students see the buttons and become curious, the project can spread organically, creating a ripple effect of engagement.

The result is **a small but powerful token of belonging, identity, and shared school culture**. Beyond the visual impact, the process gives students an opportunity to design, reflect, and express what voice means to them—encouraging a broader, school-wide conversation around student agency and participation.



Spark of an Evolution

"Student voice is important because the job of an educational program is to enhance the probability of student success. In order for administration to properly assess the quality of their efforts, there must be a communication between them and the students they serve. If we ensure that students are willing to speak up and are heard, they will be better students and will be conditioned to stay civically active after graduation. It is imperative that students take an active role in the facilitation of their education because they are the ones that have to live with the outcomes of their scholarly pursuits. Creating a student body that is invested in their education will lead to citizens that are actively invested in their communities."

- Felix Wilson, Core Team Member/Education Expert

What are the benefits of student voice?

Traditionally, educational spaces have structured leadership in K-12 schools as an “adult-only space” (13) with adults defined as administrative decision-makers. However, providing students opportunities to participate in decisions that directly impact their lives and the lives of their peers creates a model of distributed leadership that can lead to “powerful student and schoolwide outcomes” (13). **Disrupting traditional hierarchical models of how power is “shared and protected in schools” by including authentic student engagement has proven to not only strengthen belonging goals and effectively combat the root causes of educational disparities school-wide, but also supports the social and emotional development of students, promotes positive school-wide policy changes, supports the mental health of students, and increases academic achievement (13, 19, 29, 32). Research has shown that when students feel they have a voice in decision making at their school, they are 7x more motivated academically (19). Surveys collected from students studying the impacts of student voice on academic achievement found that students enrolled in schools that incorporated student voice had higher attendance rates and GPAs than schools that did not (2). Further, motivated students receiving support in embodying their agency and voice had lasting impacts on their ability to create changes in their future and in their communities (23).**

Students feeling heard and given a choice can increase a student’s sense of value, belonging, and control over their circumstances, which can be particularly beneficial for students who may be experiencing adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) (10). **Student experiences and ideas that are meaningfully integrated into learning environments have shown to improve academic skills, curiosity, empathy and relationship building skills, self-acceptance, understanding in one’s own and other cultures, and greater excitement for the future (9). In addition, students often identify opportunities to support more of the student body when groups of students may feel left behind by one-size-fits-all adult-identified solutions that do not center their personal histories or experiences (9).** Students across the country have successfully advocated for more counselors at their school, resource closets for unhoused students, accommodations for students receiving special education services, more mental health resources, and more context-aware curriculums, leading to a deeper sense of needs being met for every student (13,14). Further, teachers experiencing their own curriculum from a student’s point of view can support changes to instructional practices that can more effectively engage students of different learning styles and give students a higher sense of ownership over their learning (27, 11). The benefit of having students meaningfully participate in decisions that directly impact them shows critically positive outcomes at the micro (individual) level to macro (school/policy) level.

“I would say have more options for everyone who is wanting to go to school/college. Have different learning strategies. I would also make it a fun environment and flexible time for different things.”

- Cheyenne, College Student

Who Decides

A Student Pathway into Civic Life

"As an educator, I personally feel like we have an obligation to equip students with tools that they can use to impact their lives and society in a positive manner."

- **Felix Wilson**, Core Team Member/Education Expert

Overview

Creator: Felix Wilson

Goal: Empower students to explore and engage with governing structures, encouraging them to take an active role in decision-making processes and fostering a deeper understanding of civic responsibility.

Audience: High school seniors, college freshmen, or any students involved in Civics, Social Studies, or Government classes (adaptable for younger students with modifications).

Final Outcome: Students will complete a comprehensive project that includes research on governing bodies, professional outreach to representatives, and a firsthand field trip experience. The outcome is increased civic engagement, personal empowerment, and a lasting understanding of how students can impact governance.

Project Details

Description

This project empowers students by **exposing them to the governing structures** in their community, encouraging them to engage with community leaders, **and inspiring them to take an active role in decision-making processes.**

The three-phase approach helps students research, engage, and experience real-world governance.

Ideal Participants

- This project is ideal for high school seniors, particularly those enrolled in Civics, Social Studies, or Government classes, or first-year college students—especially those who may be voting for the first time
- While the project is aimed at older students, younger students can also engage with modifications and teacher support

Timeline

This is a 3-phase project that can take place over the course of a semester

- Research Phase: Can happen during class time or in the library
- Reach Out Phase: May take more time depending on annual elected official meeting sessions.
- Field Trip Phase: Occurs during a single day

Phase 1: Research

Goal:

Students will research a decision-making entity that directly affects them, such as a school board, town council, state legislature, or Congress. They will identify their representatives, understand their roles, and learn about their decision-making processes.

Estimated Time to Complete: 18 hours

- 6 hours – Instructor research & lesson preparation
- 2 hours – Classroom instruction
- 4 hours – Student research
- 6 hours – Document creation & question formation

PROCESS

Preparation:

- Secure necessary approvals from school administration and other stakeholders and create instructional materials

Action:

- Students will use resources such as government websites and trusted online sources to discover the governing structures and identify their representatives

Creation:

- Students compile their research into a format of their choice (research paper, PowerPoint presentation, poster, digital media, etc.)
- Students develop one thoughtful question to ask their representative based on their research

Considerations

While this project is designed for high school seniors or college freshmen, it can be adapted for younger students by integrating it into social studies lessons. Encouraging students to focus on the systems and structures of governance, rather than personal political views, is crucial. Setting clear classroom norms for respectful and non-partisan discussions will help students engage with the material effectively.

Additionally, students may experience difficulties in accessing detailed information about specific governing bodies, requiring extra time for research and support in understanding complex topics.

Phase 2: Reach Out Activity

Goal:

Students will draft professional letters or emails to their representative, asking their research questions and expressing interest in their role.

Estimated Time to Complete: 6 hours

- 2 hours – Instructor pre-planning
- 2 hours – Instruction on professional letter writing
- 2 hours – Drafting, revising, and sending letters

PROCESS

Preparation:

- Ensure all approvals are in place and gather resources on professional letter writing (templates, examples)

Action:

- Teach students how to structure a professional letter (greeting, body, closing) and discuss tone, clarity, and respect in civic engagement

Creation:

- Students will draft letters, including an introduction, summary of what they learned, and their key question
- The letters are then printed and sent or emailed to the representatives

Considerations

Not all representatives may respond to student letters, so it's important to prepare students for varying levels of engagement. Timeliness is also a factor—encouraging students to send their letters in conjunction with elections, legislative sessions, or school board meetings will help make the outreach more relevant.

Students may also face challenges with the professional tone and structure of their letters, but teacher guidance and peer review can support them in drafting effective correspondence.

Phase 3: Field Trip Activity

Goal:

Students will experience government decision-making firsthand by interacting with their representatives through a field trip, classroom visit, or virtual meeting.

Estimated Time to Complete:

- Varies depending on location and representative availability.

PROCESS

Preparation:

- Contact representatives to explore engagement options such as on-site field trips, representative visits, or virtual meetings
- Arrange transportation and permissions for in-person visits

Action:

- Students will observe governance in action, ask their pre-prepared questions, and learn about local decision-making

Creation:

- Students will share their experiences and key takeaways, discussing how they can get involved in future civic engagement efforts
- Creative reflections can include written reflections, blogs, videos, or artwork

Considerations

Field trips require significant logistical planning, and representatives' availability may vary. It's important to consider transportation arrangements, permissions, and scheduling conflicts.

Alternative approaches—such as virtual meetings or guest speakers—can also be impactful, especially when in-person visits aren't feasible. These alternatives may help ensure that students still experience meaningful interactions with decision-makers despite potential barriers.

"Giving students a voice will allow them to get a better understanding of the reality after school where they will have to make their own decisions, so by introducing it while they are still students, it helps make that transition from childhood to adulthood easier."

- Anonymous, Student

Journey

- In the Research phase, students identified a governing body that impacts their lives—like a school board or town council—and investigated its structure, key figures, and recent decisions. They compiled their findings into creative formats and crafted thoughtful questions for their representatives.
- During the Reach Out phase, students learned how to write professional letters or emails, introducing themselves, summarizing their research, and respectfully posing their questions—then sent these directly to their representatives.
- In the final Field Experience phase, students engaged in a visit, virtual meeting, or classroom session to observe governance firsthand and ask their prepared questions. Through reflection activities such as writing, video, or art, students processed what they learned. By completing each phase, students gained practical experience in research, communication, and civic participation.

Creative Evolutions

- **LEGO Structure:** Each student contributes a "brick" of knowledge, symbolizing the building of civic awareness.
- **Music Collaboration:** Partner with a local musician to create a song about civic engagement.
- **Media Project:** Create videos, posters, or blogs to share findings and reflections.

Outcomes

This project will give students the tools and experiences to research, engage, and experience real-world governance. They **will gain a deeper understanding of how civic systems work and how they can take an active role in shaping their communities.** Success is defined by the completion of all three phases—research, engagement, and firsthand experience. Students will develop a sense of personal empowerment, feeling encouraged to vote, advocate, or pursue leadership roles. The project will also have a positive community impact, as students may choose to share their findings publicly through school presentations, blogs, or social media.

The final result is more than just an academic exercise; it's **a call to action for students to participate in governance and become informed, active citizens.** By learning, connecting, and experiencing government in action, students will understand the value of their voices in shaping both their immediate environment and the larger community.

Please see support tools to implement this project in the **Resource Kit** on page 91.

Student Stakeholders Collage

Creating a Legacy of Student Influence

"I think its important to encourage student voice activities not only so students can be engaged in decision-making processes but also so they can be involved in their very own education."

- Yash Sharma, Core Team Member/College Student

Overview

Creator: Yash Sharma

Goal: Empower students to advocate for school board representation through research, action, and creative design.

Audience: High School Students, Educators, School Leaders.

Final Outcome: A student-created Representation Guide, advocacy tools, and a visual or digital artifact highlighting the process and impact.

Project Details

Description

This project supports students in **actively pursuing representation on local school boards** by creating a scalable guide and toolkit rooted in research, design, and advocacy. The focus is on **helping students understand and engage with district-level decision-making** through the creation of models, templates, and outreach strategies.

The project equips student teams to build a sustainable structure for future student board representation—so the foundational work doesn't need to be repeated. By combining data gathering, storytelling, and visual advocacy, students create a vibrant, **strategic resource that empowers youth to shape the educational policies** that directly affect them.

Ideal Participants

- Best suited for high school students due to the complexity and long-term focus
- Middle school students can participate with simplified content and more guided facilitation
- Postsecondary engagement could be adapted for student governance at the college level, though the core focus is on K-12 districts

Timeline

- Designed as a semester-long project to align with school board meeting calendars and cycles
- Best launched at the start of a term to allow time for research, planning, and outreach
- Can function as an extracurricular club, advocacy group, or student-led initiative outside regular class time for maximum flexibility

Materials

- Digital or printed templates for outreach, meeting agendas, and note-taking
- A shared research folder or journal for collecting examples of student board participation
- Collage or design tools for visual elements if creating artistic artifacts
- Online collaboration platforms (e.g., Google Drive, Canva, Padlet) for team sharing and documentation

PROCESS

Preparation:

- Introduce the concept of school board governance and share examples of student representation from other districts
- Form small student teams to explore roles, responsibilities, and models of engagement
- Define the project scope and set group goals for what students want to change, influence, or learn

Action:

- Conduct research on how student voice is incorporated in other districts
- Draft outreach materials such as emails, letters, or presentations
- Begin attending local school board meetings to observe dynamics and identify entry points for engagement
- Schedule conversations with teachers, principals, or district officials to introduce your ideas

Creation:

- Develop a digital or printed Representation Guide that includes step-by-step actions, templates, and examples. Include visual components such as infographics, student collages, or reflection quotes
- Make the guide accessible and shareable, with a focus on helping future students replicate the process

Reflection:

- Host a debrief with the student team or larger school community
- Reflect on what went well, where challenges arose, and how the process could be improved or scaled
- Create a short summary to document the project's impact and next steps

"When students have a say in their education, they feel more motivated about the goals they are pursuing in their education. By giving us a say it creates a balanced responsibility structure so we can feel more ownership for what we learn and how it will actualize into our goals."

- Anonymous, Student

Considerations

One key challenge is ensuring students are taken seriously by school board members, which requires thoughtful preparation and clear goals. Teams should be diverse and representative of the broader school community to avoid exclusivity. Balancing long-term goals with quick wins will maintain momentum, and with guidance from trusted adults, students can stay grounded in both advocacy and strategy. Encouragement is crucial as the process can be slow or bureaucratic.

Adaptations

- For younger students, this project can be simplified to focus on student councils or school-based leadership efforts rather than district-wide engagement.
- In districts with limited board access, students can start a student advisory panel or work with teachers to share ideas indirectly. The guide can also expand to support broader youth advocacy beyond education.
- If space or scheduling is tight, rotate sessions throughout the month in smaller groups.
- Pair older students with younger ones for mentoring and collaborative art-making.

Creative Evolutions

- **Collage Mural:** A large-scale visual collage representing diverse student experiences, dreams, and contributions to school decision-making.
- **Photo Journal or Video Diary:** Documenting the advocacy journey in real time.
- **Creative Guidebook/Zine:** A student-designed resource with infographics and creative formatting to make the final toolkit engaging and accessible.

Outcomes

The project culminates in a practical, replicable framework for student representation, **offering not just ideas but actionable steps**. Students gain advocacy, leadership, and civic engagement experience while creating a lasting contribution for future peers.

The school gains a better understanding of how youth can participate in decision-making, and **district leaders are offered a clear path for including student voice more meaningfully**. The combination of research, creative expression, and real-world engagement ensures this project is not only informative but inspirational.

Please see support tools to implement this project in the **Resource Kit** on pages 92-94.



This Is How We Do It

"There's so much I want to say but to summarize it, I have to say your voice matters, and if you think it doesn't and if you think you'll be disregarded, have faith. And if it does happen, help others come together and try to unionize together so you can be stronger together as a community and have your voices be heard and have your opinions be known. Everyone deserves to be heard and have a voice."

- Adeem Mustafa, STEM School Team Member/Student

How can we implement student voice strategies in the learning environment?

Incorporating and building deep, trusting relationships between students, educators, and administrators is the essential component of encouraging student voice in the classroom and school culture. It is extremely important that efforts to shift ownership and decisions back to students are done with intentionality and built into the framework of a school or classroom culture in order to avoid tokenism of students (13). Further, ensuring representation, intentional amplification, and celebration of varied perspectives and personal histories is essential in ensuring all students get their needs met while at school. **It is crucial when developing partnership between students and school staff to begin by collectively defining a shared “why” (18). This can, and should, start small - students and teachers can take time at the beginning of the school year to establish norms for discussion and treatment, starting with the culture of the classroom.** Students can work, pulling from their experiences, to define their personal and collective goals, their shared purpose with their teachers, and how they want discussions, assignments, decision-making, and accountability to look like in their class. Throughout the year, teachers can check in and have students check in with each other to see if the class culture is meeting their expectations around their shared agreed upon purpose. This can build over time to include collaboration with other classrooms, or, eventually, opportunities for school-wide student decision-making like a student council, a voice at administrative meetings, or focus groups with educator-student groups (18). Moving from student tokenism to ownership requires a shift from linear hierarchical models of power to mutually supportive models of co-creation where all parties commit to conversations that lead to actionable changes related to how to best support students in school (10, 11, 18, 20)

Individual attitudes and relationships are foundational for establishing a culture support for student voice within a wider school system (7). If adults, educators, staff, or administrators hold negative assumptions about students as being incompetent, unmotivated, or unreliable as leaders then this has direct impacts on how much motivation or trust a student feels in showing up at school as their full authentic selves (7). When asked about times students experienced engagement barriers or felt like they were not truly heard, the core team named examples of describing unfair treatment, tokenism, the feeling their voice was used for a quota or manipulation tactics, and a lack of transparent communication from schools to the student body. **It is imperative adults, educators, or school staff take the time to address power dynamics with students in order to interrupt disempowering models like adultism, internalized bias around limiting beliefs regarding youth, or savorism (18).** Part of this is a commitment to listening without defensiveness if a student shares a truth that an adult may not be ready to hear (18). **When students are considered experts and student voice is meaningfully integrated into schools, it provides a space where all voices are welcomed and patterns of unfairness related to discipline, graduation, attendance, testing are disrupted, leading to more positive outcomes for every student (17).**

An important component to consider when creating environments where student voice can thrive, is providing multiple avenues for how and in which ways students express themselves. Many students engaging in this process spoke to the idea that quieter students, students who **may be learning English, or students who prefer to communicate non-verbally, may experience more instances when their ideas and voices go unheard**. A strategy the core team of students identified to support the voices of every student, including those who are EB / ELL, included: offering ways to communicate ideas (either within the context of assignments at the classroom level or beyond) through art components; giving students more time to reflect and provide written feedback; allowing opportunities for small group discussions; and providing students the option to share their ideas through music, poetry, books, or art from their background to help communicate their experiences. Some classrooms aim to restructure their definition of “participation” by creating norms for discussions, providing “silent discourse” on assignments through written comments that are passed through the class, the use of sticky notes and stickers on boards set up around the classroom to express their ideas, and the ability for students to choose how they want to demonstrate their competency in a skill (e.g. essay, poem, video, podcast, or journal) (21). **Outside of a classroom setting, the core team said students could use their voice to inspire change around their school or even in their community through multiple pathways including surveys, focus groups, creating clubs, writing letters, making art pieces, joining councils, speaking at school board meetings, or participating in actions for a cause they are passionate about. Again, local context matters here, each student and groups of students will co-design and express their goals in different ways depending on what impacts them most in their own community.** The lack of a one-size-fits-all solution speaks to the core of this work - listening to students within one’s own communities and committing to working alongside them to co-design or support their leadership in decision making will allow for the right strategy that meets specific needs to emerge.

Yash Investigates!

A Case Study from the Field:

Chicago - The Chicago Public School system has developed a comprehensive student voice representation program, their Student Voice Committee alongside a Student Voice Summit, with an accompanying toolkit - the Student Voice 360 Toolkit - which outlines strategies to meaningfully integrate student voice within Chicago schools (25). Chicago’s Student Voice Committee focuses on developing adult - student relationships at a transformative level through the use of focus groups, discussion time, reflection, and calls to action (8, 25, 28). **One example of how this program has made lasting change is students who requested to be involved in the interview process for new teachers and their request was accepted.**

Let's Paint Together

Celebrating School Spirit Through Art

"It's very important to encourage creating things together because it reinforces the concept of community, a sense of belonging, and the prideful notion of - our accomplishment."

- Rondell Crier, Creative Consultant

Overview

Creator: Rondell Crier

Goal: Celebrate school pride through a collaborative, creative process that includes every student.

Audience: Elementary students (K–5), staff, and school families

Final Outcome: Mounted mural composed of student-painted tiles, with school pride symbols, installed permanently as a vibrant expression of school community and pride.

Project Details

Description

This project engages an entire elementary school in **a collaborative art-making experience centered on school pride and collective identity**. Students, staff, and families come together to contribute to a vibrant mural installation that reflects the spirit and unity of the school community. Each student paints a small original artwork that, **once assembled, becomes part of a larger, unified piece**. Key school symbols or mascots are incorporated to anchor the design and tell a visual story of the school's pride and values.

This project helps build a deep sense of belonging, **giving every student the experience of seeing themselves as an important part of something bigger**. It strengthens school culture by creating a shared, visible tradition that students can rally around year after year. The final artwork is installed permanently in a school hallway or gathering space, becoming **a lasting and colorful celebration of student voice, belonging, and community spirit**.

Ideal Participants

- Best for K–5 elementary students
- Includes all students across grades, regardless of art background or skill
- Perfect to build belonging and unity
- Can be scaled to fit smaller or larger schools or house systems

Timeline

- Planning and design phase to finalize colors, prep materials, and map mural layout
- One month production - Prep, a single-day event for artmaking, then assembly and installation
- Best completed mid-year so students can bond and view the installation for the rest of the year

Materials

- Small artwork canvas (1 per student)
- Paints in school and additional colors including white and black for tinting.
- Brushes, mixing trays, paper towels, water containers
- Drop cloths, drying racks or tables
- Larger panels for assembling smaller works onto
- Wood glue, clamps, epoxy for sealing the final project
- School name/motto/symbols cut from wood or vinyl
- Hanging hardware

PROCESS

Preparation:

- Finalize color palette and process for painting
- Collect and organize materials
- Plan an event for paint day
- Design mural layout and enlist volunteers or staff helpers

Action:

- On paint day support stations are set to manage mixing paint, drying art projects, and cleanup
- Students paint individual artworks

Creation:

- All paintings are assembled into larger works of art based on design
- Affix additional designs such as names/motto/symbols
- Seal and install panels on school walls with appropriate hanging hardware for the type of wall

Reflection:

- Invite students to visit and talk about the murals
- Ask how it felt to see their piece become part of a whole
- Encourage return visits and continued connection to the artwork

"Being a successful student or teacher looks like your best self. Doing what you need to stay focused and influencing others to stay on the right track."

- KK, College Student

Considerations

Younger students may need guidance with painting steps. Drying time and paint mess can become challenging—strong support roles and space management helps. Final assembly requires technical skill, so artist or designer involvement is ideal. It's helpful to emphasize that this project is about contributing to a shared expression, not individual perfection. Creating ways that students who miss paint day can still contribute or participate in the overall process.

Adaptations

- Smaller schools can reduce panel sizes for smaller and larger artworks.
- Schools without mascots or symbols can use other identifiers (grade, class, values). In schools without an art teacher, a creative classroom teacher, community artist, or parent with DIY skills can lead.
- Alternate materials like thick cardboard tiles or foam boards can be used as canvases where wood is unavailable.

Creative Evolutions

- **Expansion of Artwork:** New artworks are added each year to grow the mural tradition.
- **Functionality:** Artwork can be functional in some capacity, including lights and interactive parts.
- **Mobile Art:** Create portable versions to travel between classrooms or community events.

Outcomes

Every student contributes to a permanent, visible artwork **that celebrates their identity and school pride, giving them a sense of ownership and lasting impact within the school community.** The murals foster unity by bringing together students from all backgrounds and ages, strengthen creativity through **opportunities for individual expression, and deepen belonging** by visibly honoring each student's participation. They also reinforce the school's visual culture, creating recognizable symbols and colors that represent the values and spirit of the community.

Students feel seen and valued, knowing their unique contributions matter, and **experience the pride of being part of something larger than themselves.** Over time, the murals become touchstones for school spirit, serving as daily reminders of collective achievement, inspiring future classes, and anchoring celebrations, traditions, and moments of pride throughout the year.

Voice to Vision

Making Student Perspectives Public

"I know that some people might be shy... I'm shy too, even though you might be shy you should still try to speak your mind as much as you can and feel bold that you did that."

- A'mya Underwood, STEM School Team Member/Student

Overview

Creators: Quinn Holland, Megan Dean, A'mya Underwood, and Jacob.

Goal: Empower students to amplify their voices through data-driven, student-created artwork that fosters community engagement.

Audience: Middle and high school students (adaptable for all age groups.)

Final Outcome: A public mural that reflects student voices and enhances school culture, demonstrating that student input shapes the environment.

Project Details

Description

This project centers on a student-led effort to **amplify peer voices through data, design, and public art**. A small group of students creates and distributes a short survey to better understand how their classmates feel about being heard at school. Using those responses, they design and **install a mural in a high-traffic area of the school** to make those voices visible and valued.

The project **supports students who may feel disconnected from decision-making** by offering them an opportunity to express what matters most to them—and see it reflected in their school environment. Many school visuals are adult-created; this one is **designed by students, for students**, combining data collection and creative action to promote visibility, connection, and empowerment.

Ideal Participants

- Designed by students, for students
- Works well in small groups (3–6 students) but can expand to full-class collaboration
- Ideal for middle and high school students, particularly in art classes, student council, or leadership programs

Timeline

- This project can be completed over the course of 6–8 weeks depending on the survey process, data collection, and scale of the final artwork
- Best done during Student Voice Week, Spirit Week, or alongside school-wide community-building initiatives
- Include time for survey promotion, data analysis, artwork design, and administrative approvals

Materials

- Printed Survey Materials: Paper and ink
- Digital Tools: For online survey distribution (optional)
- Final Mural Materials: Plywood, MDF, acrylic paint, spray paint
- Additional materials depending on the creative direction (e.g. lights, sound components, interactive tech)

PROCESS

Preparation:

- Form small working groups and begin brainstorming what to learn from peers
- Write two powerful survey questions centered on voice, belonging, or student experiences at school
- Create a plan for survey distribution and collection, factoring in methods, visibility, and permissions

Action:

- Distribute the survey, collect responses, and analyze the results to identify themes or standout ideas
- Discuss the findings and consider what the data reveals about student voice in the school

Creation:

- Brainstorm ways to visually represent the data
- Begin designing the mural or public artwork through sketches and prototypes
- Gather feedback from peers and teachers, revise the design, and submit it for school approval

Considerations

Crafting strong survey questions can be challenging, and gathering enough responses to reflect the broader student body takes intention and effort. Once data is collected, students may feel unsure how to translate abstract findings into visual art. Limited access to time, space, or materials can add pressure, so encouraging creativity and adaptability is key. Support the process by brainstorming multiple artistic directions, prototyping both survey tools and mural ideas, and hosting events—like a poetry slam or mini concert—to boost survey participation. Building in time for feedback and revision helps students refine their work and stay confident throughout the project.

Adaptations

- If mural-making isn't possible, consider creating a digital gallery, zine, or hallway exhibit using printed panels or mixed-media collage.
- Students could record voice memos or video clips from survey respondents and integrate them into an interactive installation.
- Teachers or school leaders can help promote survey participation and celebrate the artwork as a symbol of shared community values.

Creative Evolutions

- **Interactive Artwork:** Include sound, light, or motion-activated components to engage more senses and draw attention to student voices.
- **Rotating Exhibit Wall:** Feature new artwork each semester based on student-generated data or questions.
- **Art & Data Showcase:** Create an event where students share findings, perform poems, and reveal the final mural with a live audience.

Outcomes

This project allows students to lead an entire creative process, from asking questions to building a public display. **It fosters pride, collaboration, and leadership** while helping students feel seen and valued in their school environment.

The mural becomes a lasting visual symbol of student voice—a **reminder that what students think and feel matters**. Through this process, students learn how to gather and reflect diverse perspectives, make informed design choices, and **turn abstract ideas into powerful, visible action**. More than just an art piece, the final result is a message: our voices shape this place.



Laying It All Out

"Student voice, I feel, is one of the most important things in a school setting. If the kids can have their voices be heard on any topic, whether it is something minor like you don't like what is being served for lunch or something major where a teacher isn't teaching how they should or is doing something in the classroom that they shouldn't be, I think being able to instantly know the steps to get out of your comfort zone and be able to go to a trusted adult about that is perfect."

- Jaiden Asberry, STEM School Team Member/Student

Why Does Student Voice Matter?

At its most basic level, student voice humanizes a student. **Each student is their own universe with unique ideas, perspectives, feelings, strengths, abilities, ways of thinking, and ways of being. Each student is an educational expert that holds a wellspring of knowledge on how to address school challenges or goals.** In a system that was created for them, students grow up spending the majority of their day within a classroom. They experience firsthand the impacts of educational policies and know the intricacies of how each part of the educational experience, from curriculum and testing to school climate and belonging, play out in a classroom. Honoring student expertise, therefore, and supporting young people to be active participants and decision makers within their learning should be a cornerstone of the educational system. **However, in many cases, decisions that have direct impacts on schools and classrooms do not include basic input from students. Educator and philosopher Paulo Freire describes how viewing students as a passive vessel or empty container that teachers fill - instead of a full unique person deserving of inherent worth, dignity, and respect - takes away the true purpose of learning and creates environments that perpetuates harm and unfairness within schools (9).** Students who engage in participatory or co-design processes report feeling more agency and more prepared to enter the world as engaged citizens (24).

Fundamentally, students should not have to turn off their authentic selves when they enter a school building. While it is true that students may have different goals for getting an education and, therefore, school may play a different role in each student's life, **asking a student to put who they are on hold is at odds with their participation in an environment that is asking them to grow as people.** Having the opportunity to explore one's own agency while learning new things and collaborating with new people prepares students to step boldly into the lives they are building for themselves both inside and outside of school. Further, when given the opportunity, students say they are excited to be able to help their community and those around them - the only thing holding them back at school are the adults in their life who believe they are not capable of creating change. Once this barrier is removed, educators, student bodies, schools, and communities feel the positive benefit of an activated, passionate student who is participating in their own learning.



The Ongoing Conversation

Youth-Designed Dialogue for Real Connection

*"If you could be best friends with a celeb who would it be?
Do you worry about your future? Who is your biggest supporter?"*

- **Boston Drake**, STEM School Team Member/Student

Overview

Creator: Rondell Crier

Goal: Empower students to craft and lead meaningful conversations through peer-generated prompts.

Audience: Teens ages 15–20; ideal for classrooms, youth programs, and leadership groups.

Final Outcome: A curated set of student-created conversation prompts organized for ongoing use and reflection.

Project Details

Description

This project invites teens to step into the role of prompt-creators—**designing the very questions they wish someone would ask them**. In a small-group setting, students generate conversation prompts across four meaningful categories: Personal, School, Friends, and Self. Working collaboratively, they write, share, and select questions **through a rotating process** that ensures both variety and depth. The result is a powerful collection of youth-generated questions, organized in a way that supports honest and relational conversation.

Whether used in classrooms, community programs, or youth groups, **this activity fosters empathy, self-expression, and connection**. By building the prompt list themselves, students become the architects of more authentic dialogue.

Ideal Participants

- Works best with a small group of 4 students, ideally ages 15–20
- Great for teens who are moderately comfortable with one another—especially mid-year in classrooms or programs
- Flexible enough for earlier in the school year as a warm-up to relationship-building
- Can be used in schools, afterschool programs, teen leadership initiatives, or peer mentoring spaces

Timeline

- Designed as a 45-minute to 1-hour session
- Best used mid-year once some group trust is established
- Can also serve as a powerful opener for new groups if gently facilitated

Materials

- Sticky notes or slips of paper
- Pens or pencils
- Chart paper, table space, or wall surface to collect and organize final questions

PROCESS

Preparation:

- Introduce the idea of peer-generated conversation prompts
- Discuss how a good question can open up a powerful dialogue
- Review the four categories (Personal, School, Friends, and Self)

Action:

- Each student writes three questions per category on sticky notes
- Rotate their questions to another peer who selects their favorite from the set
- Rotation continues for all four categories, ensuring everyone interacts with each other's ideas

Creation:

- At the end of the rotations, the selected questions are compiled and arranged into a visual display, prompt deck, or list
- This final flow can be used in future conversations or shared with the school or community

Reflection:

- Invite students to reflect on which questions stood out to them, how it felt to ask and read peer-generated questions, and what they learned about one another through the process

Considerations

Some teens may feel unsure about coming up with thoughtful questions, especially under time pressure. Others might hesitate to share personal insights or feel awkward choosing a “best” question from a friend’s list. To create an emotionally safe space, it’s helpful to introduce group norms, allow students to skip prompts, and normalize all levels of participation. Sensitive or triggering topics may arise unintentionally, so facilitators should remain present and responsive. Encouraging creativity and offering affirming feedback can ease nerves and build confidence in the process.

Adaptations

- Larger groups can work in small teams, each responsible for one category of questions.
- Younger students or groups new to reflective conversation might benefit from example prompts or sentence starters.
- The format can shift into journaling or anonymous submissions if privacy is needed. For virtual settings, use collaborative digital tools like Jamboard or Google Slides for rotation and sharing.
- Pair older students with younger ones for mentoring and collaborative art-making.

Creative Evolutions

- Visual Collage Prompts: Students choose an image and write a question inspired by what it evokes.
- Music-Based Questions: Listen to a song and craft questions inspired by lyrics or emotional tone.
- Deck Design: Students create their own physical or digital deck of conversation cards using drawings, symbols, or color codes.
- Prompt Wall: A rotating wall or bulletin board where students add new questions over time.

Outcomes

This project results in a curated collection of **peer-generated questions that speak directly to the interests, concerns, and curiosities of the group**. More than just a fun activity, it gives teens space to express what matters to them and connect more deeply with one another. It builds confidence in asking meaningful questions and **strengthens empathy and understanding among peers**.

Facilitators gain insight into student values, and the resulting questions can be reused in advisory sessions or future community-building circles. **Ultimately, it models how young people can lead conversations that matter.**

What do you want to impact or change from the following list?

Choose one: (circle one)

Classroom	Teachers
Students	Subjects
Parents	Policies
Rights	Grades

Why? (Name three reasons why you chose this area of impact)

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Who could be a good "personal" partner(s) in support of this work? (Try to list three people)

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Steps to think through.

A

Who need to be at the table to make this idea most impactful?

When building a core team, think about the smallest group possible to gain success. Also, since young people are centered in student voice work, its necessary to recruit people who highly value and accept the perspectives and opinions of children as equally or more important than adults.

Students - Age, Grade, or Interest/Capabilities

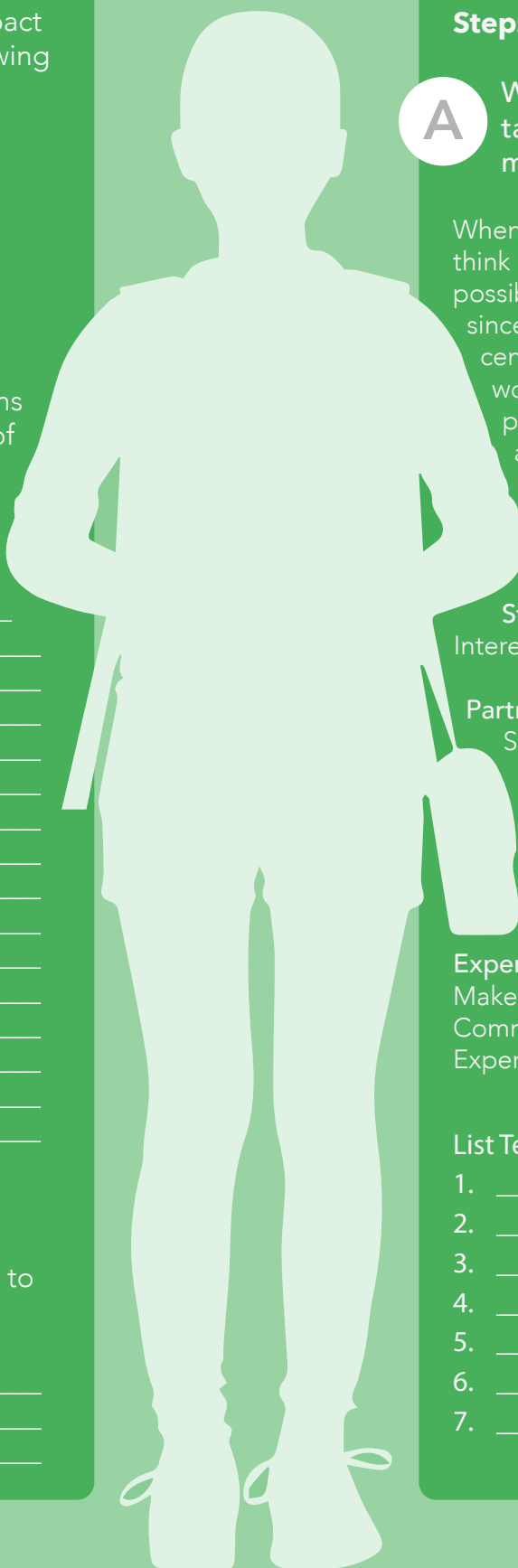
Partners - Teachers, Parents, or School Administrators

Decision-Makers - Principals, Superintendents, or School Board Members

Experts - Education Policy Makers, Specific Consultants, or Community Experts (Lived Experience)

List Team Members:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____





How will you recruit team members: Promote your idea, appeal to the interest and perspective of candidates, then set up time-frames to meet, plan, and act. Briefly write out how you will approach recruitment and ideal timeline to meet.



What resources will you need? Define a list of resources that will aid in creating the most impactful student voice project or activity. List the actual resources, books, videos, weblinks, or experts including names, titles, and links below

<hr/>	<hr/>
<hr/>	<hr/>
<hr/>	<hr/>
<hr/>	<hr/>
<hr/>	<hr/>

Make sure to prioritize the ideas that are contributed by students, then build a plan of action project using the input of partners and defined resources. Be as clear as possible about who and or what this project is supporting? How long will it take to start and finish it? What does the outcome look like physically or emotionally - system-wide or locally? How is its intent contributing to the success and progression of student voice?

Project Title

Impact Area(s)

Schedule/Timeframe to complete

Description



Dream Voice Community Input

(Optional) Name: _____

Favorite Color: _____ Favorite Number: _____ Age: _____ State: _____

Who are your greatest supporters? (list up to three people) These would be people who know the real you. They fully see you and the relationship is mutually supportive.

Do you feel that your voice matters? YES or NO

Do you feel that you are included in decisions that impact your life? YES or NO

What are some things you would like to help decide that impact your life? (For example: where I live)

Who do you think has the biggest impact on your life right now? _____

Do you have any input in this area? YES or NO

How would you describe a successful student or teacher?: _____

What is the most important school grade and why? _____

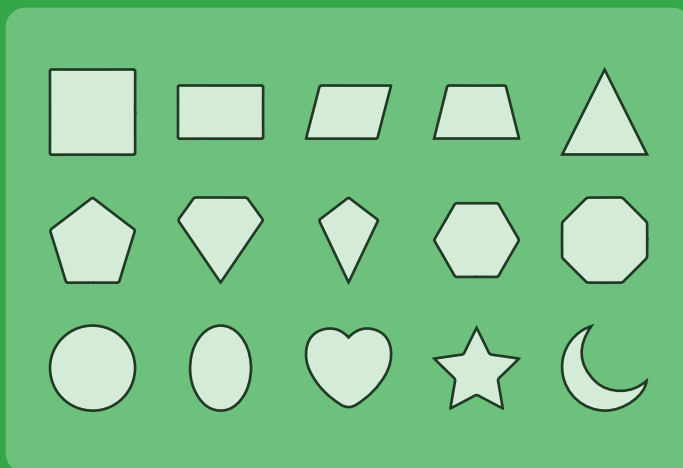
What dream change do you think would make the learning experience better at schools?

What would your dream voice say to change the world? _____

Dream Voice Illustration

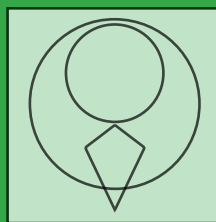
What would your dream voice look like? Imagine using your voice to make the world a better place. When we think about our voice, we typically think about how it sound based on what we say to the world. Remember we can also make expressions with visual statements. As you think about the power of your voice, what shapes could represent that power? What colors can express the essence of your voice?"

Use the square below to create a design that represents your dream voice. Combine two shapes and up to three colors to manifest a design of what your voice can look like in its visual power!



Tip:

Give yourself three minutes to make three quick sketches using two shape combinations. Then choose the best sketch to enlarge for coloring.

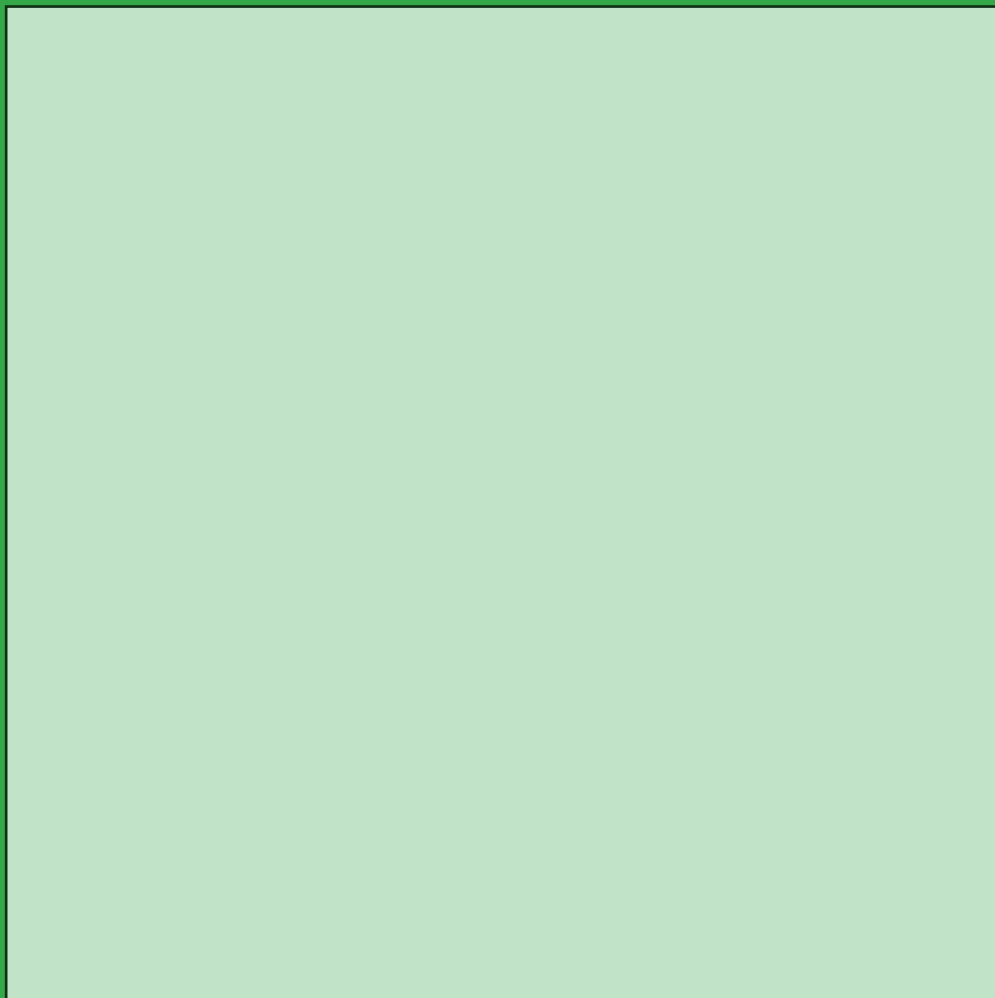


(sample sketch using a diamond and circle)

Colors: (List your three colors)

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Sketches





Seeing Is Believing

"If I could make one statement to the world about student voice, I think it would simply be just to listen. I know that may sound very simple but I think student voice is often discounted or tokenized or just taken for the sake of just filling a student voice quota. I think if administrators, faculty, staff, etc. took the time to really listen to these student voices and integrate them into curriculum changes, programmatic changes, or other spheres of their education, then real change could happen."

- Yash Sharma, Core Team Member/College Student

Conclusion

Students have perspectives that deserve to be amplified and empowered. Students positioned as active participants and experts within their learning should be an inherent component of measuring the success of an educational environment. Student voice supports leadership and collective decision-making that promotes positive change-making within a learning community (1). Its principles of deepening community connection and care while encouraging relationship building between students, their peers, and their teachers lays a foundation for trust, excitement for learning, and transparency which supports a student's success both in and outside of the classroom.

When beginning a student voice journey, it is critical to reflect and ask who does and does not currently have a voice that is being heard, expressed, represented, or reflected in the classroom?

Starting from a place of curiosity, and leaning into truly listening to students, leads to powerful outcomes and opportunities to create a learning community that works for everyone. Honoring each student as a wellspring of wisdom, who is uniquely capable of embodying their own power, meeting challenges, and achieving their goals, sets a framework for leadership and an excitement for learning that has ripple effects across a whole school. Students are capable of supporting each other and capable of finding creative solutions to whatever challenges a classroom may face. Building courageous, safe, and caring classrooms for every student, in partnership with students, ensures each student can truly see themselves reflected in their own learning. **When a student feels seen, heard, and understood - when a student sees who they are and what they aspire to become honored throughout their learning - there is no limit to what they can achieve.**



Resource Kit

"Students have been the canary in the coal mine forever, students are always on the right side of issues, so I feel like we have historically earned a seat at the table."

- Anonymous, Student

Resource Guide

Something About You

Questions: Set One - Light to Reflective

Age Group: 15-22 **Group Size:** 4-7 participants

Format: Roundtable conversation or small group dialogue

Goal: Deepen connections among peers through meaningful conversation

1. How many siblings do you have? (Personal)
2. What's your favorite subject? (School)
3. Favorite thing about me? (Friends)
4. What one activity makes you the happiest to do? (Self)
5. Who is your biggest supporter? (Personal)
6. How would your friends describe you? (Friends)
7. What's the best school project you can remember? (School)
8. If you could go anywhere in the world on a free trip, where would you go? (Self)
9. Do you worry about your future? (Career/Future)
10. What was your childhood dream job? (Career/Future)
11. Do you have a lot of friends in your class? (Friends)
12. Are you always the youngest or oldest in your friend group? (Friends)
13. What do you think about dual enrollment? (School)
14. What places have you lived? (Self)
15. What's an embarrassing family story? (Friends)
16. What is your aesthetic? (Self)
17. Are you in any clubs or sports? (School)
18. Who would you call if you got into trouble? (Personal)
19. Do you have a sleep schedule? (Self)
20. Would we stay friends through and after college? (Friends)
21. What is something you want to improve about yourself? (Self)
22. What's your funniest animal memory? (Self)
23. What do you define as a friend? (Friends)
24. What do you want to be when you grow up? (School)
25. How comfortable are you making a stranger into a friend? (Meeting Strangers)

Resource Guide

Something About You

Questions: Set Two - Familiar to Deeper Dive

Age Group: 15–22 **Group Size:** 4–7 participants

Format: Roundtable conversation or small group dialogue

Goal: Deepen connections among peers through meaningful conversation

1. What's your favorite form of entertainment? (Self)
2. How close are we? (Friends)
3. What is the longest time you've known a friend? (Friends)
4. What's your favorite place to eat during lunch? (School)
5. What is your favorite letter in STEM or your school name? (School)
6. Are you familiar with most people in your grade? (Personal)
7. What one memory will you remember forever? (Self)
8. Have you ever felt like you disappointed someone you cared about? (Self)
9. Do you feel like you would be prepared for the next grade? (School)
10. Who is one friend who feels like family to you? (Friends)
11. What is your highest aspiration? (Aspirations)
12. What animal describes you and why? (Self)
13. What's your favorite sport to watch? (Self)
14. Are your parents still together? (Personal)
15. What's a family tradition you have? (Personal)
16. If you had to be a Secret Santa to someone, who would it be? (Friends)
17. What is something you despise? (Self)
18. When was a time your worldview changed and how? (Self)
19. What's your most embarrassing moment? (Self)
20. What's the funniest joke you've ever heard or said? (Self)
21. What do you think about the social sphere around your school? (Personal)
22. How would your friends describe your role in your group? (Friends)
23. Are you outgoing? (Self)
24. Do you have any teachers you don't like? (School)
25. If you could be best friends with a celebrity, who would it be? (Personal)

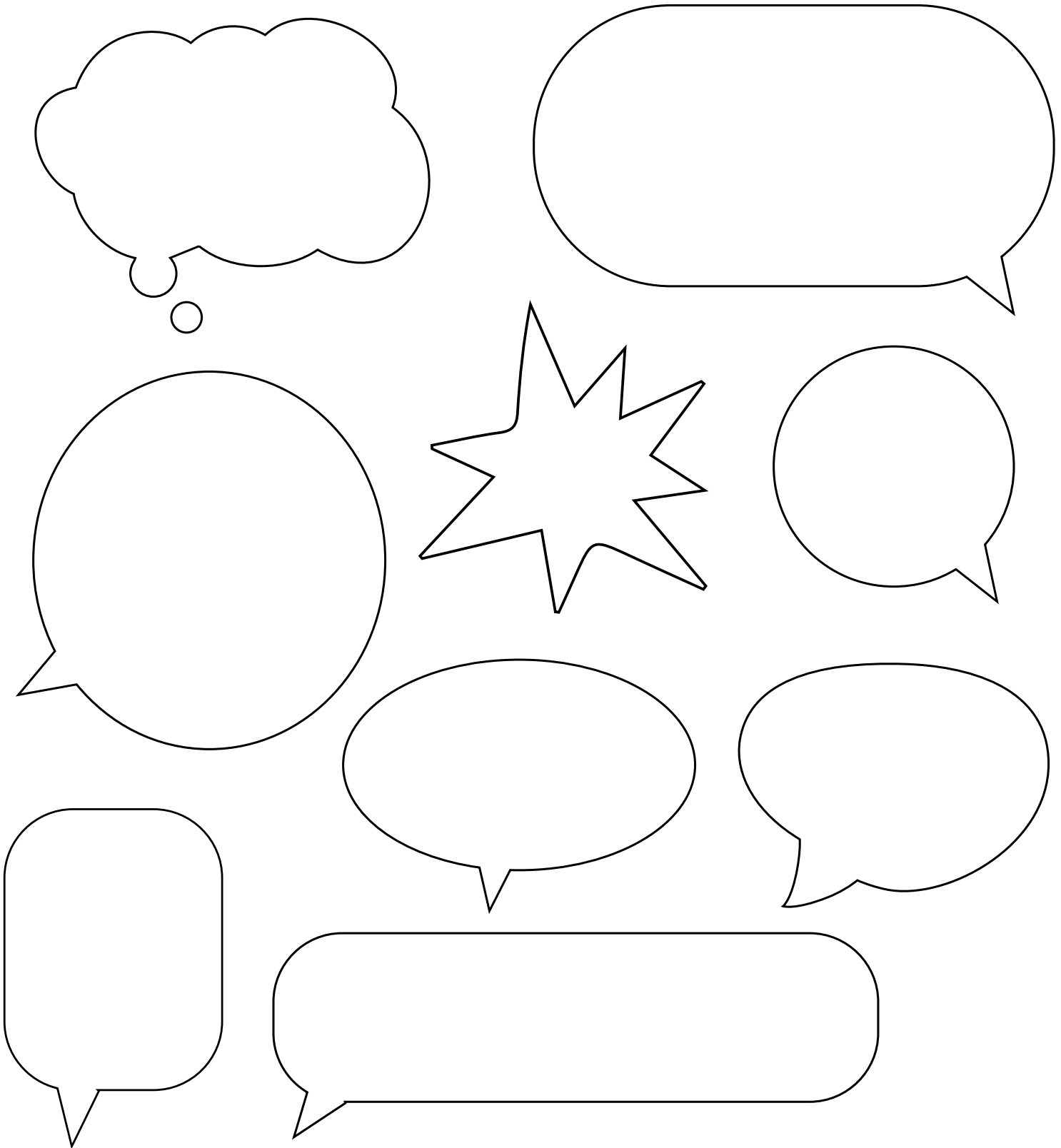
Comic Strip Template



Resource Guide

EmpowerArt Student Comic

Comic Strip Bubbles



Resource Guide

Its My Classroom Pizza

My Regular Pizza Toppings

Use this guide to engage students in a conversation about personal choice. Pizza is something many people eat and often get to choose toppings for, making it a fun and relatable way to introduce the idea of decision-making. This can help get students excited about choice before leading into a more specific conversation about choice in the classroom.

Main Ingredients:

Regular Toppings:

Yucky Toppings:

Extra Dreamy Toppings:



your regular pizza

Resource Guide

Its My Classroom Pizza

My Classroom Pizza

Students spend most of their day in classrooms, yet many don't view the classroom as a space that belongs to them. This exercise invites students to reflect on the classroom as a shared environment—one that is theirs, too. By comparing decisions they might make when customizing a pizza to choices they could make about their classroom, students can begin to understand the value of personal choice and how it applies to shaping a collective space.

What is most important
in every classroom?

What other things do you feel
are needed in every classroom?

What would you take out
of the classroom?

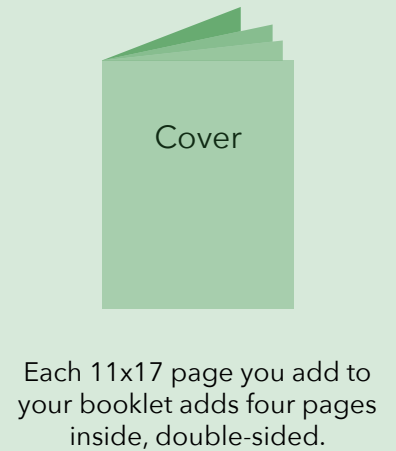
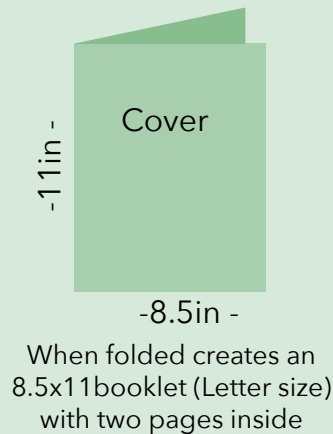
What would be in your
dream classroom?

your classroom pizza

Newsletter - Basics

This template is designed to support the process of creating and publishing a newsletter. It can help you think through key elements such as layout, format, content, design, style, promotion, and advocacy. A newsletter can organize and share many types of information, and there are various ways to approach its creation. You might choose to partner with a printer or graphic designer, or you could take a more hands-on approach by making a zine-style newsletter with basic supplies. This guide will walk you through some essential components for creating your own DIY newsletter.

Booklet



Design

The cover is key—it grabs the reader's attention first.

What image or photo will help draw people in and represent what your newsletter is about?

Style matters.

Everything from the color scheme and font choice to the content, artwork, writers, illustrators, and audience plays a key role in making your newsletter meaningful and impactful.

What's inside?

What specific information you'll include to communicate and showcase in your newsletter. The amount of content will help determine how many pages you'll need.

How many copies will you publish?

Who's your audience? Will you deliver it digitally or in print—and how will it get to readers?

Content Planning

Choosing content for the newsletter means thinking about the stories, art, ideas, and information that matter to you and your peers. You can share experiences, highlight cultures, talk about challenges, or celebrate what makes students unique. Whether it's a personal reflection, a drawing, a tip, or a resource, your content helps shape a newsletter that speaks for students—and speaks to the whole school.

1. Student Voices

- Anonymous or named student reflections.
- Interview-style questions (e.g. "What's something you wish teachers knew?", "What's helped you feel welcome?").
- Personal stories, poems, or experiences about cultural identity, belonging, or navigating school.

2. Art & Expression

- Student-created artwork, collages, photography, or comics.
- Cultural celebrations, symbols, or personal imagery.
- Visual storytelling around emotions, family, heritage, or transitions.

3. Community & Resources

- School-based supports (EB/ELL program info, writing centers, language labs).
- Mental health and wellness resources (in-school and external).
- Community organizations that support immigrant families.
- Student-curated guides: "Where to find help," "My favorite local spots," etc.

4. Culture Spotlights

- Student contributions about traditions, foods, holidays, or cultural values.
- Mini-language lessons or phrases from students' home languages.
- Highlighting global diversity in the student body.

5. Advocacy & Data

- Student-researched or advisor-supported infographics on demographics.
- Statistics about immigrant populations in the school/community.
- Brief policy summaries or student proposals for improved support.

Newsletter - Distribution

How many copies will you publish?

- A few (small group)
- Dozens
- Hundreds or more

Who is your audience?

- Students
- Teachers
- Families
- Community members
- Other: _____

How will you share it?

- Printed copies
- Digital version (PDF, website, email)
- Both

How will readers receive it?

- Hand-delivered
- Posted around school
- Emailed or shared online
- Mailed home
- Other: _____

Reflection Questions

1. In what ways did your identity (language, background, experiences) shape the way you communicated during this project? *(Personal reflection and voice.)*
2. What voices or perspectives are often missing from decisions that affect students—and how can this project help change that? *(Encourages awareness of representation and inclusion.)*
3. Where does a representative's power come from? How does this process connect to history curriculum? *(Connects learning to civic systems and academic content.)*
4. What themes or patterns were observed in communication from representatives? *(Develops critical thinking around how power communicates.)*
5. What did you learn about how to frame a demand to get a favorable response? *(Highlights strategy and effective advocacy.)*
6. What would happen if you did not make demands of your leaders? *(Explores consequences of inaction.)*
7. How would you respond to constituents if they were an elected leader? *(Encourages empathy and role reversal.)*
8. What surprised you most about how your representative responded—or didn't respond—to your questions or concerns? *(Processes real-world engagement outcomes.)*
9. How might you stay engaged or keep advocating for change after this project ends? What's one small step you could take? *(Future-oriented thinking and agency.)*

Resource Guide

Student Stakeholders Collage

Research Guide

This guide will support locating important leaders and community member who serve as stakeholders. The keywords to successfully utilizing this guide are “research and document.” Grab a paper pen/pencil and follow these steps.

How to find contacts:

1. Search online for the school and website. Enter the school name in a search engine. Please make sure to add the city, state, or county of the school you are researching, any additional information would be helpful in locating the correct school.
2. Once the school website is located, explore to find the “About Us” link or contact information link. Most school sites have this information located under the “Our School” tab.
3. Usually leadership contacts, such as the principal and vice principal’s names are listed here. Explore deeper to find additional information on contacts such as board members, committee chairs, alumni, etc.
4. Document the names, phone numbers, school or business locations, email addresses, and any available information provided about these individual.

Documentation Guide

Name: _____ Title: _____

School: _____

Phone: _____

Email: _____

Additional Info: _____

Writing Tips

1. Research and Preparation

- Look up schools that have successful student voice programs
- Take notes on specific outcomes and benefits
- Write down 2-3 concrete examples you can reference
- Think about your school's current situation and what could be improved

2. Structure Your Main Points (Before Writing)

- Identify yourself and your purpose
- Pick your strongest argument (students as stakeholders)
- Choose one solid example
- List 3-4 specific benefits
- Have a clear "ask" (like requesting a meeting)

3. Email Format

- Use a clear, specific subject line
- Start with formal greeting using their name
- Keep paragraphs short (2-4 sentences each)
- Use professional language but stay authentic
- End with a specific request and your contact info

4. Writing Process

- First Paragraph
 - Introduce yourself with grade level
 - State why you're writing immediately
 - Keep it brief and direct
- Second Paragraph:
 - Present your main argument about student voices
 - Connect it to real school improvement
 - Keep it positive and solution-focused

- Example/Evidence Paragraph:

- Describe one successful program
- Include specific details about what worked
- Connect it to your school's potential

- Benefits Section:

- List 3-4 concrete benefits
- Make them specific and realistic
- Connect them to school goals

- Closing:

- Make a clear, polite request (like a meeting)
- Offer to provide more information
- Thank them for their time
- Include your contact details

5. Review and Refine

- Read it out loud to check flow
- Remove any repetitive points
- Check for professional tone
- Make sure every paragraph serves a purpose
- Verify all names and titles are correct

Letter Template

Subject: Proposal for Student Integration in Educational Decision-Making

Dear *[School Board Member Name]*,

My name is *[Your Name]*, and I am a *[Grade Level]* student at *[School Name]*. I am writing to propose an initiative that would meaningfully integrate student voices into our school's decision-making processes.

As students, we are the primary stakeholders in our education, yet we rarely have formal channels to contribute to discussions that directly impact our learning experience. I believe that by incorporating student perspectives, we can create more effective and engaging educational policies that better serve our school community.

I recently learned about *[Researched School Name]* successful Student Voice program, which has transformed their approach to educational planning. Through structured forums and regular meetings between students and administrators, they've created a collaborative environment where student input directly shapes their strategic planning. This program has led to improvements in curriculum design, school culture, and student engagement.

Some key benefits of implementing a similar program at our school could include:

- More relevant and engaging curriculum development informed by student experiences
- Increased student investment in their education through direct participation
- Better understanding between administrators and students about educational challenges and opportunities
- Development of leadership and civic engagement skills among participating students

I would greatly appreciate the opportunity to discuss this proposal with you in more detail. I envision starting with a pilot program similar to *[Researched School's]* model, where a diverse group of students could meet regularly with administrators to provide feedback and suggestions on school policies and initiatives.

Would you be available for a brief meeting to explore this idea further? I am happy to provide additional information about successful student voice programs at other schools and discuss how we might adapt these models to benefit our school community.

Thank you for considering this proposal. I look forward to your response.

Best regards,

[Your Name]

[Grade Level]

[School Name]

[Contact Information]

Sources

1. Benner, Meg, Catherine Brown, and Ashley Jeffrey. "Elevating Student Voice in Education." Center for American Progress, August 14, 2019. <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/elevating-student-voice-education/>.
2. Blad, Evie. "Really Listening to Students Has an Academic Payoff, New Research Finds." Education Week, June 16, 2022. <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/really-listening-to-students-has-an-academic-payoff-new-research-finds/2022/06>.
3. brown, adrienne maree. Emergent strategy: Shaping change, changing worlds. Chico, California: AK Press, 2021.
4. Darling-Hammond, Sean. "Fostering Belonging, Transforming Schools: The Impact of Restorative Practices." Learning Policy Institute, May 18, 2023. <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/impact-restorative-practices-report>.
5. Davenport, Mary. "Maximizing Student Voice to Achieve Equity in Classroom Participation." Edutopia, October 4, 2021. <https://www.edutopia.org/article/maximizing-student-voice-achieve-equity-classroom-participation/>.
6. Davis, Angela Y. Freedom is a constant struggle. Chicago, Illinois: Haymarket Books, 2016.
7. Equity Accelerator. "Elevating Student Voice, Agency, and Co-Creation." WestEd, 2022. <https://wested2024.s3.us-west-1.amazonaws.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/11172319/Student-Voice-and-Leadership-Brief.pdf>.
8. "For Teachers & School Leaders." Chicago Public Schools, 2025. <https://sve.cps.edu/student-voice/for-school-leaders/>.
9. Freire, Paulo. Pedagogy of the oppressed: 30th Anniversary Edition. London, England: Continuum, 2001.
10. González, Rosa. "The Spectrum of Community Engagement to Ownership." Movement Strategy, 2019. <https://movementstrategy.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/The-Spectrum-of-Community-Engagement-to-Ownership.pdf>.
11. Hart, Roger A. "Children's Participation: From Tokenism to Citizenship." Innocenti Essays 4 (February 1, 1992). https://www.researchgate.net/publication/24139916_Children's_Participation_From_Tokenism_To_Citizenship.
12. Hellerich, Kimberly. "Opportunities for Student Decision-Making." Edutopia, January 18, 2022. <https://www.edutopia.org/article/opportunities-student-decision-making/>.

13. Holquist, Samantha E., Dana L. Mitra, Jerusha Conner, and Nikki L. Wright. "What Is Student Voice Anyway? The Intersection of Student Voice Practices and Shared Leadership." *Educational Administration Quarterly* 59, no. 4 (June 22, 2023): 703–43. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161x231178023>.
14. "Including Voice in Education Addressing Equity Through Student and Family Voice in Classroom Learning." Institute of Education Sciences (IES), January 2025. <https://ies.ed.gov/pacific/2025/01/infographic-9>.
15. Javornik, Špela, and Eva Klemenčič Mirazchiyski. "Factors Contributing to School Effectiveness: A Systematic Literature Review." *European Journal of Investigation in Health, Psychology and Education* 13, no. 10 (September 30, 2023): 2095–2111. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ejihpe13100148>.
16. Klevan, Sarah. "Building a Positive School Climate through Restorative Practices." Learning Policy Institute, October 28, 2021. <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/wce-positive-school-climate-restorative-practices-brief>.
17. Malarkey, Tom, Stephen Chang, Casta Guillaume, Heidi Gill, Sarah Goldsmith, Sara Gray, Nichelle Nichols, et al. "Centering Student Experience Through Liberatory Design." National Equity Project, 2023. https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5e32157bff63c7446f3f1529/t/65a8564b5741473e1cece472/1705530959576/NEP_Using+Liberatory+Design+to+Center+Student+Experience+-+Digital.pdf.
18. Malarkey, Tom, Stephen Chang, Casta Guillaume, Heidi Gill, Sarah Goldsmith, Sara Gray, Nichelle Nichols, et al. "Developing Youth–Adult Design Partnerships." National Equity Project, 2023. https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5e32157bff63c7446f3f1529/t/663282aaf1ddd27a90f9ddd0/1714586286886/NEP_Developing%2BYouth-Adult%2BDesign%2BPartnerships_Print.pdf.
19. Mathias, Sarah. "5 Ways Student Voice Enhances Education Quality." ThoughtExchange, July 25, 2023. <https://thoughtexchange.com/blog/student-voice-enhances-edu-quality/>.
20. Mensa Kwao, Augustina, Lakshmi Neelakantan, Jennifer Velloza, Emily Bampton, Swetha Ranganathan, Refiloe Sibisi, Joshua Bowes, et al. "An Application of Evidence Based Approaches to Engage Young People in the Design of a Global Mental Health Databank." *Health Expectations* 27, no. 5 (September 2024). <https://doi.org/10.1111/hex.14172>.
21. Plotinsky, Miriam. "Creating a Classroom Culture of Shared Ownership." Edutopia, October 10, 2019. <https://www.edutopia.org/article/creating-classroom-culture-shared-ownership/>.
22. "Recommendations to Empower the Student Voice in Campus Mental Health Decisions." Active Minds, October 1, 2017. https://www.activeminds.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/ActiveMinds_PositionStatement_StudentVoice_Oct2017.pdf.
23. Shafer, Leah. "Giving Students a Voice." Harvard Graduate School of Education, August 18,

2016. <https://www.gse.harvard.edu/ideas/usable-knowledge/16/08/giving-students-voice>.

24. Siegel-Stechler, Kelly, Kei Kawashima-Ginsberg, Noorya Hayat, and Mary Ellen Daneels. "Participatory Budgeting in Schools Helps Build Student Voice and Civic Skills." Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement at Tufts, August 9, 2024. <https://circle.tufts.edu/latest-research/participatory-budgeting-schools-helps-build-student-voice-and-civic-skills>.

25. Simmons, Megan, and Eboné Ivory. "Chicago's Student Voice Committee Program Is a Model for the Nation." Student Voice, n.d. <https://www.stuvoice.org/tour-blog/chicagos-student-voice-committee-program-is-a-model-for-the-nation>.

26. "Student Bill of Rights: Student Voice." Student Voice, 2024. <https://www.stuvoice.org/student-bill-of-rights>.

27. "Student Engagement versus Student Ownership." National Institute for Excellence in Teaching, 2021. <https://www.niet.org/assets/Resources/student-engagement-versus-student-ownership.pdf>.

28. "Student Voice Committees." Chicago Public Schools, 2025.

29. "Student Voice to Transform Education for Equity Designing for Equity." Next Generation Learning Challenges, 2025. <https://www.nextgenlearning.org/equity-toolkit/student-voice>.

30. "Tools to Change Our World." Community Tool Box, 2025. <https://ctb.ku.edu/en>.

31. "What Is School Climate?" National School Climate Center, August 19, 2021. <https://schoolclimate.org/about/our-approach/what-is-school-climate/>.

32. Wolfe, Isabelle. "Why Does Student Voice Matter in the Curriculum?" Educational Collaborative for International Schools, November 21, 2023. <https://ecis.org/student-voice-curriculum/>.



"I am part of my own education. I want to learn about what I care about!"

- Dustin, Student

Illustration by - **Edith Ramirez**, Core Team Member/College Student

My Dream Voice

Amplifying Student Voice In The Classroom



N A P E

Copyright © 2025 by NAPE Education Foundation All rights reserved

Contact: info@nape.education

Visit nape.education to access this workbook online