

# Cultivating Participatory Habits and Civic Responsibility: The Far-Reaching Value of Student Voice

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On September 20, 2019, an unprecedented number of U.S. students in all 50 states, Puerto Rico, and Washington, D.C. did not attend school to participate in the Global

Climate Strike. They reasoned, why go to school when the future they are being educated for may not come to pass if the threats of climate change remain unaddressed? This dramatic mass action, which is believed to have engaged four million people worldwide (Barclay and Resnick, 2019), was preceded by large-scale student strikes on March 15 and May 3, 2019.

Beyond calling for truancy as a means of disrupting the social order and forcing attention to their concerns, these strikes have clear connections to schools. Some students first became involved in the issue of climate change through their school's environmental action club or sustainability committee. Isra Hirsi, a high school student and one of the co-executive directors for the U.S. Youth Climate Strikes, said that although she had been going to protests since she was in first-grade, she became involved in climate justice when she joined her school's green team as a high school freshman (Schleeter, 2019). Other students, who became politicized through the strikes, have targeted their schools and school districts for change. In Portland, Oregon on March 15, for instance, striking students marched to school district headquarters to demand implementation of a climate justice curriculum. In May, they protested again at a school board meeting, winning an agreement from district officials to allocate \$200,000 for the curriculum. This past summer, with student activists serving on the selection committee, Portland Public Schools hired its first Climate Justice Coordinator to oversee the curriculum's rollout (Seely, 2019).

This example, which demonstrates the power of students to demand and effect change, is emblematic of student voice. Student voice is shorthand for a strategy that engages youth in sharing their views on their experiences as students to promote meaningful change in educational practice or policy and reposition students from passive beneficiaries to active stakeholders in education (Conner, 2015; Conner, Ebby-Rosin, and Brown, 2015). While the strategy is sometimes used by teachers or administrators to invite student perspectives or collaborate with students on initiatives, it can also be deployed by students themselves, without any formal solicitation from adults. This article describes seven broad types of student voice, reviews outcomes associated with this practice, and offers recommendations for K-12 teachers and administrators to support effective implementation.

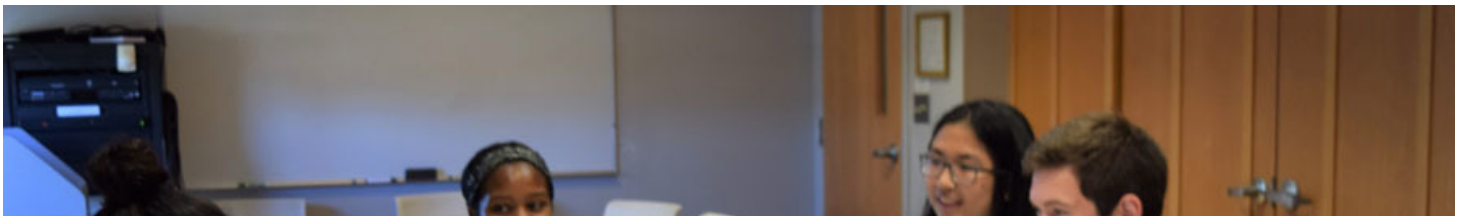
# Types of Student Voice

Student voice exists at all levels of the education system, from the classroom to the federal level. It can focus on pedagogy, curriculum, assessment, and classroom or school culture, practices, or policy. It can be spontaneous or carefully planned out, but perhaps the simplest distinction among the various types of student voice initiatives is whether they are endorsed by school leaders.

## School-Approved Student Voice

School-approved student voice is permitted by adults in positions of power inside the school, whether they are classroom teachers or administrators. Four types of school-approved student voice efforts exist in U.S. schools: ad hoc initiatives, extracurricular clubbased initiatives, course-based initiatives, and formal governance structures.

*Ad Hoc.* Ad hoc or occasional student voice efforts happen at the discretion of the teacher, principal, or policymaker. They tend to occur irregularly and are not formally institutionalized. At the classroom level, this type of student voice practice may involve the teacher inviting student input in curriculum design at the outset of a new unit, for example, by using a KWL graphic organizer (where students articulate what they know, what they want to know, and then what they have learned at the conclusion of a unit). It may involve soliciting student feedback on a lesson or a unit by asking students to complete an exit ticket (a short written reflection in response to a prompt before the end of class) or a survey. One such survey developed by the Boston Student Advisory Council generates constructive feedback for teachers, while promoting students' metacognitive reflection on learning. Some research has found that many teachers who embrace student voice like to hold discussions with students, either individually or as a group, to solicit their perspectives on teaching and learning (Conner, in press).





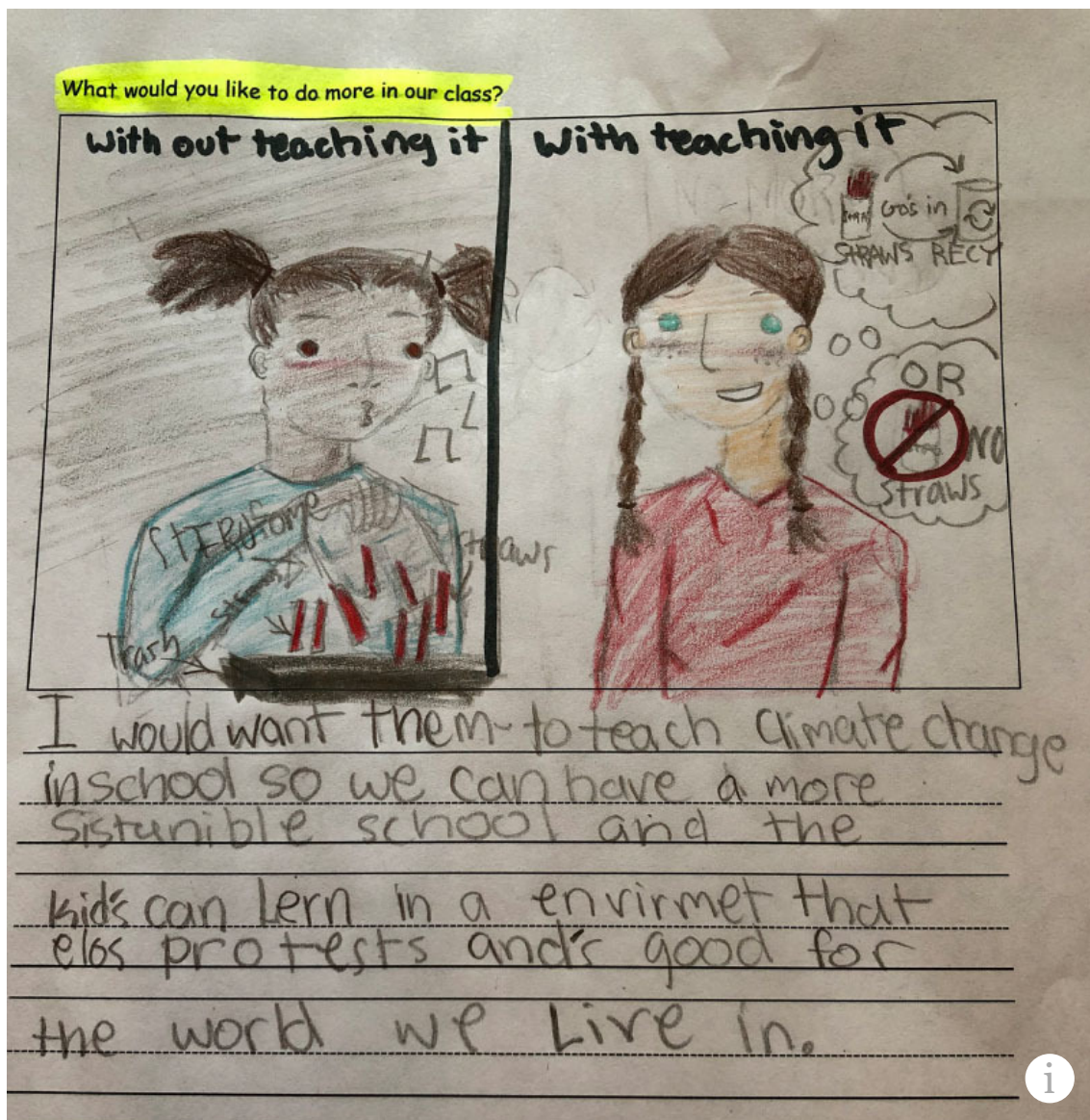
Student voice is often conflated with giving students a choice, differentiating instruction, or personalizing learning. However, when the options are circumscribed or predetermined by a teacher, a curriculum designer, or a computer program, they do not facilitate robust student voice. Accommodations like choice boards (which give students options of tasks or learning activities to complete) may grant students a degree of agency in their learning, but they do not empower students to express their views on their learning experiences, call for change to educational practice or policy, or lead change efforts. In contrast, open-ended projects, whether term papers or inquiry-based projects, can create opportunities for student voice. When students use these assignments to study topics such as their school's lunch offerings or discipline policy, and when they issue recommendations or mount a call to action as a result of their findings, they are exercising student voice.

At the school level, ad hoc student voice efforts may arise in response to an emergent issue in the school or surrounding community. The tragic death of Antwan Timbers, Jr., a student at Burlington City High School in New Jersey who was struck by a drunk driver while walking home, served as a catalyst for one such effort. Following his death, Antwan's classmates organized to change the speed limit in front of their school from 40 to 25 miles per hour. With their principal's support, students held rallies, testified before the New Jersey State Senate Transportation Committee, and collaborated with a former state senator to craft a series of bills. The bill at the heart of this package, "Antwan's Law," was officially signed into law



by Governor Murphy in January 2019 (Whittaker, 2019).

Another trend that has gained traction in schools, but still occurs irregularly, is student-led professional development. During in-service days, students may be tapped to lead sessions for teachers on engaging instructional approaches, culturally relevant teaching, or building positive student-teacher relationships. Last year at Roosevelt High School in Des Moines, Iowa, teachers met with two of their students during an in-service day to evaluate a past lesson, plan for an upcoming class, and identify their strengths and areas for improvement. Designed to curb chronic absenteeism at the school, the professional development session helped faculty begin to think differently about their practice (Ellis, 2019; Superville, 2019).



*Extracurricular Club and Program-Based.* Student voice can emerge from school clubs and other extracurricular venues. Clubs with a social justice bent, grounded in critical analyses of power and privilege, offer especially fertile ground for cultivating student voice. Gay-straight alliances, environmental justice clubs, and diversity or multicultural clubs can catalyze student voice to press for changes to school policy and practice. At one Maine high school, after talks with administrators proved fruitless, members of the Feminist Club asserted student voice when they launched a campaign to challenge their school's dress code for shaming girls for wearing shorts on an 80-degree day, rather than teaching "teachers and male students to not overly sexualize a normal body part to the point where they apparently can't function in daily life" (Brown, 2017). In Colorado, a high school environmental club used its funds to purchase a block of wind energy to power the school during the month of April, launching an annual tradition that has resulted in considerable energy savings for the school (Schelly et al., 2012).

Traditional venues for student expression, such as student government, are ironically less likely to foster student voice and power than other clubs. As Kathleen Cushman (2015) observed, "A student council often primarily exists to plan social events like proms and pep rallies" (p. 51); however, some exceptions exist. In Nevada's Washoe County School District, representative student advisory councils are working at the school level to analyze school data. They are pursuing further student-led data collection in response to emergent issues of student interest or concern, and they are planning for action in consultation with school and district staff (Davidson and Hammond, 2019).

Even when a student-led club or organization is legitimately established and recognized by the school, school leaders may not endorse the policy positions and perspectives that its student members espouse. Some school officials may respond with attempts to contravene or suppress students. This was the case at Langhorne, Pennsylvania's Neshaminy High School when student journalists voted to bar use of the word "Redskin" from the school's paper, arguing that the nickname for the school's sports team was culturally offensive. In response, the principal suspended the paper's editor-in-chief from her position for one month, and the school board passed a policy barring student editors from refusing to publish editorials or advertisements that use the term (Moselle. 2019). Other school leaders may do so

far as abolishing the groups themselves, as was the case at a Philadelphia high school when a student member of a youth organizing chapter at the school testified in front of the school board that there were not enough textbooks for students at her school. School-based youth organizing clubs can be powerful venues for student voice, but they are not without controversy (Conner, 2015; Taines, 2014).

Although less common than the aforementioned clubs and extracurricular programs, another form of after school programming that exemplifies school-sanctioned, program-based student voice initiatives occurs at the district level. As one example, the New York City Department of Education Student Voice Collaborative supports students in advocating for a citywide student voice agenda and in pursuing specific research-based change initiatives in partnership with adult staff at their schools.

*Course-Based.* Often linked to Action Civics or democratic models of schooling, course-based student voice involves students in shaping the curriculum and learning experience. Youth-led participatory action research (YPAR) has become a particularly popular model for such courses. In YPAR, students collectively identify a problem, collect and analyze evidence pertinent to the problem's root causes and effects, determine their key findings, develop an action plan to redress the problem, share their findings and recommendations, and pursue any follow-up actions they see as necessary. The Youth Engaged in Leadership and Learning curriculum offers a strong, research-based example of a YPAR curriculum that has been used in after school programs and semester or year-long courses at the middle and high school levels.

Other democratically-based curricular models empower students to select the topics they will explore and determine how they will display their mastery. For example, the Soundings Program, a year-long integrated science and humanities curriculum for eighth-graders at Radnor Middle School in Pennsylvania, engages students in collectively selecting themes they wish to study for the year. Teachers Dave Mercurio and Kyle Yeiter explain that "for each theme selected, students learn to set goals and objectives, develop and initiate plans to achieve those aims, present their results, and assess their performance. As they experience this process...students master essential skills and concepts from all academic disciplines and apply them to

real world issues" (Radnor Middle School, n.d.).

Perhaps the most radical form of school-sanctioned, curricular student voice is personalized learning, which enables students to choose which, if any, courses to take and what kinds of internships or learning experiences they might pursue in their stead. Some approved personalized learning plans (PLPs) may not have students going to school at all. Shortly after the Vermont legislature passed Act 77 in 2013, which called for all students in grades 7 – 12 to have PLPs by the 2018 – 2019 school year, the Department of Education produced a video heralding the case of Gus, who earned math, English, and science credits by becoming an apprentice goat farmer. In the video, Gus explains that he likely would have dropped out of school had it not been for his PLP. Seventeen states have embraced personalized learning as a core part of their plans to comply with the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (Molnar, 2018). Although implementation has been uneven across states, sometimes falling well short of policymakers' vision (Bishop, Downes, and Nagle, 2017), personalized learning represents a new frontier in school system-sanctioned student voice.

*Formal Governance Structures.* Giving students a seat at the decision-making table is yet another way of legitimizing student voice. This may mean including students on hiring or evaluation committees; involving students in reform initiatives (e.g., Challenge Success and UP for Learning's Youth and Adults Transforming Schools Together); establishing student seats on school boards and endowing them with full voting rights, as in California, Massachusetts, and Tennessee; or developing formal mechanisms for students to voice their concerns, propose changes, or weigh in on pending decisions. At the school level, students, faculty, and the principal of Vermont's Montpelier High School collaborated to develop the Solon Circle, a shared decision-making process that is transparent and open to all members of the school (Evans, 2009). At the district (e.g., Los Angeles, California and Richmond, Virginia) and state (e.g., Georgia and Oklahoma) levels, superintendents have established student advisory councils which, while not enlisting students to lead change efforts, do ensure that educational leaders hear directly from students about what is and is not working in their schools. Other examples of successful state level student voice initiatives include Oregon Student Voice, the Prichard Committee Student Voice Team in Kentucky, and the Iowa Student Learning Institute. At the federal level high school students have increasingly been invited to Capitol Hill to



ederal level, high school students have increasingly been invited to Capitol Hill to offer testimony at hearings on issues such as teacher quality, the school-to-prison pipeline, and school safety. These mechanisms enable students to have a say, if not a vote, in shaping educational decisions that affect them.

Another governance model, focused on school disciplinary policy, encompasses youth courts and restorative justice programs, which create opportunities for students to respond directly to their classmates' infractions, administering justice while acting as stewards of school culture and climate. In youth courts, which can be schoolbased or community-based, youth assume roles as judges, prosecutors, defense attorneys, and jurors. Restorative justice programs, meanwhile, involve students in collectively identifying the harm that was done to the community and choosing appropriate reparations. Restorative practices are geared at promoting meaningful accountability, healing, a sense of belonging, and a caring community, rather than punishment and exclusion. These practices center student voice as students work together to ensure a safe and growth-inducing learning environment.

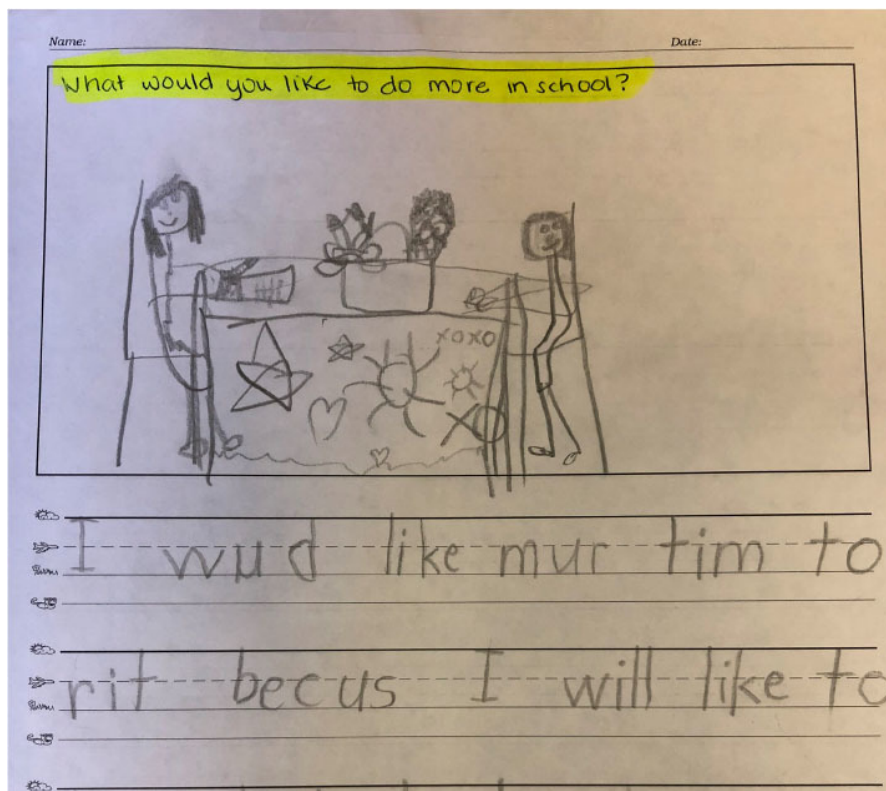
## **Unsanctioned Student Voice**

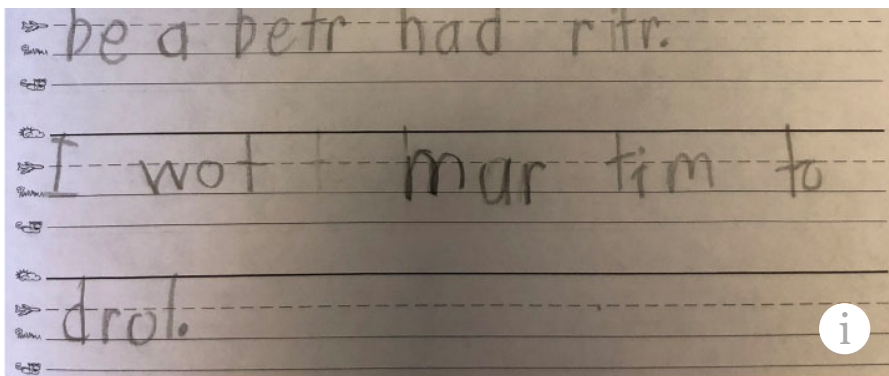
In addition to the four types of student voice outlined above, there are at least three types of student voice efforts that are not endorsed or supported by school leaders or school systems. These include momentum-based student activism, communitybased educational organizing, and legal challenges to education policy.

*Momentum-Based Student Activism.* This type of student activism may be well-planned, but it is often spontaneous and responsive to current events and typically met with reticence, if not active resistance by school leaders or district administrators. The Students of Color Matter group at Ethical Culture Fieldston School in the Bronx offers a case in point (Shapiro, 2019). In March 2019, after an unsatisfying response by school leaders to a racist incident, a group of students occupied a school building, locking it from the inside and posting their list of demands on the door. Over the course of three days, more than 140 students joined in the occupation. Eventually, administrators acquiesced to most of the students' demands, including agreeing to hire more faculty of color, recruit more students of color, and implement racial bias training programs. To ward off momentum-based

activism, administrators will often threaten suspensions or other disciplinary measures for participating students when walkouts or strikes seem to be in the offing.

*Community-Based Educational Organizing.* Since the mid-1990s, community-based organizations have been supporting students in learning to organize and effect change in their communities. Student voice is an animating force in these groups' campaigns, which often target school administrators or district policymakers and focus on educational justice work (Braxton, Buford, and Marasigan, 2013). Although youth organizing groups can claim significant victories at school, district, and state levels, including increased educational funding, these fights are often hard won and span many years (Dolan, Christens, and Lin, 2015). For example, the Philadelphia Student Union launched the Campaign for Nonviolent Schools in 2009 to dismantle the school-to-prison pipeline in the School District of Philadelphia. It was not until 2012 that they secured significant changes to the school district's student code of conduct, such as elimination of out-of-school-suspensions for dress code violations and other low-level infractions. Their work continues today as they push for greater implementation of restorative justice practices and fight against the use of metal detectors in schools, which they say criminalizes students (Murphy and Wolfman-Arent, 2019; Pope, 2012).





*Legal Challenges to Education Policy.* Suing their school or school system is yet another way students might exercise student voice. One of the most famous examples of student voice in the American legal system is *Tinker v. Des Moines*. This lawsuit was triggered when the Des Moines Independent School District suspended three students for wearing black armbands to school as a symbol of their opposition to the Vietnam War. In a 7 – 2 decision in 1969, the Supreme Court ruled in favor of the students, holding that students do not "shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate" (*Tinker v. Des Moines*, 1969). Through this landmark case, the student plaintiffs were able to change school discipline policy, while ensuring students' rights to free expression. Currently, students in Rhode Island have filed suit against their state for failing to provide an adequate civics education (Wong, 2018), and in Detroit, Michigan a case brought by students against the state for denying their access to literacy is making its way through an appeals process (Young and McMahon, 2019).

## **Outcomes of Student Voice**

Research on student voice highlights benefits for students, teachers, and schools. Students who participate directly in student voice initiatives can develop stronger leadership, communication, collaboration, and analytical skills (Mager and Nowalk, 2012). Because student voice initiatives ask students to assume responsibility for effecting change, whether in the classroom, school, or broader educational system, these activities can promote civic and sociopolitical development as well (Arthurs, 2018; Conner, in press). As Peter Levine and Kai Kawashima-Ginsberg (2017) explain, "Young people develop into more effective, skilled, and knowledgeable citizens when they feel that students influence the climate and policies of their schools and

that all students' voices are respected and valued" (p. 4). Researchers have also linked involvement in student voice to important developmental outcomes, including agency, belonging, and competence, all of which are critical antecedents to healthy youth development (Mitra, 2004; Rudduck, 2007).

In addition to these nonacademic outcomes, students involved in student voice initiatives develop metacognitive skills as they learn how to think and talk about their experiences as learners (Beattie and Rich, 2018). Student voice has also been associated with greater engagement in school (Baroutsis, McGregor, and Mills, 2015; Fielding, 2001; Smyth, 2006). Some empirical evidence links participation in student-led educational change campaigns to improvements in academic achievement and attainment (Camarota, 2007; Conner and Slattery, 2014; Rogers and Terriquez, 2016) as well as decreases in alienation or disengagement in school (Taines, 2012a).



One explanation for these enhanced student outcomes is that students become more invested in their education when they are asked to share their views on what is and is not working in their school and classrooms. Another possible explanation is

and is not working in their school and classrooms. Another possible explanation is that by sharing their perspectives and ideas for reform, students help their teachers and administrators to rethink current practice and policy and make changes that are more attuned to students' needs. Indeed, research finds that student voice can spark teacher learning (or unlearning) and lead to improvements in instructional practices and curricular design (Cook-Sather, 2009; Mitra, 2008; Rudduck, 2007). As teachers and administrators become more aware of and responsive to students' needs, interests, and goals, they create learning environments that are more engaging and more effective. Student voice has proven to be a particularly powerful intervention for struggling students, because it can help teachers learn how to better support students whose specific needs might have otherwise gone unnoticed or misunderstood (Fielding, 2001; Mitra, 2008).

At the school level, student voice can result in better school culture and climate as well as more successful reform efforts and equitable education policies (Conner, Ebby-Rosin, and Slattery, 2015). Research finds that student voice programs can bring about safer and more welcoming schools (Flanagan et al., 2007; Taines, 2012a). One way this shift happens is through improving student-teacher relationships (Baroutsis, McGregor, and Mills, 2015; Rudduck, 2007). When teachers and students work together in common cause, they build mutual trust and respect (Mitra, 2008). Furthermore, feeling heard and valued is a key component of positive student-teacher relationships (Phillippo et al., 2017). Not only do student-teacher relationships improve, but reform efforts are more likely to succeed when students have a say in their design and implementation. Whether they target school schedules (Osberg, Pope, and Galloway, 2006), cafeteria food and bathroom cleanliness (Wholey and Burkes, 2015; Taines, 2012b), school overcrowding (Mediratta, Shah, and McAlister, 2009), or student feedback on teaching (Sussman, 2015; Gunther, 2016), evidence is mounting that school-based youth-adult partnerships and student-led campaigns can catalyze significant changes in schools. These changes can translate into better learning conditions and improved student outcomes.

## Recommendations

Despite the different types of student voice, a growing number of examples and a



Despite the different types of student voice, a growing number of examples, and a robust body of literature documenting its benefits, student voice remains rare. A recent national study found that nearly half (49%) of student respondents felt that none or few of their teachers gave them a voice in their high school classrooms and only 2% reported having a voice in school level decision-making (Conner, in press). Although it is beyond the scope of this article to examine why these numbers are so low, it is clear that student voice runs against the grain of traditional school power hierarchies.

Careful planning and preparation are required to realize the far-reaching value of student voice. Educators have legitimate fears about student voice that need to be overcome, including worries about losing control of their classrooms and concerns about not having enough time. While students may be hungry to share their perspectives, adults need training to avoid the pitfalls of tokenizing students, manipulating them, or further alienating them through disingenuous efforts.

The author's research with teachers who are learning to solicit student voice suggests the following guideposts:

- Start small by piloting a student feedback survey or having an informal conversation about what is and is not working with a few students during a preparation period. These test runs can help challenge educators' assumptions that students may not take the opportunity to offer feedback seriously, may make unrealistic demands, or may say or write comments that wound. They can also help educators begin to see the value of engaging students as thought partners in instructional planning, curricular design, or policymaking.
- Find and share models and resources. The internet offers a plethora of student voice toolkits, curricula, and examples. Websites such as [soundout.org](https://www.soundout.org), [whatkidscando.org](https://www.whatkidscando.org), and [yparhub.berkeley.edu](https://www.yparhub.berkeley.edu) contain lesson plans, guides, and inspiration. When you find or develop something that works, share it with a colleague to scale the practice.
- When discussing student voice with colleagues, try reframing implementation challenges as learning opportunities. Doing so can prime educators' curiosity about what and how they can learn from students and how they might partner

with students to bring about more engaging and effective schooling. It can tie into a vision of your school as a learning organization or a learning community, in which everyone is invested in their own and one another's growth and development.

At the September 20, 2019 Youth Climate Strike, some students held signs reading, "We are missing our lessons so we can teach you one." Although the implied lesson seems to be about climate justice and the imperative to act, perhaps there is also a lesson to be drawn from the largest climate protest in history (Laville and Watts, 2019) about the value of taking young people's concerns seriously and collaborating with them to improve our institutions and effect needed change. Embracing student voice is one way to do just that.

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