

Research Matters / Listen Up!

Bryan Goodwin and Samantha E. Holquist

Bring student voice into school decision making to change the culture.

At a large urban high school in the Pacific Northwest, school climate data told administrators they had a problem.¹ Students felt alienated, disconnected, and apathetic—in a word, disengaged. So the school leaders sprang into action, lavishing students with pep rallies, theme days, and other festivities to make school more "fun."

The students' collective response to these efforts was "meh." They still felt disengaged. Exasperated administrators wondered *what more* the students could possibly need, until a few savvy students offered to help. Let us talk to our peers, they said. We'll figure out what's really going on.

They hosted a series of "climate summits," inviting other students to share their experiences in school and offer suggestions for improving the school climate and their engagement. Through these conversations, an unlikely and simple starting place surfaced—one that for the administrators had remained hidden in plain sight: Students had *too little time to eat lunch*. After standing in a 15-minute queue and jockeying for a place to sit down in the cafeteria, the teens barely had time left to eat or decompress with friends. The solution? Tack an extra 15 minutes onto the lunch period. While this scheduling tweak did not solve all the school's woes, it was a step forward for both administrators and students.

Inviting student voice into school improvement conversations has similarly remained hidden in plain sight for many school leaders—although a growing body of research suggests that inviting students into these conversations is a powerful way to unearth what's really happening in a school and thus to ensure improvement efforts solve the *right* problem.

What Students See That Leaders Don't

Studies suggest that students as young as nine years old can provide meaningful input into school decisions (Flutter & Rudduck, 2004) and that that input benefits both students and schools. For example, a review of 32 empirical studies of efforts to involve students in school decisions (Mager & Nowak, 2012) found positive effects on student life skills, self-esteem, student-teacher relationships and, to a lesser extent, student achievement. It also found positive effects in school climate for more than three-quarters of school sites studied, including better student attitudes about school and decreased behavioral problems, bullying, and racism.

An in-depth case study of a student voice initiative in a California high school (Mitra, 2008) offers a finer point to these data. The high school had a graduation rate hovering around 50 percent, and one in three teachers were resigning each year. At a loss for how to dispel the malaise that had settled over the school, administrators invited students to participate in a series of focus groups to share what they thought needed to change. Afterward, with some facilitation, students analyzed transcripts from these conversations and surfaced four opportunities for improvement: boosting the school's reputation, increasing counseling services for incoming freshmen, improving student-teacher communication, and raising the quality of teaching. As students grew more energized, they offered to join teacher professional learning sessions, which not only motivated resistant teachers to become more involved in the sessions, but also provided compelling insights—for example, that English language learners needed teachers to talk slower, visualize concepts, and connect learning to student interests.

If You Ask Them, Make Sure You Listen

It's worth noting, though, that if done poorly or disingenuously, efforts to solicit student voice can have *negative* effects, including student disillusionment, frustration, and disengagement (Mager & Nowak, 2012). Here are some guidelines for encouraging student voice in improvement efforts:

- *Clearly define roles and responsibilities.* Studies (Mitra & Gross, 2009) show that clarifying roles and expectations for student voice initiatives builds trust and helps students feel more comfortable with, and willing to participate in, opportunities to express their opinions. For example, if you're asking students to respond to a survey, share how and when you'll use the results to make decisions.
- *Identify an adult ally.* Initially, students may be hesitant to share their opinions and need an adult to encourage their input and champion their role. Case studies of student voice efforts in San Francisco schools highlighted the critical role of an adult ally—a teacher or staff member to mentor students, encourage them to share ideas, and serve as a bridge between students and adults (Mitra, 2014).
- *Provide students with professional learning.* Case studies in Oregon and Kentucky found that encouraging student voice requires students to contribute in situations they may find uncomfortable, such as speaking to leaders or providing feedback on school policies (Holquist, 2019). Leaders, therefore, need to think about teaching knowledge and skills that might not ordinarily be covered in the school's curriculum, such as school governance, survey research, and electronic communication.
- *Offer multiple forums for participation.* Many students will feel uncomfortable speaking to administrators, responding to surveys, or participating on site councils (Mitra, 2014; Murphy, 2017). Offer them multiple (and creative) ways to participate in decision making, such as painting pictures, writing poems, or taking photos to express their opinions (Walls & Holquist, 2019).
- *Listen to all voices.* Student voice initiatives can backfire if educators don't value *all* students' thoughts, feelings, and recommendations (Hart, 2008; Holquist, 2019). Invite a broad array of students to participate and be open to all voices, including dissenting ones, as students will quickly see token engagement for what is and become unwilling to share their opinions in the future.

Inviting students to share candidly what their challenges are shows the real value of student voice—helping schools solve the right problem and avoid *over-solving* the wrong ones.

References

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Endnote

¹ Samantha E. Holquist was working with the school's administrators at the time to support their school climate efforts.

Bryan Goodwin is the president and CEO of McREL International and the author, most recently, of *Out of Curiosity: Restoring the Power of Hungry Minds for Better Schools, Workplaces, and Lives* (McREL, 2018). **Samantha E. Holquist** is a researcher at McREL International who specializes in student voice in K–12 decision making.