

Meaningful Student Involvement

Presented by
Adam Fletcher, Youth Ambassador
Youth Leadership & Service Team
Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction
PO Box 47200
Olympia, WA 98504-7200
360.725.6105
<mailto:afletcher@ospi.wednet.edu>



Meaningful Student Involvement

An idea guide

Purpose:

By promoting meaningful student involvement, schools can ready students for a lifetime of significant participation in their communities and nation. Alfie Kohn concluded that meaningful student involvement in school decision-making has four distinct outcomes on school climate:³

1. **Effects on general well-being.** *Its good for all people to experience a sense of control over their lives.*
2. **Effects on behavior and values.** *If we want children to take responsibility for their own behavior, we must first give them responsibility, and plenty of it.*
3. **Effects on academic achievement.** *Students who feel empowered through self-determination will likely have greater motivation.*
4. **Effects on teachers.** *Educators who are willing to share power may well find that they benefit directly as one's job becomes a good deal more interesting when it involved collaborating with students to decide what is going to happen.¹*

This idea guide will introduce several ideas and examples of meaningful student involvement in schools, and provide resources for teachers and administrators increase and enhance meaningful student involvement in their schools.

Background:

In schools today, students are often addressed as passive learners, merely participants in their educations, as opposed to partners. Opportunities for meaningful and significant student involvement in education planning, school leadership and self-governance are primarily offered to gifted and advanced students only, and even then with reservation from the teachers and administrators. However, a recent survey¹ summarized the following conclusions:

- Students need to become directly involved with the decision-making processes in schools;
- stakeholders, including teachers, counselors and administrators, need to believe that students' needs are important and that their attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors are key to their success in school;
- schools must find an organized way in which students' needs, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors are reverberated through the system and become an integral part of the problem-solving process; and
- that students need feedback and validation that their voices have been heard.

The actual practices of meaningful student involvement vary, and include all grade levels and capabilities. Examples include students in kindergarten having an hour a day to choose what to do, and high school students being involved in hiring teachers and administrators. Through effective, empowering opportunities to use their voice, experience and knowledge to make meaningful decisions, all students can have ownership in their learning, and the investment to succeed.²

STUDENTS AS PARTNERS IN THEIR EDUCATIONS

When Student Voice is supported, students can become partners in their education. Healthy student partnerships take commitment from both students and teachers in the following four components:

RESPECT

Respect is mutual: *You give it, you receive it.*

- A culture of respect shatters stereotypes based on age.
- Students respect teachers who listen and ask challenging questions.
- A culture of respect provides all people the opportunity to act on their dreams and learn from their mistakes.

COMMUNICATION

Listen up: *An honest and open exchange of ideas is crucial.*

- Students are best heard when teachers step back and students speak up.
- Teachers are best heard when they are straight up and explain where they're coming from.
- All people's ideas and opinions are valuable and must be heard.

INVESTMENT

It takes time: *Investing in the future is accepting that students are leaders today.*

- Students and teachers must first set their fears aside and take a chance on each other.
- Teachers must provide students with the information, education and support they will need to succeed. They must also develop their own ability to engage students.
- Strong partnerships require patience and courage.

MEANINGFUL INVOLVEMENT

Count us in: *Decisions about students should be made with students.*

- Teachers need to support students in taking on responsibility based on what they can do, not what they have done.
- Reflection helps everyone appreciate the importance of their education - for themselves, for their communities and for their lives.
- Students and teachers must hold each other accountable for all their decisions and actions.
- Students and teachers should continually challenge the impact of schools in their lives.⁴

IDEAS FOR TEACHERS

Student-led parent conferences – Students facilitate parent conferences, with the teacher as a supportive partner in the process. In preparation, students evaluate their learning, and as an outcome, co-create plans to continue and expand their learning (see below).

Student-led Conference Goals

A recent gathering of middle school faculties from throughout the United States developed the following goals for student-led conferences to achieve:

- *to encourage students to accept personal responsibility for their academic performance;*
- *to teach students the process of self-evaluation;*
- *to facilitate the development of students' organizational and oral communication skills and to increase their self-confidence;*
- *to encourage students, parents, and teachers to engage in open and honest dialogue; and*
- *to increase parent attendance at conferences.*

Faculties using this model frequently report that, as a result of involvement in student-led conferences, parent and teacher bonds are strengthened. Both teacher and parent are more likely to initiate subsequent contacts throughout the remainder of the school year.⁵

Self-directed learning – Students, in partnership with teachers and parents, implement learning plans in particular subject areas, developing learning goals and meeting assessment criteria throughout.

Advocacy education – Students educated to advocate and support concerns in their peer groups, school, community and nation.

Service learning – Students research, plan, implement and evaluate a community service project linking academic learning from classroom with action in community settings. All projects include reflection activities to increase learning.

Student-teacher team teaching/student-run classes – Students work with teachers to facilitate classroom learning in subjects that they have expertise in, including history, business and science. Students teach their peer groups or cross-grade courses.

IDEAS FOR TEACHERS (cont.)

Student evaluations of classes and/or teachers – Students provide input and considerations for teachers and administrators regarding the effectiveness of curriculum, quality of teacher instruction methods and student voice in the classroom (see below).

Sample Student Assessment OF Teachers

- Does the teacher understand the students' point of view?
- Does this teacher seem to care whether students learn?
- Does this teacher behave differently towards students of different grades or academic performance?
- Has this teacher been helpful to you in your learning efforts this year?
- Does the teacher usually know what he/she is talking about?
- Does the teacher give students the opportunity to confirm and get a firm grasp of what they've learned?
- Is the teacher enthusiastic about the class?⁶

Student Peer evaluations of classroom performance – Students providing constructive feedback regarding student-led teaching and presentations, as well as behavior and learning attitudes.

Encouraging student voice in learning – Students encouraged to express their concerns, intentions, attitudes and opinions through the arts, media and advocacy opportunities.

Student designed courses and curriculum – Teachers train students to research, plan, design and evaluate course curriculum throughout schools.

Curriculum emphasizing meaningful student involvement – Schools and teachers incorporate innovative programs for teaching students, including those designated progressive, democratic, open, free, experimental, or alternative; or educational philosophies called developmental, constructivist, holistic, or learner-centered; in specific innovations such as whole-language learning, discovery-based science, or authentic assessment; they may include experiential and applied learning methods, or service learning, collaborative or group teaching; and they support the daily practice of teachers whose natural instinct is to treat children with respect.

IDEAS FOR SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS

Training for student decision-makers – All students are engaged in constant and meaningful decision-making opportunities in their own education, school-wide and community issues. Schools train students and adults to be effective and empowered members of decision-making groups (see below).

14 Ways Students Can Participate in School Decision-making⁷

1. Deciding the number of employees in each school position
2. Selecting textbooks and instructional materials
3. Selecting a new principal when there is a vacancy
4. Consulting with principal when other vacancies are filled
5. Deciding what is to be taught
6. Deciding which teaching methods will be used
7. Deciding which classes teachers will teach
8. Deciding which classes students will take
9. Deciding how time will be used during the day
10. Deciding how the school building will be used
11. Making discipline and classroom management policies
12. Deciding issues concerning extracurricular activities
13. Determining how available funds are to be spent
14. Planning activities for teacher in-service days

Student-based school needs assessments – Students voice their concerns and praise on topics including school climate, student ownership and teacher/principal responsiveness.

Student action committees – Diverse student groups reflect the attitude and ability of students throughout the school regarding a wide-range of topics, including class offerings, school activities and teachers, adult coordinators and peer leadership.

IDEAS FOR SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS (cont.)

Curriculum development committees – Student voice is included when new courses are added or dropped at the local and district levels. Student voice is included in course selection, implementation and review.

Framework for Student-Teacher Partnerships in Curriculum Planning⁸

1. A series of proposed topics and/or themes.
2. Essential questions designed to provoke collaborative inquiry by students and teachers, driving the program forward and focused on constructing knowledge.
3. An activities “menu” from which advisory groups can pick and choose how they want to investigate ideas and pursue essential questions.
4. Assessments connected to the activities – pushing the inquiry deeper and requiring students to reflect critically and demonstrate understanding.

School and/or site councils – Students engaged in community-wide discussions about school policy. Students have full membership, and are empowered to go to meetings by the validation of their concerns and beliefs. Students are encouraged to push for what they need and want in their education.

IDEAS FOR DISTRICT ADMINISTRATORS

Student-led teacher training – Students facilitate professional development for teachers including (but not limited to) service learning, diversity and using technology in the classroom. Students’ teaching is evaluated by teachers and administrators in attendance, and guided by supporting adults.

Students Conduct Teacher In-Service

Vashon Island (WA) School District- February, 2001

For two consecutive Thursdays in February, students from the Vashon Island Youth Council conducted teacher in-service trainings. The young people, ages 12-18, educated teachers, school administrators, city officials and other community members about service learning for in two three-hour sessions.

“The students were organized, knowledgeable and energetic in their presentations,” remarked Nasue Nishida, Learn and Serve Program Specialist at the State Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction. “They presented service learning in an entirely new way for many experienced and new teachers and interested community participants.”

The students taught participants from all levels of service learning knowledge and experience, from service learning “rookies” through the most seasoned practioners.

“Most workshops can’t meet the needs of everyone there. These students did that, engaging everyone in lively dialogue, initiative activities, small group facilitation, brainstorming and action planning,” said Nishida.

When asked whether she’ll promote this method, Nishida responded “Yes, definitely. I think that students in all areas, rural and urban, wealthy and low-income, have worthy experiences to share with adults, and their teachers. We will promote this heavily in the future.”

Students on local boards of education and/or district school boards– Students have equal effect and full participation in decision-making processes through education about issues, insurance of transportation for regular attendance, pointed inclusion in discussions and debate, and full voting rights.

Formal student involvement in school, district and state staff hiring – Students have equal voice on interview panels and application review teams. Students are encouraged to engage applicants about student and community concerns and viewpoints without parroting adults.

IDEAS FOR STUDENTS

Show interest – Schools don't assume that students want to be involved. Let your teachers and principals know that you want to be involved meaningfully in your high school. Give supportive adults a list of your desires, and be prepared to act on them.

Prairie High Senior Adds Her Voice To School Policy

Columbian; Vancouver, WA Aug 18, 2000

For Carly Cyr, having two students on the State Board of Education is a no-brainer.

Many policies, such as the new graduation requirements, are drafted by adults but directly affect students. So for Cyr, a senior at Prairie High School, adding a students' perspective to the board makes sense.

"We're there to remind them of things they might not think about," Cyr said. "They need to know what we're thinking."

State Superintendent Terry Bergeson said students have been included on the state board for several years.

"The board members were making so many decisions that affected students that they decided it would be nice to have a student voice on the board,"

Bergeson said. "(Students) aren't voting members, but they can influence votes, and I've seen Carly do it."

Bergeson said Cyr's input has been valuable to the board.

"She's articulate and very bright," Bergeson said. "It's a sacrifice for her to be on the board, because she has to go back to school and make up her work. But she cares about fellow students. She goes home and talks to students."

Cyr said she tries to think of all students, not only those who are like her. She makes good grades and is involved with sports, peer counseling, National Honor Society and community service projects.

"Like with the graduation requirements," Cyr said. "I worry about it. What about those people who don't test well? You have to put people you know in that situation. I think about those students who get good grades and those who are struggling."

"I feel so lucky," she said. "I realize that what I've been doing is important."

Identify supportive teachers – Students working in partnership with supportive adults to affect change in school practices can greatly enhance success.

Offer direction and support to state agencies – Students providing suggestions and advice based on their experience and opinions to the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction demonstrates concern and investment in their education.

Student organizations – Take advantage of current school groups to involve students meaningfully throughout schools. By working together with supportive adults, ASBs, student councils and students on site councils can have a significant voice in school decision-making.

IDEAS FOR STUDENTS (cont.)

Student/school forums – Student organized and facilitated forums focused on pertinent issues with full school involvement, including students, teachers, staff and administrators.

Student press – Encouraging student voice through the press increases participation in school by fostering ownership and critical thinking skills in students, and responsiveness from adults.

Bibliography

1. Sharon Kruse, "Student Voices: A report from focus group data," *NASSP Bulletin*, National Association of Secondary School Principals, Sept 00 pp. 77-85.
2. Ruthanne Kurth-Schai, "The Roles of Youth in Society: A Reconceptualization," *The Educational Forum*, Winter 98, pp. 112-132.
3. Alfie Kohn, "Choices for Children: Why and How to Let Students Decide," *Phi Delta Kappan*, Sept. 93, pp. 8-20.
4. The principles listed are adapted from a product of the Youth Voice Project at the University of North Carolina- Chapel Hill. The Youth Voice Project produced a series of informational brochures, written by young people and adults, on how better to involve youth in planning and operating organizations. The Project's writers talked with over 500 people in more than 40 states encompassing dozens of schools.
5. Hackmann, Donald G, Student-Led Conferences at the Middle Level, ERIC ED407171, 1997-05-00, ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education Champaign IL.
6. Look Who's Talking Now: Student Views of Learning in Restructuring Schools, 1997, School Change Collaborative, Portland.
7. Patmor, George and McIntyre, John D. (1999) "Involving Students in School Decision Making," *NASSP Bulletin*, pp. 74-78.
8. Kathleen Cushman, "Empowering Students: Essential Schools' Missing Link," *Horace*, Sept. 94, p. 4.

Resources

Books

Paulo Freire, Teachers As Cultural Workers: Letters to Those Who Dare To Teach, Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998

This last work from internationally respected educator Paulo Freire makes his ideas on education and social reform accessible to a broad audience of teachers, students, and parents. Freire shows how a teacher's success depends on observing individual students' approaches to learning and by the teacher's adapting teaching methods to students' learning methods. – from Adam Fletcher

Michael Wehmeyer, Making It Happen: Student Involvement in Education Planning, Decision Making and Instruction, Brookes Publishing, 1998.

"Making It Happen gathers together disparate lines of research and practice that have been gradually accruing and gaining support over the past 25 past years. It also presents creative new thinking and methods. Readers... will have the 'a-ha' experience of seeing this new gestalt." – from the publishers

N. Amanda Branscombe, Dixie Goswami and Jeffrey Schwartz, Students Teaching, Teachers Learning, Boynton/Cook, 1992.

By allowing teachers to be collaborators in the classroom through co-facilitating learning with students, classrooms can become centers of reciprocity. Ideas in this book, including students and teachers as co-researchers, student-sustained discussions, and redefining student-teacher interactions, clearly reflect an progressive attitude towards meaningful student involvement in schools. – from Adam Fletcher

Curriculum

Northwest Regional Education Laboratory, Listening to Student Voices: Self-study Toolkit, Portland, OR, 2001

Organizations

Student Empowerment

Institute for Community Leadership
2113 13th Avenue South
Seattle, WA 98144
www.icleadership.org

The Giraffe Project
PO Box 759
Langley WA 98260
360-221-7989
www.giraffe.org

Students Teaching Teachers

Generation Why
1113 Legion Way SE
Olympia, WA 98501
360.753.8835
www.genyes.org

Service Learning

Corporation for National Service
www.nationalservice.org

America's Promise
www.americaspromise.org

Points of Light Foundation
www.pointsoflight.org

Experiential Learning

Association for Experiential Learning
www.aee.org

Experiential Learning Service Center
www.umn.edu/elsc/profile/contenttable.html

For more information about the information contained in this packet, please contact:

Youth Leadership & Service Team, OSPI
PO Box 47200, Olympia, WA 98502
360.725.6105
afletcher@ospi.wednet.edu