SEL TRENDS

Empowering Youth Voice

July 2018 Vol. 2

Events since the February school shootings in Parkland, Florida, offer a potent reminder of the power of youth voice. Marches occurred in hundreds of U.S. cities and scores of countries. The Republican-dominated Florida legislature passed gun safety legislation, an action that was previously unthinkable. Scores of new efforts are mobilizing more young people to vote in the 2018 congressional mid-terms and other elections. A Time Magazine cover story names Youth as #1 of the Top 100 Most Influential People in the World.

Youth voice is alive, well, and receiving unprecedented attention.

"People are so impressed and surprised by what the students from Parkland, Florida, can do. But they had to leave the building to find space for leadership. It's better to create the space inside the schools."

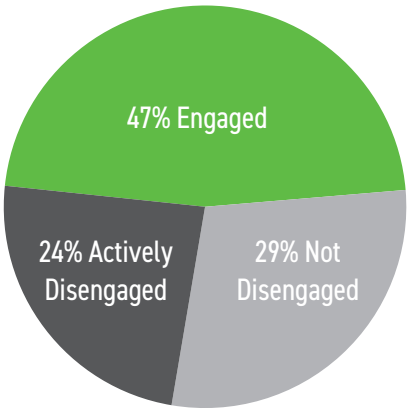
— Cristina Salgado, Chicago Public Schools

Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning
CASEL.org

Why This Issue? Why Now?

The 2017 Gallup Student Survey found that most U.S. high school students are disengaged. Less than one-third of eleventh-graders are engaged with school, compared with nearly three-quarters of fifth-graders. Only one in four eleventh-graders says that adults at school really care about them, compared with two of three fifth-graders.

GALLUP STUDENT ENGAGEMENT INDEX



Source: http://www.gallupstudentpoll.com/197492/2016-national-scorecard.aspx

A Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence survey of 22,000 high-school-age youth in October 2015 found that most students described negative emotions in response to "How do you feel at school?" Of the top 10 emotions named, eight were negative. Students also said they feel bored 70% of the time and stressed 80% of the time.

In its brief "Learning from Student Voice: What Do Students Have to Say about School Culture?," YouthTruth reported that only 30% of high school students rate their school culture positively; 57% of students agree that most adults treat students with respect, but only 34% agree that students treat adults with respect; and only 37% of students feel that discipline at their school is fair.

A landmark 2006 survey from Civic Enterprises and Peter Hart Associates found high levels of disengagement among students who left school before graduating. Although 65% said there was a staff member or teacher who cared about their success, only 56% said they could speak to an adult about school problems, and 41% said they had someone in school with whom they could discuss personal problems.

Learning from Leaders

Helping students to find and use their voice to make change requires both the promotion of students' social and emotional competence and a safe and caring learning environment where adults are listening to and valuing what students have to say. Educators from our Collaborating Districts Initiative (CDI) have been prioritizing youth voice efforts for many years. Their work might not draw the banner headlines of marches on Washington, but the impact is evident.

On any given day in a district or school that has prioritized SEL, students as young as kindergartners will be helping to set the classroom norms and lead morning meetings and other instructional opportunities. Middle and high school students are mediating disputes, advising on school policy, and experiencing opportunities to give meaningful input into decisions about how the school is run. In some cases, they serve on teams that help hire key staff such as the principal.

With SEL's emphasis on building self- and social awareness, working in teams, self-advocacy and agency, and identifying and nurturing the strengths of each student, student engagement is central to these schools' work. Students are listened to and respected. Their opinions are heard and acted on. Their well-being, holistically defined, is paramount.

Three of our CDI districts are considered leaders in this work.

Chicago: School-Based Empowerment

For the past five years, Chicago Public Schools has supported Student Voice Committees (SVCs) in every high school. From six schools at the start, the effort has now grown to 70 high schools and 35 middle schools.

Unlike traditional student councils, which tend to focus on events like fundraising and organizing student social events, these committees focus on deeper issues of culture and student well-being. These include: (1) *Teaching and learning:* working with teachers to create feedback protocols and ways to improve staff/student relationships. (2) *Health:* focusing on providing students with mental health resources and creating peer mentoring programs for students to support each other. (3) *Discipline and attendance:* helping craft more supportive policies such as restorative practices. (4) *Facilities and nutrition:* focusing on school infrastructure projects and making improvements to school lunches.

"Students have been in school most of their lives. They're the real experts. When adults co-create and cultivate a space with students so they can be a part of all decisions impacting school culture, the entire school community wins."
— Cristina Salgado

Members are self-selected or nominated by teachers. "We deliberately want to find nontraditional student leaders," says Cristina Salgado, who manages the program as part of her role in the Department of Social Science and Civic Engagement. (Close cooperation and co-training with the Office of Social and Emotional Learning ensure SVC facilitators understand the basics of SEL.) Each school committee has between 15 and 25 members who tend to meet weekly during the school year. At the district level, a Student Advisory Council meets regularly with CEO Janice Jackson.

At an annual December student leadership conference and then during quarterly networking meetings, students who have been trained during paid summer internships teach their peers about the basics of leadership: conducting research surveys, leading effective meetings, and understanding issues such as race, equity, and oppression. Students have the opportunity to share strategies, identify common issues, and learn from each other.

These basic themes are supplemented by workshops on specific issues selected by the student participants during the conferences and quarterly meetings. Workshop examples: taking care of yourself after a trauma, improving relationships between youth and the police, and using restorative practices to be heard constructively.

In about half the high schools, student leaders also serve as representatives on the Local School Council, a powerful group involved in everything from hiring the principal to setting budgets. The CPS Student Advisory Council and district officials are trying to increase student representation on these councils in addition to supporting the adults who work with them to be more receptive to student input and leadership.

Salgado sees multiple benefits for students, teachers, and staff alike. Students learn and have a chance to practice the skills that will serve them well in high school and beyond. They see their ideas acted on, which empowers them to engage even more. Schools benefit from their unique insights. "Students have been in school most of their lives. They're the real experts," says Salgado. "When adults co-create and cultivate a space with students so they can be a part of all decisions impacting school culture, the entire school community wins."

RESOURCES

- One-page overview of CPS' student voice committees
- Google folder with multiple student voice resources including a curriculum and action planning template
- 7-minute video created by CPS Student Voice Committee

Cleveland: Driven By Data

For Cleveland Metropolitan School District, student engagement was mandated by the Cleveland Plan, a strategic initiative created by Cleveland's mayor, other civic leaders, and school district leaders in 2012. CEO Eric Gordon has turned what could have been a compliance exercise into a core part of his work.

Gordon meets quarterly with 450 students, 10 from each of the district's high schools. This Student Advisory Committee is designed to give students voice in the climate of their schools and to make suggestions for improvement. The conversations focus on the big issues: doing a better job of preparing students for college and careers, improving safety, and strengthening social and emotional learning. The school-level recommendations are shared with the building leadership team and fellow students. The information is also shared at staff meetings to further implement change. The students also give feedback about the district's operations.

Data from the district's Conditions for Learning surveys drives the conversation. "CFL is the fulcrum. It is referenced throughout the year," says Denine Goolsby, executive director of Humanware, Cleveland's SEL initiative.

For example, during the first session this year, students saw that even though graduation rates were rising, college enrollment rates were falling. In response, they and district leaders brainstormed solutions such as offering more Advanced Placement courses and scheduling more college visits. Other priority issues they have addressed include boosting student attendance after holidays, ways to peacefully protest, and enhancing relationships between young people and community police.

"They have something to say. We need to be willing to listen and include their ideas in our school decision-making processes," says Goolsby. "As adults, we think we're running the school, but the reality is that when children want to do something, they can make it happen. We must involve them as collaborative partners."

As in Chicago, students benefit from learning leadership skills. They get multiple chances to hear different perspectives; the informal "mix and mingle" interactions with other students are a key part of the quarterly meetings with Gordon. Students also see the power of using data to drive discussions and ultimately change. They also have a chance to get an inside look at the school district and city. Opportunities include meetings with school district department heads to discuss everything from academics to school meals and with Cleveland Police Department representatives to address safety concerns.

Goolsby says the student voice efforts have contributed to steady improvements in how high school students rate

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>
> *— Denine Goolsby*

their school's climate. Percentages who say "adequate" or "excellent" have more than doubled in the past few years. Serious incidents and suspensions are down. "People need to think about student voice as critical to building successful leaders. They need opportunities to take responsibility for their community. They need a consistent, ordered process. And they need to see their ideas being used," says Goolsby.

RESOURCES

- District's Humanware SEL web site, with multiple resources

Washoe County: Even Kindergartners Have a Voice

This year, Washoe County School District (WCSD) has worked to utilize student voice at the elementary, middle, and high school levels. "We know that the best information we have about supports and obstacles in our system often comes straight from the students." says Laura Davidson, the district's director of research and evaluation.

"Student voice looks different at the elementary level, but it's equally important," says Michelle Hammond, student voice coordinator. While high school students tend to focus on issues like bullying and school climate, elementary students look at issues close to their classrooms. They're helping change school rules to reduce behavior problems in the cafeteria. In one elementary school the Student Advisory Council addressed equity concerns by changing the gift policy for teacher appreciation week so that all students had something to give. "A lot of what we see in our student voice work is geared toward high school students, so we are exploring what student voice in elementary schools can look like. We know student voice fosters social and emotional learning, so let's start early in life to lay positive groundwork," says Hammond.

> "When it comes to leadership opportunities, we often default to students perceived to fit certain criteria, but *all* kids have a voice and they deserve to express it."
>
> *— Michelle Hammond*

A unique feature of Washoe County's work is the Strength in Voices Symposium, now in its fourth year. Attendance has grown to 400 participants attending the Spring 2018 event. Elementary, middle, and high school students lead all breakout sessions, which focus on a variety of topics like equity, assessments, analyzing results from climate surveys, and the challenges that issues like poverty present to students. In each session, students provide recommendations for change, and adults are present to capture that input.

"One of the best things about this event is that we work to ensure a representative sample of students so we have *all* voices at the table. We provide schools with a randomly selected list of 15 students from which eight are selected to participate," says Hammond. "When it comes to leadership opportunities, we often default to students perceived to fit certain criteria, but *all* kids have a voice and they deserve to express it. If we're really trying to drive change and improve, we *must* have students with diverse experiences at the table."

That's one of the implementation challenges the district is addressing. Getting educators on board isn't always easy because they have so much on their plates. "We are working with teachers to embed student voice into their existing practices, including SEL, so it is not seen as one more thing," says Trish Shaffer, the district's MTSS/SEL coordinator. "We as adults must become more comfortable watching students solve problems while we facilitate without taking over. Students often come up with ideas even the greatest teacher wouldn't think of. We have to listen for that."

It's working. Washoe leaders are seeing more buy-in as educators witness the benefits of increased student voice. "We have too many issues that are too difficult to solve on our own. Harnessing the power of students, with their out-of-the-box ideas, makes our lives easier," says Davidson.

RESOURCES

- Student voice web page, including extensive toolkit developed with WestEd
- Photos and other resources from 2018 Data Summit

Allstate Foundation Good Starts Young and CASEL are collaborating to raise awareness of youth voice and focus the country's attention on what is possible in American education. A report in the fall of 2018 will share findings from interviews and a national survey of youth in an effort to improve schools to be engines of learning and opportunity.