



Engaging Youth Voice

Climate Connection is a monthly publication of the NYS Center for School Safety.

What is Youth Voice?

Simply defined, “youth voice” is the sharing of ideas, thoughts, perspectives and beliefs by children and youth. Engaging youth voice in education promotes a safe and supportive school climate, and is a key component of a trauma-informed approach. When the practice of engaging youth voice is intentionally inclusive, it helps enhance a school's equity initiatives, and supports programming that is student-centered and culturally responsive.



To create a culture that values youth voice, schools can begin by encouraging classroom practices that normalize student sharing and engagement, such as morning meetings and community building circles, and collaborating to establish classroom rules and norms. In addition, teaching strategies, such as group discussions, student reflections, cooperative activities, and project-based learning create space for youth voice.

Why is youth voice important? Allowing time and space for student voice promotes the development of social-emotional skills, such as self-efficacy, empathy, perspective-taking, effective communication, leadership, and open-mindedness. Furthermore, when youth share their ideas with peers and adults, the ensuing discussions often expose them to new perspectives that help shape their values and beliefs. When students feel genuinely heard and respected, they are empowered, more confident, and ready to learn. Investing time and effort in opportunities for student voice results in greater engagement, less disruptions, and positive relationships.



All schools provide opportunities to engage youth voice, such as student council and extracurricular clubs focused on advocacy and awareness (i.e. mental health, social justice). In addition, they typically include student representation on health and safety committees. However, there are often voices missing from these activities, especially students who identify with historically marginalized groups, such as students with disabilities, students of color, homeless youth and those experiencing poverty. *This edition will explore concrete strategies to engage diverse and inclusive student voices.*

Recommended Resource

[An Equity Toolkit for Inclusive Schools: Centering Youth Voice in School Change](#) (2017) from the Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center is a great resource. It includes a rubric for evaluating your school's current efforts engaging youth voice, collaborating with adults, and building leadership capacity. There is also a mapping tool to gather more information from students, and a template for goal setting.



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Have you ever had this experience: you organize a student forum to gather input about an issue affecting your school community and a limited number of students attend? Those who do, typically participate in such activities. How can we be more inclusive in our efforts to engage youth voice?

Below are some questions to guide your school in assessing current practices and developing a plan for improvement.

How was the event communicated? You probably shared it during morning announcements, sent an email, and hung flyers around school. Consider a more comprehensive plan for outreach that is repetitive and includes personal invitations from trusted messengers. Recruit a diverse team of students (think beyond Student Council) to talk about the event during lunch periods or in homerooms, and to share announcements on social media. Ask teachers and staff to personally invite students to attend, being intentional about encouraging students who don't typically participate. Students will be more responsive to peers, as well as teachers, with whom they can identify or have a positive relationship. All communication should clearly state the purpose for the event and what students can expect as an outcome, including a timeline for any deliverables and/or follow-up.

What were the barriers that prevented students from participating? If the event was held after school, some students may have caregiver responsibilities at home, a part-time job, or lack transportation. Instead, offer multiple options for students to participate, including before, during and after-school, as well as virtual meetings and electronic surveys. Other students may have felt uncomfortable participating in a large group or didn't trust the adults leading the activity. To address these barriers, offer 1:1 or small group opportunities, and allow students to choose from multiple sessions led by diverse faculty and staff, particularly those whom students tend to seek out for support. This may be a coach, an art teacher, the SRO, or a club advisor. Finally, we've identified some barriers but there may be more we didn't consider. Reach out to individual students in an effort to better understand why they chose not to participate. In a way, by not attending, they are telling us *something*. How can we hear them and do better?

Have you demonstrated a commitment to engaging diversity and inclusivity? Spend some time reflecting on the student voices currently active in your school (see resource on the front page). Are they consistent with your school's demographics or are their groups missing? Students will be more active when they feel they belong. We must be intentional about presenting opportunities to students beyond those we typically view as leaders. For example, when recruiting for student representation on committees, consider a student who volunteers with the local fire/EMS to serve on the District Wide Safety Team. Students in the early college and career healthcare program would be a great fit for the District Health Advisory Committee. Too often, we go to the students we know we can depend on - the proven leaders. When we give other students a chance, they too can develop as leaders.