

TOOL: Strategies for Elevating Student Voice

Student voice can be elevated in virtually every dimension of a school. It's important that student voice is incorporated in more than planning big events or celebrations—but rather a way of life in a school in which adults prioritize time to learn from students and hear their perspectives. This tool can help you identify ways to honor and support a broad range of student perspectives and experiences as part of your schoolwide SEL efforts.

Strategies	Adult Support
Gather student perspectives. Student surveys can help to better understand students' perspectives on schoolwide SEL implementation, school climate, academic engagement, adult-student relationships, and other important components of their school experiences. Continuing the conversation through focus groups or interviews can help staff to contextualize survey data and answer questions that emerge from survey data. Go further by involving young people themselves in the process of research and analysis, a strategy called youth participatory action research (YPAR).	Elevating student voice isn't just about hearing from young people. It is about sharing power and ownership and being transparent about the process as well as the results. Make it clear that you hear their feedback and share what you plan to do about it. Let students know how they can help or be part of the planning process. With your students, develop a survey (or adapt this sample) to better understand their perceptions of school climate, student support, and creating a sense of belonging.
Recruit student members for the SEL team and other leadership teams. Students need to have an authentic voice in decision-making about school events and policies that impact them, and adults need their voice in order to co-create equitable learning environments. Student representation on the school's SEL team, school improvement, or equity and diversity teams can be of great value to both the school and the students. While all voices are important, it is especially critical to hear from those who may feel disconnected from school, as their experiences can provide a critical perspective on how to continuously improve a learning environment that supports <i>all</i> students, not just those who are already thriving.	Listen to youth. For some, it may be a shift to listen actively while resisting the urge to show students the "right way." Prepare adult team members to receive student input in a way that is respectful and encouraging, particularly when student feedback is critical or delivered in unconventional ways. In addition, provide students with opportunities to practice leadership skills such as public speaking and meeting facilitation. See further guidance on supporting student team members in this tool.
Encourage student-led advocacy. Students can work with their peers around issues they care about. They can do this through clubs and activities such as a student voice committee, gay-straight alliance (GSA), peer jury, student council, or youth advisory committee. Students also need outlets to react to current events in their school, community, or the country. Finding a productive way to exercise their voice (e.g., awareness campaigns, peaceful protests) is an ideal opportunity for them to develop new skills <i>and</i> have an impact.	Based on a clear understanding of their concerns, help students develop the skills they need to lead, including public speaking, planning meetings, and marketing to organize and engage their peers.

Build student-centered classrooms. Creating environments where students drive learning helps to develop problem-solving skills and prepares students for lifelong success. Schools can place students at the center of their learning by including them in decision-making about the <i>why</i>, <i>what</i>, and <i>how</i> of their learning experiences—shaping learning activities, making choices, and evaluating their own progress.	Support teachers to use strategies such as interactive pedagogy, classroom community building, and project-based learning to keep students at the center of learning. Establish classroom leadership roles on a rotating basis so all students have an opportunity to guide projects and classroom activities. Introduce narrative feedback as a way for students to assess their own performance and continue learning until they master a particular subject or skill.
Involve students in teaching about SEL. In some schools, students facilitate learning around SEL or related subjects based on their interests or the needs of the school. Students may partner with another student or teacher to co-teach their peers or other grade levels. Student-led SEL can include students leading activities such as mindfulness, advisory lessons, discussions, or community-building circles. Students may also want to use social media as a mechanism to inform and educate their peers about SEL.	Prepare students to lead SEL activities by introducing them to the content, giving them options about what they want to present or facilitate, providing talking points, and engaging students in role playing or rehearsing how content will be delivered.
Establish student-led conferences. The opportunity to prepare for and conduct their own conferences about academic, social, and emotional progress with their parents or guardians gives students a sense of ownership of the learning process and cultivates skills in communication and self-awareness (Berger et al, 2014).	Help students prepare to lead conferences by having them gather work samples to review, write a reflection on their strengths and challenges, and set goals for the next quarter. Support the student in this conference by shifting from a directive role (e.g., “do it this way”) to a consulting role (“let’s develop a plan for improvement together”).