

Working with Students: Using Youth Voice to Promote Healthy Schools



The Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child (WSCC) model provides a unified and collaborative approach to learning and health.¹ The model focuses on the need for students to be healthy, safe, engaged, supported, and challenged. Schools implementing the WSCC model should engage youth as full partners in making the model a reality. Youth are the experts of their own experiences and are essential to making decisions about wellness policy, planning, and programs that really work.^{2, 3}

What is youth voice and why is it important?

Youth voice happens when youth are an active and empowered force representing their vision throughout society.⁴ Imagine a school where youth are involved in responsible, challenging actions to create positive social change — a school where youth engagement means creating a gateway to leadership, community planning, communication skills, and civic service.⁵ Youth own the future. An effective youth voice builds youth skills and positions them to actively shape the future for their communities.⁵

Too often, schools assign authority to adult leaders who advocate for youth rather than creating opportunities to enable youth to organize on their own behalf.⁶ The youth voice challenges the role of young people as targets of policy making and instead makes youth agents of public policy, especially in low-income communities and communities of color.² It is important to engage diverse groups of youth with various racial/ethnic backgrounds, socioeconomic status, genders, sexual identities, abilities, and academic standing. School leaders should prioritize engaging students who are more likely to be disengaged.

How can we engage the voices of youth?^{6, 7, 8}

- **Make room for youth.** Create safe spaces for youth to use their voices. Identify core values to be maintained in the space and work with youth to set group norms and expectations. Avoid tokenism where only one or two students represent their peers.

Action: Create a youth advisory group or invite students to be part of school leadership meetings.

- **Make it practical to obtain youth input.** Assess your organization's readiness to encourage youth voice. Promote administrative structures and cultural attitudes that encourage youth voice. Schedule meetings and events when and where it works for youth—not for you! Provide youth with the platforms and resources they need to contribute meaningfully to the overall health and well-being of schools.

Consider: What prevents youth engagement? Ask students for solutions.

- **Welcome diverse youth.** Create opportunities to work with diverse youth and ask them to take on leadership roles. Adopt an anti-discriminatory policy and use trauma-informed processes and practices. Create various pathways to participation because youth have different skills and personalities.

Action: Balance representation of high-achieving and traditionally less-engaged students. Try alternative tools to engage students, such as photovoice and writing.

- **Make youth voice meaningful.** Have youth be the leaders and encourage them to take on responsibilities that are challenging and manageable. Make space for youth to take ownership of work from start to finish in order to increase engagement and develop their leadership skills. Support youth leaders as they learn from mistakes. Provide experiences that build youth's knowledge and skills.

Consider: What do youth want to work on to improve student health and well-being, school climate and culture, and community support? Ask students what their priorities are.

“Start by including us in your planning and conversations ... Invite our ideas and perspectives ... Make us part of the solution and not the problem ... Our voices matter.”

*Students as Allies in Improving Their Schools:
A Report on Work in Progress, October 2004*

- **Make communication regular and open.** Engage youth early in the process of planning programs and initiatives—this includes generating project objectives. Allow youth to bring their ideas and perspectives to the table. Regularly seek youth feedback and have youth guide the thinking about assessing and planning for school health and wellness.

Action: Have students conduct surveys and learn from other students.

- **Make mutual respect the norm.** Check your own thoughts, actions, and beliefs that may be silencing youth. Avoid adultism. Learn from youth. Build respect and trust. Acknowledge demographic and generational differences and the variety of languages, cultures, and racial/ethnic identities.

Consider: How do your own biases affect the way you interact with youth?

- **Make youth voice fun!** Work with youth to develop fun activities, events, and gatherings such as community service events, fairs and field days, rallies, and canvassing.

Action: Ask students how to create energy and make health and wellness efforts meaningful and engaging. Celebrate achievements.

Success story: Students in Chicago Are Change Agents

Voices of Youth in Chicago Education (VOYCE) is led by students of color who organize for education and racial justice with a focus on ending the school-to-prison pipeline. VOYCE students partnered with adult supporters to conduct research on student health and wellness needs. Using this research, the students created evidence-based recommendations to combat underage drinking and meet student social-emotional needs. One recommendation was to eliminate punitive school disciplinary policies and processes for low-level offenses.

Voices of Youth in Chicago Education, 2018

What do youth gain from having a voice in decision making?

Engaging youth in designing, planning, implementing, and evaluating school health can help them become passionate about health and wellness and model healthy behaviors for other students. Youth voice can provide a pathway for students to contribute to school culture and provide a sense of safety, belonging, and self-efficacy.¹ Youth voice can increase involvement in social and policy issues, strengthen community connections, and improve achievement.¹

Where can I learn more about engaging youth?

- [Virtual Healthy School Resource List by WSCC Components](#)
- [The Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child Model: A Guide to Implementation](#)
- [Washington Youth Voice Handbook](#)
- [Youth for Healthy Schools](#)
- [Meaningful Student Involvement: Guide to Students as Partners in School Change \(2nd edition\)](#)
- [Ladder of Youth Voice](#)
- [Young People Empowered to Change the World](#)
- [Sample Youth Advisory Council Meeting Agenda/Minutes](#)

References:

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