

*A Summary of Research  
on Using Student Voice in  
School Improvement Planning*



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# **A Summary of Research on Using Student Voice in School**

## **Improvement Planning**

Aiming to close the achievement gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (2002) established a high-stakes accountability system that not only holds schools responsible for students' learning but also, for the first time, links federal education funds to specific student performance goals [No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, Pub. L. No. 107-110, 115 Stat. 1425, 20 U.S.C.A. §§ 6301 et seq. (2002 Supp.)]. Moreover, the law explicitly holds schools accountable for improving the performance of historically low-achieving students, including low-income, minority, limited English proficient, and special education students [No Child Left Behind Act, 2002, §1111 (b)(2)(C)(v)(II)(aa-dd)].

With more than half of its students eligible for free and reduced lunch, West Virginia faces barriers to school achievement associated with poverty. Although the state's scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) have generally risen over the past decade, they remain, for the most part, slightly below the national average: 75 percent of 4<sup>th</sup> graders and 80 percent of 8<sup>th</sup> graders do not meet proficiency in mathematics, and 70 percent of 4<sup>th</sup> graders and 75 percent of 8<sup>th</sup> graders are deemed to lack proficiency in reading (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2003). In addition, NAEP results show an achievement gap between high- and low-income students across all grades and subjects tested. The gap is even more pronounced when examined by race/ethnicity: 87 percent of African American 4<sup>th</sup> graders do not meet proficiency levels in either reading or mathematics; 86 percent of African American 8<sup>th</sup> graders lack proficiency in reading; and 94 percent of African American 8<sup>th</sup> graders lack proficiency in mathematics, with 61 percent scoring at the below-basic level (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2003). Statewide testing results show a similar pattern: an achievement gap exists between students of high versus low socioeconomic status, while an even larger gap exists between Caucasian and African American students (Office of Technology and Information System, West Virginia Department of Education, 2004). With rewards and sanctions now resting on the performance of such student subgroups, the stakes have never been higher to ensure that all students, regardless of race or socioeconomic status, achieve at high levels.

As education reforms of the past two decades have focused on results and given rise to performance-based accountability, educators have sought to improve schools and raise student achievement. Although student performance is the bottom line of such efforts, students themselves, for the most part, have had little voice in educational practices and school improvement efforts (Cook-Sather, 2002a; Ericson & Ellett, 2002; Smith, Butler-Kisber, LaRoque, Portelli, Shields, Sparkes, & Vibert, 2001; Levin, 1999; Roberts & Kay, 1998; Gregg, 1994). For disadvantaged and minority students, their communities and cultures may have been silent as well, contributing to their relative underachievement (Howard, 2003; Cook-Sather, 2002a; Wilder, 2000; Delpit, 1988).

This is changing, however, with the growing awareness that students, if asked, have much to say about teaching and learning that can help schools become more effective educational environments for them, and as such, student voice can be a powerful tool for improving student performance and closing the achievement gap (Fletcher, 2003a; Fletcher, 2003b; Smith, Butler-Kisber, LaRoque, Portelli, Shields, Sparkes, & Vibert, 2001; Wilder, 2000; Levin, 1999; Fasko, Grubb, Jesse, & McCombs, 1997). In fact, because performance accountability ultimately rests on students, Levin (1999) argues that “education reform cannot succeed and should not proceed without much more direct involvement of students in all its aspects” (p. 2).

The term, “student voice,” has been used in reference to various types of student input, ranging from personal expression in classroom assignments, to feedback to educators on instructional issues, to involvement in school governance and decision-making, to participation on state-level boards of education. Although student voice can take many forms (e.g., self-expression, feedback, opinion, choice, self-determination, representation, and empowerment), it connotes a level of involvement and investment that holds implications for students’ engagement in school and in learning (Smith, Butler-Kisber, LaRoque, Portelli, Shields, Sparkes, & Vibert, 2001).

Few studies have directly explored the role of student involvement in school improvement, but the literature from related fields—e.g., organizational change, motivation, and learning—affirms its conceptual validity and suggests the potential effectiveness of student voice as an agent for school reform and renewal (Raymond, 2001; Levin, 1999). For example, research on organizational change, whether in education reform or business applications like Total Quality Management, supports the participation of all stakeholders in guiding change and indicates that reforms are more successful when participants feel ownership and buy-in (Levin, 1999; Stern, 1995).

Adapting his model from change theory, Rivera (1998) has developed a process of inquiry for school transformation that successfully involves students as stakeholders in participatory research to identify problems and formulate solutions. Barth (in Lockwood, 1996) likewise maintains that when involved in school renewal, student stakeholders, like adults, can contribute inventive ideas that help schools to overcome obstacles and boost educational productivity.

Other conceptual support for student voice in school improvement comes from motivation and learning theories. Research has consistently shown that student engagement strongly relates to success or failure in school: more engaged students generally show higher achievement, while disengaged students are more at risk of school failure and dropout (Montgomery & Rossi, 1994; Finn, 1989; Wehlage, 1983).

Furthermore, strategies that foster interest, identification, active involvement in academic and other school-related activities, and personal connection to school staff and fellow students have been found to boost engagement, to improve both achievement and behavior, and to increase school completion rates (Howard, 2001a; Samdal, Wold, & Bronis, 1999; Dynarski & Gleason, 1999; Raywid, 1994a; Montgomery & Rossi, 1994;

Finn, 1989). For example, student-centered strategies and choice and autonomy in assignments—classroom forms of student voice—are linked to motivation and engagement in learning, as are perceived self-efficacy, academic challenge, and relevance, including cultural relevance, of curriculum and pedagogy (Howard, 2001a, 2001b; Smith, Butler-Kisber, LaRoque, Portelli, Shields, Sparkes, & Vibert, 2001; Levin, 1999; Lumsden, 1994; Raywid, 1994b; Kohn, 1993; Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan, 1991; Deci & Ryan, 1985).

In addition, the positive effects of small schools and classrooms on achievement may be due in part to increased personalization that helps students feel more connected, cared for, and valued in school (Howard, 2001; Cotton, 1997; Finn, 1998). Research has shown that student reports of satisfaction with school, including demands placed by teachers and relationships with other students, accurately predict their academic achievement (Samdal, Wold, & Bronis, 1999).

### **Using Student Voice for School Improvement**

Schools are finding that meaningful student involvement can be a powerful and effective force for school improvement, increasing students' commitment to their own achievement as well as to school goals and making schools, in turn, more responsive to the characteristics and needs of their students (Howard, 2002; Raymond, 2001; Levin, 1999; also Fletcher, 2003b; Cook-Sather, 2002b; Roberts & Kay, 1998; Lee & Zimmerman, N.D.). Meaningful student involvement honors and authorizes the unique perspectives, insights, and needs of all students in the school and engages them in shaping their own educational experiences (Cook-Sather, 2002b; Fletcher, 2003b, Raymond, 2001). It is characterized and distinguished from tokenism by students' engagement with learning, student-adult partnership in the process of schooling, equity and excellence for all, infusion throughout systems and attitudes, quality of learning activities and experiences, and evidence of effectiveness (Fletcher, 2003b). By seeking the perspective and affirming the experience of each individual student, meaningful involvement can help to end educational discrimination (Howard, 2003) and “bridge the engagement gap between minority, low-income, and underserved students and mainstream student populations” (Fletcher, 2003b, p. 10). In addition, a study of rural schools found that honoring student voice is particularly related to achievement in classrooms with less effective teachers (Fasko, Grubb, Jesse, & McCombs, 1997).

A framework developed by the Manitoba School Improvement Program (MSIP) can be useful in helping schools to assess ways that student voice is used to achieve school improvement (Lee & Zimmerman, N. D.). The *Student Voice Continuum* presents a four-point scale that encompasses all forms of student voice in both schools and classrooms: (1) no involvement, (2) passive involvement (student as information source), (3) active involvement (student as participant), and (4) directive involvement (student as designer) (Lee & Zimmerman, N. D.).

## **Student as Information Source**

Students can inform school improvement by providing thoughtful and reliable information about ways to make schooling more engaging and effective for all (Cook-Sather, 2002b; Ferguson, 2002; Howard, 2001b; Raymond, 2001; Roberts & Kay, 1998; Samdal, Wold, & Bronis, 1999; Orletsky, Hange, Ceperley, & Harmon, 1997; Lee & Zimmerman, N. D.; Newman, N. D.). Using methods such as surveys, focus groups, and interviews, schools can gain information about the learning needs, preferences, and experiences of individual students and diverse student groups; their perspectives on school policies, practices, and structures; and their perceptions of relationships with teachers, staff, and peers (Ferguson, 2002; Howard, 2002; Rudduck & Flutter, 1996, Poplin & Weeres, 1992; Lee & Zimmerman, N.D.). For example, researchers conducting focus groups in eight Kentucky schools found that students—regardless of gender, race, grade, achievement level, or rural-urban status—held similar views of their schools and teachers and were highly consistent in describing effective and ineffective teachers (Roberts & Kay, 1998). Likewise, a survey of 40,000 students in 15 suburban school districts participating in the Minority Student Achievement Network revealed little difference in students’ academic aspirations and attitudes towards school across racial/ethnic groups; however, important discrepancies emerged among groups in reported skill mastery, access to educational resources, and motivation to achieve in the classroom: more African American students across sites cited teacher “encouragement,” as opposed to teacher “demands,” as important to their academic performance (Ferguson, 2002). While such information has intrinsic value for educators as they strive to improve schools and raise student achievement, the very process of seeking student input can have the added benefit of increasing student effort, participation, and engagement in learning (Fedderson, 2003; Fletcher, 2003b; Ferguson, 2002; Cook-Sather, 2002a; Howard, 2002, 2001a; Raymond, 2001; Fasko, Grubb, Jesse, & McCombs, 1997).

## **Student as Participant**

Students can influence school improvement through participation in efforts such as action research and inquiry. As active collaborators with schools and communities, students can help to gather information, analyze results, and develop recommendations and solutions to address perceived barriers to learning and achievement (Network of Regional Educational Laboratories, 2000; Lee & Zimmerman, N.D., Rivera, 1998; Poplin & Weeres, 1992).

A set of tools developed by the Network of Regional Educational Laboratories (2000) and used in schools nationwide actively involves students as leaders of focus groups and reflective dialogues about student work and in the analysis of student survey results. Poplin and colleagues (1992) pioneered the method of student-led focus groups as a way to hear student voice and secure student input in a study of urban schools.

## **Student as Designer**

Student voice may have the most potential for impact when students are involved as equal partners and designers of school improvement efforts (Raymond, 2001; Lee & Zimmerman, N.D.). At this level of involvement, students help to determine the research agenda, formulate questions, conduct research, and analyze results (Raymond, 2001; Crane, 2001; Network of Regional Educational Laboratories, 2000; Lee & Zimmerman, N.D.). The Students as Researchers initiative, for example, has had a profound effect on school renewal and improvement through a process of student-led inquiry (Raymond, 2001; Crane, 2001; Fielding, 2001). Similarly, Data in a Day is a tool for school improvement through which students collaborate with staff to design and conduct school-based research on mutually determined topics (Network of Regional Educational Laboratories, 2000).

An extension of students' role as designer is the involvement of student voice in education policymaking at local and state levels. An increasing number of states are including students not just as token representatives but as full voting members on state boards of education (Webb, 2002; Marques, 1999).

However, despite the growing attention to student voice in education reform, students thus far have had too few opportunities to weigh in on one of society's most pressing educational issues—closing the achievement gap. West Virginia's NAEP and statewide assessment scores provide ample evidence that the achievement gap exists in the state's schools. To help students meet the goals of the No Child Left Behind Act, it is critically important that schools find ways to dramatically improve the achievement of economically disadvantaged students and African American students. The Alliance's study will aim to help schools eliminate the achievement gap by listening to what the students who are most affected by educational inequity say about their educational experiences and what needs to be done to ensure learning for all.

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