Centering Student Voice in Social and Emotional Learning
Strategies for Lasting Change

Student perspectives are critical to creating equitable learning environments that provide students with whatever they need to develop socially, emotionally, and academically. Like student-centered instruction (e.g., personalized learning, culturally responsive practices, universal design for learning), student voice principles emphasize active and reflective learning by centering students' perspectives and honoring their characteristics, perspectives, and lived experiences. When educators and students partner to amplify student voices, they do not simply improve instruction. They transform their schools and communities for the better.

When students and adults build strong relationships based on trust, they can break down barriers to co-create safe and healthy learning environments for all students, including those who have been historically sidelined or left out of conversations. By listening to students, collaborating with them, and supporting them in leading inside and outside the classroom, educators foster students' development of five essential social and emotional competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making.

> "Before, I thought school climate 'just happened,' but now I recognize that I can be an active part of making it what I want it to be."
>
> — Reflections from an Ann Arbor student participant in the Neutral Zone Student Voice Initiative

What does equitable student voice look like in practice?

Student voice opportunities include practices that range from listening to students to collaborating with them and supporting them in activism and leadership roles. Researchers have described these practices as a pyramid or continuum (see figure below).[1,2] As student voice activities ascend the pyramid, the adult roles shift from directive to guiding and learning to advance equity, inclusion, and civic engagement. At one end of the continuum, educators collect and use student perspectives and feedback to make decisions. On the other end, students engage in problem-solving, democratic processes, research, service, advocacy, and leadership, with educators playing guiding roles.
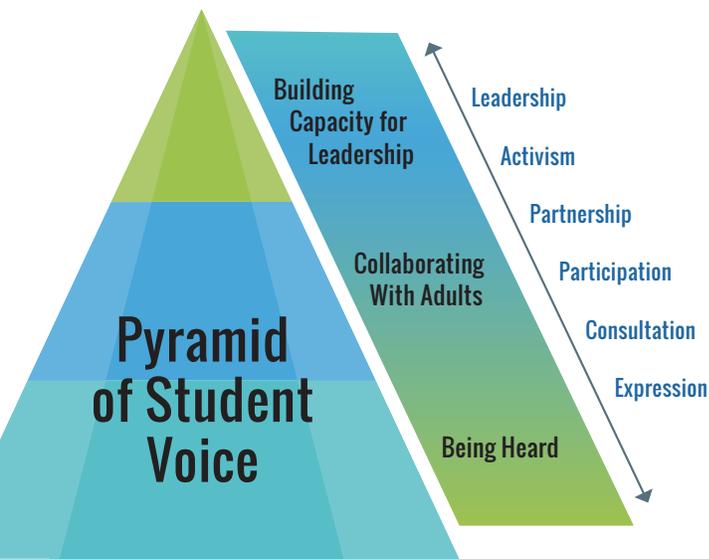
The continuum of student voice activities is relevant for even the youngest students. However, the practices will look different based on context (including the goals and purpose for engaging student voice) and grade level. Regardless of student age, to provide opportunities across the pyramid, adults must focus less on directing student behaviors and more on designing scenarios that scaffold students' engagement in developmentally appropriate decision-making, collaboration, and leadership (similar to adult facilitation of balanced assessment and project-based learning). Ideally, this is a collective effort of individuals such as teachers, coaches, mentors, and other youth-serving individuals, and is personalized to each individual student so that students own their solutions.

At every level of the pyramid, educators must consider what it means to offer all students opportunities to participate in developmentally and culturally relevant leadership activities. Educators can use the following questions to examine current student voice practices when designing and implementing new initiatives with equity and inclusion in mind:

Questions To Ask in Centering Equity in Student Voice Practices:

▸ How are all students' characteristics, age levels, abilities, and identities represented?

▸ How do all students enter and engage with resources, initiatives, and choices?

▸ How do all students have opportunities to speak up, make decisions, lead, and drive change in their classrooms and schools?

▸ How are students' perspectives represented in reviewing information to design, implement, and evaluate student voice opportunities?

How can educators center student voice in social and emotional learning?

Centering student voices is not a straightforward process. Instead, educators must continually review their efforts to engage student voices appropriately within their unique contexts, plan for and implement actions to address inequities, and communicate results. The following strategies are critical for centering student voice in social and emotional learning at all levels of the pyramid:

▸ **Promote relationships between adults and students based on trust.** Trusting and meaningful relationships between students and adults must be based on effective communication and shared responsibility to allow progress along the student voice continuum. With authentic relationships, adults will have opportunities to understand students' lived experiences, identities (including gender, race, ethnicity, class, and sexuality), and contexts (or physical and social environments). At all grade levels, student voice starts with intentional practices that allow students and educators to develop the relationships necessary for collaboration and student leadership. For example, Ferndale Lower and Upper Elementary Schools, located in Ferndale Public Schools, incorporate Restorative Practices to empower students to find success in building trusting and meaningful relationships with all members of the school community. With Restorative Practices, students can learn and teach others advocacy skills and strategies to develop, maintain, and heal broken relationships.

▸ **Provide opportunities for students and adults to make the most of their strengths and develop capacity.** Developing strength- and asset-based mindsets in students and adults is necessary to ensure that the learning environment supports student voice. Establishing a culture in which both students and adults understand the value of questions and feel safe to explore answers will provide opportunities for everyone to build trust, learn, collaborate, take action, and improve together. Educators can cultivate a culture of inquiry with younger students by regularly holding question-and-answer sessions for students to explore topics of interest to them. Older students can share and teach each other (and adults) about their talents, skills, and interests, or research and ask questions about school/community strengths and areas of need and collaborate toward strategies to improve or solve those challenges. Michigan's The Neutral Zone, located in Ann Arbor, uses Student Voice programming to promote personal growth, leadership, and development of genuine partnerships between youth and adults. Students and educators then identified a need for a student panel to support curricular decisions in the district.

▸ **Use multiple ways to gather students' perspectives.** Practical student voice efforts include multiple opportunities for students to share their understanding, ideas, and feedback. For example, student perspectives could be collected through student surveys, forums, focus groups, and interviews. With developmentally appropriate scaffolding, students in all grade levels should have options for sharing their perspectives, and collaborating with adults on or even leading committees and research projects. One way adults in Farmington Public Schools better understand their students' perspectives is through a student voice survey administered to all students.

▸ **Establish practices that encourage students' participation in advocacy and decision-making.** Intentional practices and processes encourage all students to feel comfortable sharing their views. At all grade levels, student-centered learning opportunities and classroom practices may include student leadership, feedback, decision-making; inquiry-based learning; student-led conferences; and culturally responsive practices. Students and adults at Malcolm High School in Sault Ste. Marie Area Public Schools established a Tribal Youth Council to provide opportunities for students to have a voice in the school and tribal communities and participate in training, leadership, and opportunities for service learning.

▸ **Ensure structures and supports for lasting change.** Educators should include student voice in any plans for improving the school community through social and emotional learning. School and district leaders can support student voice by providing critical resources, including finances, time, dedicated spaces, and learning and collaboration opportunities. Finally, adults and students of all ages must continually partner and collaborate to create a vision for student voice, examine and reflect on the success of current activities, success, and identify practices that may need to be changed or discontinued. To ensure lasting change at Seaholm High School in Birmingham Public School District, the Student Voice Advisory Board collaborates with adults to address school improvement goals. Students and staff work together as partners to problem-solve, ensure the voices of other students are heard, and learn together in professional development.

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Pulling It Together:
Centering Student Voice-Farmington Public Schools

Educators in Farmington Public Schools have a history of supporting student voice activities. In the last few years, adults have shifted intentionally from simply listening to students to creating opportunities for them to participate in decision-making and leadership. According to the district's Assistant Superintendent of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, "We've always had systems in place that supported student voice, but we have been working to be more intentional about making sure student voice is not just heard but listened to and acted upon."

As part of this effort, Farmington Public Schools has developed and expanded district- and school-level student voice opportunities for middle and high school students and school-level activities for elementary school students. Student voice has provided opportunities to develop students' advocacy and leadership skills and has helped the district create quality programs and activities. For example,

- Student members participate in district board committees, with voting rights and the ability to inform district decisions regarding various issues, including hiring practices, academic excellence, finance, and strategic planning.

- Students on the district's Student Round Table meet regularly, collaborate with leadership, and engage in their own learning to create agendas and district action plans. The Student Round Table brings forth suggestions on ways adults can honor students' voices, create inclusive spaces, and enhance student leadership opportunities. When Round Table members disliked that nominations from teachers determined members, they successfully advocated for consideration of peer- and self-nominations to ensure diverse and multiple perspectives.

- Students organized a Diversity Conference on Intersectionality: Redefining Labels. The students chose the guest speakers, determined the ice breakers, and designed the breakout sessions. The conference provides opportunities for students to take the lead on a topic of importance and creates spaces for adults and students in the district to collaborate and learn together.

[1] Mitra, D. L., & Gross, S. J. (2009). Increasing student voice in high school reform: Building partnerships, improving outcomes. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 37(4), 522–543. https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1741143209334577

[2] Toshalis, E., & Nakkula, M. J. (2012). *Motivation, engagement, and student voice*. Jobs for the Future. https://studentsatthecenterhub.org/resource/motivation-engagement-and-student-voice

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