

FOCUS AREA 3 > SCHOOL > ELEVATE STUDENT VOICE

Elevate Student Voice

Students have a unique perspective on how high-level decisions impact the day-to-day life of the school, and their voices are critical to quality schoolwide SEL implementation. By listening to students, schools can make informed decisions about the changes that will best support all learners.

Just as importantly, when students are engaged authentically as leaders, problem-solvers, and decision-makers, they feel ownership over SEL. This is a step toward ensuring that all students experience a sense of agency—the ability to make choices and take actions that impact one’s own trajectory and influence the wider world. When students have a sense of agency, they believe that their own active participation matters.

Schools can ensure they hear from all students, not just those who regularly speak up, by providing a variety of thoughtful opportunities to lead and contribute both in and outside the classroom. This includes actively engaging students who don’t typically take on leadership roles.

As you work to elevate student voice and engagement, use the **rubric or the questions below to identify areas for continuous improvement:**

Do staff honor and elevate a broad range of student perspectives and experiences by engaging them as leaders, problem-solvers, and decision-makers?

Are there ways for students to shape SEL initiatives, instructional practices, and school climate?

Do students regularly initiate and lead activities, solutions, and projects to improve their classrooms, school and the broader community?

Ladder of Student Participation and SEL

A major goal of elevating student voice is to support young people in becoming agents of change. To do this, it is important to consider the existing power dynamics between adults and young people. The figure below provides a way for adults to reflect on the different ways that they engage students. While it is likely not realistic for young people to engage and initiate all action, teachers and administrators can be intentional and purposeful about how to elevate student voice and engagement to promote SEL.

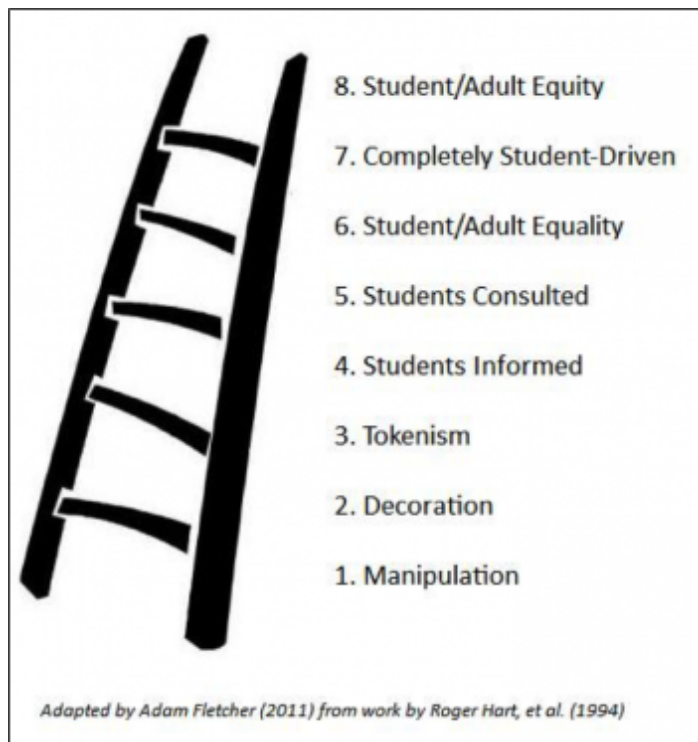


Image from [SoundOut](#), adapted from the work of [Roger A. Hart](#). Learn more about the Ladder of Student Involvement [here](#).

By creating space for all students to provide their perspectives, share in decision-making, and lead and initiate action, schools can support the development of:

- Self-awareness, as students define their own values and perspectives, gain awareness of personal strengths, and gain a sense of self-efficacy.
- Self-management, as students practice self-motivation and organizational skills when working toward a goal they've set.
- Social awareness, as students recognize the perspectives of others when many different voices are elevated.
- Relationship skills, as students practice communicating and engaging others in shared ideas and goals.
- Responsible decision-making, as students identify and solve problems in their classroom, school, and community.

Washoe County School District's Student Voice Strategies

Washoe County School District involves students in informing and making important decisions, including [budget proposals](#). They hold a Strength in Voices Symposium that brings together elementary, middle, and high school students to discuss priorities and challenges within the district. For example, students analyze results from climate surveys and make recommendations for change. Sessions are led by students, while adults capture the input.

Rather than "defaulting to students perceived to fit certain criteria," Washoe works to ensure a representative sample of students by providing each school with 15 randomly-selected students, from which eight are selected to participate, according to Michelle Hammond, Student Voice Coordinator. "All kids have a voice and they deserve to express it" (CASEL, 2018). To learn more about Washoe's work visit their [Student Voice homepage](#).

Opportunities for Elevating Student Voice

Below are examples of ways that staff can honor and elevate a broad range of student perspectives and experiences as part of schoolwide SEL efforts:

- **Student-led parent/guardian conferences**—Provide the opportunity for students to conduct their own conferences about their academic, social, and emotional progress with their parents or guardians. This creates ownership over the learning process, while cultivating skills in communication and self-awareness (Berger et al, 2014).
 - **Adult supports:** Teachers can help students prepare to lead conferences by having them gather work samples to review, write a reflection on their strengths and challenges, and provide goals for the next quarter.

- **Student surveys**—Many districts use student surveys to better understand students' perspectives on schoolwide SEL implementation, school climate, academic engagement, adult-student relationships and other important components of their school experiences. Some districts go even further by involving young people themselves in the process of research and analysis, a strategy called youth participatory action research. The work in Washoe County, Nevada (see case study above) is an example of this.
 - **Adult supports:** Elevating student voice isn't just about hearing young people, it is about sharing power and ownership by being transparent about the results. Make it clear that you heard their feedback, share what you plan to do about it, and let students know how they can help or be part of the planning process.

- **Student representation on SEL and other school leadership teams**—Students need an authentic voice in school decision-making, such as hiring. While all students' voices are important, it may be especially critical to hear from those who feel disconnected from school. In addition, we recommend student representation on the school's SEL team. Providing students with feedback around public speaking and meeting facilitation helps them develop their communication skills.
 - **Adult supports:** Help adults listen to youth. For some adults, it can be a shift to listen actively without getting defensive or jumping in to show students the "right way." Provide professional learning to help address this issue non-judgmentally. In addition, provide students opportunities to practice important leadership skills such as public speaking and meeting facilitation.

- **Student generated opportunities**—As citizens, students will have reactions to school, community, and national news. Listen to students' concerns and help them to develop productive opportunities to respond (e.g., awareness campaigns, non-violent protests, fundraisers.)
 - **Adult supports:** Don't let student voice become only about big events or celebrations—work to make it a way of life in your school by making time to engage with students and elicit their perspectives.

Student Voice Resources

[SoundOut Student Voice Toolbox](#)

[Portland Oregon Youth Manual](#)

[Giving Students a Voice, Harvard online](#)

[Washoe County Student Voice Toolkit](#)

[CASEL SEL Trends Volume 2, July 2018: Empowering Youth Voice](#)