



Elevating Student Voice, Agency, and Co-Creation

author: Equity Accelerator

Introduction

This brief on including student voice, agency, and co-creation in education decision-making proceeds from the premise that successfully transforming education systems to be more student centered involves addressing four key elements: Individual Mindsets, Interpersonal Relationships, Community Culture, and Structural and Systemic Supports.

The brief is adapted from and expands on a 2021 blog—[To Achieve Racial Equity in Education, Include Students as Co-Creators](#)—and draws on key concepts presented through the Equity Accelerator project in California. In particular, it draws from an Equity Accelerator professional learning session hosted by two student leaders and experts in youth engagement, leadership, and equity: Zoë Jenkins and Zachary Patterson (Jenkins & Patterson, 2021). This session sparked productive conversations among Equity Accelerator Fellows about how to better engage students in racial equity efforts. Although many of the strategies presented in this brief apply to all initiatives that aim to feature student voices, the focus on racial equity prompted special consideration of how these concepts apply to students of the global majority—the students whom the Equity Accelerator Fellows aimed to better serve through their efforts. Therefore, in addition to offering ideas for effectively implementing student voice initiatives generally, this brief specifically includes ideas for advancing racial equity.

EQUITY ACCELERATOR PROJECT

Funded by the S. D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation as part of the COVID Education Equity Response Collaborative, the Equity Accelerator project provided statewide professional learning sessions in California and a fellowship program for staff from select county offices of education (COEs) from January through November 2021. The project supported California's COEs to improve how their whole-child and whole-school efforts align with each other and cohere with a vision of cultivating fundamental and sustainable change toward more equitable education systems. Equity Accelerator Fellows participated in an intensive, cohort-based experience in 2021 focused on leveraging existing agency efforts and priorities to dismantle biased and oppressive systems, cultivate healing and resilience, and ensure equity across their counties. They learned technical skills and adaptive strategies for creating systemic and sustainable change.

Importance of Student Participation and Leadership

According to California Healthy Kids Survey school climate data, fewer than one third of California secondary students report feeling that they have opportunities for meaningful participation at school, including having a say in how things work and helping decide school activities or rules (CaSCHLS, 2019). Although many schools and education agencies elicit feedback from student surveys and may even have student representation on their councils and boards, meaningful student engagement may be limited to a select group of students who do not represent the full spectrum of student experiences. Furthermore, the level to which adult decision-makers make effective use of student feedback can be limited at best. For African American, Latino/a, and American Indian students, self-reported rates of meaningful participation are even lower (CaSCHLS, 2019). When adults miss out on hearing directly from students—especially students of the global majority—it can deepen racial inequities in school systems.

Making opportunities available to these students for leadership and for co-creating school systems can be a key component of efforts to achieve racial equity in education. A co-creation perspective affirms that all students create value and that adults and youths can and should share leadership and decision-making in education settings. This perspective requires a shift from doing to or making decisions for students to co-creating with students (Buckner, 2021). When adults commit to sharing decision-making power, they engage in authentic and actionable conversations with students about how to best design school systems that respond to students' hopes, needs, and aspirations.

Elements of Student Voice, Agency, and Co-Creation

The four key elements featured in this brief—Individual Mindsets, Interpersonal Relationships, Community Culture, and Structural and Systemic Supports—are based on Steve Waddell's (2011) application of change management principles to Ken Wilber's Integral Theory framework (2001), which organizes concepts into four quadrants based on the relationship to the self or others and in relation to internal or external viewpoints or experiences (see Table 1). Transforming education systems to be more student centered should address all four elements.

Table 1. Elements of Student Voice, Agency, and Co-Creation

	Interior	Exterior
Individual	Individual Mindsets: changing one’s own perceptions	Interpersonal Relationships: engaging in positive interactions with others
Collective	Community Culture: fostering collective commitment to engaging and elevating student perspectives	Structural and Systemic Supports: providing the necessary resources and policy structures

Source: adapted from Waddell (2011) and Wilber (2001)

Although all elements are equally important, education leaders should consider the interrelationships of each and how they might build on or support one another. For example, individual adult mindsets can influence the interpersonal relationships that those adults foster with students. Positive interpersonal relationships are likely to support a communitywide culture of valuing and elevating student voices and perspectives. And in some cases, providing the structural and systemic supports necessary to implement student voice initiatives may provide a needed validation of the importance of such work, which may impact overall culture. Considering how each element relates to the others can help determine where there are opportunities to strengthen the collective goal of elevating student voice and students’ roles in co-creating school systems.

The following four sections further elaborate on and point to activities and resources for fostering these elements. The additional resources and guidance in a section near the end of the brief cut across the four elements and can help schools and local education agencies plan for greater inclusion of student voice through new initiatives or take stock of current initiatives and identify opportunities for more impactful and equitable student leadership.

Individual Mindsets

Adults often dismiss students as unreliable, uninterested, or not quite competent enough to participate in major decisions shaping their experiences at school. Additionally, when students do weigh in, their contributions can be tokenized or not taken seriously by adults (Jenkins & Patterson, 2021).

Positive adult mindsets about the abilities of students shape expectations of young people and motivation to support students' educational experiences (Benard, 2004; Brooks et al., 2012). For any student voice initiative to be effective, adults need to believe that students can participate in important decision-making; that their ideas, experiences, and perspectives have value; and that including students in the process of trying to improve is key to making positive change.

Activity: Videos

Watch one or a few of the following videos that include adult reactions to student feedback:

- [San Dieguito School Board OKs Full Reopening](#)
- [Russ Quaglia - Student Voice](#)
- [Student Surveys: Using Student Voice to Improve Teaching and Learning](#)

After watching, take a few minutes to reflect on the following questions:

- What adult mindsets do you notice?
- Do these adult mindsets demonstrate high value for student input?

Likewise, student mindsets are an important aspect of successfully engaging them as leaders. Students' positive beliefs about their own value and their ability to learn are associated with psychological well-being and school engagement (Zeng et al., 2016). Students who believe their input has value may be more likely to share their experiences and engage in opportunities to take on leadership and co-creation roles.

Importantly, adults in a school system can often have a large impact on students' mindsets and therefore students' motivation, engagement, and resilience (Brooks et al., 2012; Benard, 2004). School connectedness—which refers to students' beliefs that the adults in their education environments care about them—may support students' willingness to partner with adults in education decision-making (Blum, 2005). Building positive interpersonal relationships is one key component of fostering school connectedness.

Interpersonal Relationships

Positive interpersonal relationships at school are linked with students' feelings of connectedness and personal well-being (Hanson, 2011; Benard, 2004; Danielsen et al., 2009; Malecki & Demaray, 2003). Teachers and other adults in school settings can foster school connectedness by investing time and care into their relationships with students and by encouraging positive peer relationships among students (O'Malley & Amarillas, 2011).

Positive relationships may be especially important for students who are experiencing adverse conditions outside of school or who do not have positive experiences while in school (Austin et al., 2013; Weinstein, 2002). These students may already feel isolated from their school community and feel that their feedback will be unwelcome or dismissed. Building positive relationships with these students is an important first step for ensuring they feel safe and supported to engage in student voice opportunities.

Activity: Connect the Dots

This activity has been adapted from [Climate Connection Toolkit](#) (O'Malley & Poynor, 2014).

Create a visual representation, or “socio-gram,” of the relationships that students have with the adult staff members in their school. Use the socio-gram to identify students who do not have at least one positive relationship and then make a plan to connect each such student with an adult who is committed to their development and well-being.

- Select a socio-gram statement that defines the type of social connections you are hoping to foster among students and adults. Some examples follow:
 - I have a strong enough connection with this student that they would come to me for help with a personal problem.
 - I know this student well enough to call them by name when I see them outside of class.
 - I know at least one detail of this student's life outside of school.
- Create a chart listing students selected for consideration and each adult willing to participate. You may decide to consider all students in a grade or class or those who fall into subgroups—for example, according to socioeconomic status, attendance rates, academic scores, home language, or race.

- Have participating adults check a box in the row for each student for whom the socio-gram statement is true.
 - After each adult has filled in their row, make a note of any students who are not currently connected with a caring adult at school.
 - Identify an adult volunteer who is willing to commit to building a positive relationship with each student who is currently not connected.
 - Check back in every few weeks to discuss progress and any challenges that may arise.
-

TIPS FOR BUILDING AUTHENTIC RELATIONSHIPS WITH STUDENTS

Two keynote presentations at a 2019 Regional Educational Laboratory West event outlined specific strategies for building positive relationships with young people:

- [Six Strategies to Promote Student Resilience](#), Dr. Flojaune Cofer, Public Health Advocates: [Reflection Guide](#)
- [Trauma-Informed Strategies for Building Relationships with Students](#), Dr. Sam Himmelstein: [Reflection Guide](#)

To foster positive interpersonal relationships with students, adults in school systems can start by demonstrating genuine care for students and a desire to connect with them. In *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain*, Zaretta Hammond (2014) outlines five trust generators that can help adults connect with students and help students feel safe and cared for:

- selective vulnerability: sharing personal details that demonstrate humanity while maintaining clear boundaries, professionalism, and emotional safety for both the adult and the student
- familiarity: being physically present at consistent times and places
- similarity of interests: making a special point to surface commonalities and share about them to build rapport
- concern: showing genuine interest in a student's life, remembering key details and making a point to check in and ask questions about them
- competence: effectively displaying skills, knowledge, confidence, and reliability

As noted earlier, there is a reciprocal relationship between fostering positive interpersonal relationships and building individual mindsets about students' abilities to take on leadership roles and make decisions about their school environments. Fostering positive relationships, especially with students who are most likely to opt out of engagement opportunities, can improve students' individual mindsets about their capacity as leaders and decision-makers and can increase a communitywide culture of student engagement and participation (National Research Council & Institute of Medicine, 2004; McLaughlin, 2000).

Community Culture

A school's or community's culture is shaped by individual mindsets and interpersonal relationships and is made evident in the behaviors, expectations, and experiences of those who are part of it (Fullan, 2007). For effectively and equitably engaging student voice and co-creation, a whole-school approach to cultivating the mindsets and relationships that encourage student leadership is critical. When a schoolwide culture of student agency exists,

- student voice is valued and sought after as an important tool for decision-making;
- adults share decision-making power with students; and
- students are authentically engaged in leadership roles that have direct influence on policy, practice, and everyday experiences.

School staff may benefit from considering their current culture of student engagement by examining where their student voice activities fall on Hart's Ladder of Participation (Hart, 1992, adapted by Cornell University Cooperative Extension, n.d.). Hart's Ladder organizes participation activities in terms of rungs on a ladder, from the lowest levels of authenticity and student leadership (which are actually nonparticipation activities disguised as authentic or meaningful participation) to the highest levels, which elevate students as leaders engaged in co-creation. As activities advance higher on Hart's Ladder, the activities range from expression—sharing opinions—to full embodiment of leadership roles that not only influence decisions but also identify areas of concern and take responsibility for outcomes.

Activity: Popular Student Engagement Activities and Hart’s Ladder of Participation

The Center for American Progress lists the following activities as being the most common ways that schools promote student voice (2019):

- student surveys
- inclusion of students on governing bodies
- student government or councils
- student journalism
- student-led academic conferences
- democratic classroom practices (e.g., setting expectations, resolving conflicts, co-creation of curriculum and assessment)
- youth participatory action research (e.g., “conduct systematic research, analyze oppressive issues in their schools or communities, and develop solutions to address them”)
- personalized learning

For these activities or for any youth engagement activities currently conducted in your school, consider where each activity falls on Hart’s Ladder. Then consider the following questions:

- How could these student voice activities be elevated to a higher rung? (For example, if a school currently collects student feedback via surveys, how might students be provided with more direct access to providing feedback and possibly helping to determine solutions to problems surfaced through the surveys?)
- What about your current school culture might prevent student voice activities from reaching the highest rungs on Hart’s Ladder? How could this barrier be removed?
- In what other areas or decisions might students be engaged and at what level of participation?
- How can leaders ensure that student voice activities include equitable consideration for students from all backgrounds? Are there ways that your school can ensure that student leadership and co-creation are accessible to all students?

Although not all decisions may be appropriate for the highest levels of youth participation, almost all initiatives could benefit from consideration of how to improve student participation and leadership. As culture and capacity for

authentically engaging student voice increases, decisions that were once thought inappropriate for youth input may turn out to be within the scope of possibility for student involvement.

Structural and Systemic Supports

Appropriately designing student voice initiatives and providing adequate resources are imperative for success. Resources include tangibles—such as materials and supplies, meeting spaces, and transportation—and intangibles such as time, staff commitment, knowledge, and training.

Another important resource for ensuring long-term success is an organization's capacity to make and sustain changes that come from student co-creation and decision-making. This capacity includes both individual commitments and systemic commitments such as policy or documented agreements on how final decisions will be made. Although adults may feel that they have cultivated the relationships and culture needed to engage students in leadership and co-creation, it may be helpful to make the implicit explicit by putting commitments in writing and making them known to students.

Activity: Making Your Commitment to Student Voice Explicit

- As a group, fill in a chart with three columns; starting in a column labeled “Our commitment,” list the shared commitments that adults in your school have regarding student engagement.
- Next, in a column labeled “This commitment looks like...,” note how you currently demonstrate each commitment to students.
- Then, with a continuous improvement mindset, use a column labeled “This commitment could look like...” to note ways you might enhance how you display or make clear each commitment. The following questions can help guide your thinking:
 - Do all students know and understand what these commitments mean?
 - Are written policies or procedures in place to bolster these commitments? Could there be?
 - Do those outside of the school (i.e., district leadership, community leaders) share these commitments?

Our commitment	This commitment looks like...	This commitment could look like...

Appropriate design of student voice activities includes considering how to ensure participation from students with a diverse range of experiences by offering multiple ways for them to provide feedback. Feedback options may include opportunities for them to provide anonymous input or share as part of a group rather than requiring students to speak up individually. Similarly, some students may have privileges that have enabled their individual capacity and confidence to participate in co-creation and leadership; a well-designed student voice initiative will consider how to build these capacities among all students.

Consider what additional resources may be needed for providing equitable access for all students. These may include translation services or other accessibility measures, such as relay services, ramps, or headphones. You may also want to provide meals or stipends to students who are putting in significant time or commitment.

Additional Resources and Guidance

This section includes additional resources, such as guiding questions, examples, and activities, that cut across the four elements described earlier for promoting student voice.

Key Questions for Implementing Student Voice Initiatives With a Focus on Equity

The following questions can help guide educators to focus on equity when implementing student voice initiatives. The questions are from the blog—[To Achieve Racial Equity in Education, Include Students as Co-Creators](#)—and

adapted from a book chapter titled “Students as Co-Creators of Educational Environments” (Pate et al., in press).

- What would it look like to partner with students to co-design education policies, practices, and services?
- Do your current systems and practices acknowledge, affirm, and celebrate students’ wisdom and cultures in ways that foster belonging and agency?
- Do current policies and practices empower those being served (students) or those providing the service (adults)? In other words, is emphasis being placed on control rather than on the true needs of students?
- In what ways do your current systems and practices perpetuate White, adult-centric beliefs, values, and biases?
 - How can you begin to shift away from these constructs and toward true partnerships that recognize students’ capabilities, leverage their knowledge and wisdom, and use their contributions?
- In what ways might sociocultural identities such as race and gender influence students’ expressions of voice, agency, and leadership? In what ways do dominant culture identities influence perceptions of student voice, agency, and leadership?
- How are your organizational goals contributing to an overall vision of student equity? Could they be revised to be more explicit?
- How can you invite and facilitate bidirectional feedback between students and adults?
- How can you ensure you are receiving feedback from all students, not just the ones for whom it is easy or safe to give feedback?
- What specific decisions could be made using student voice? What specific activities, programs, or policies can students co-create?

Youth Leadership and Co-Creation in Action

The following initiatives are spearheaded by students and youths and may provide inspiration for your own efforts:

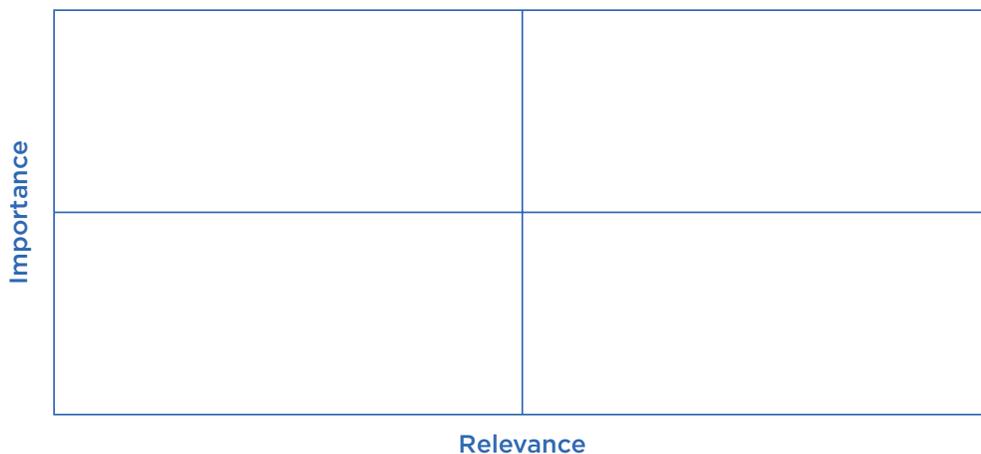
- [Kentucky Student Voice Team](#)
- [San Juan Unified School District Student Leadership Groups](#)
- [GENup](#) (a California-based, nationwide, student-led social justice organization and student activist coalition that strives to advocate for education through the power of youth voices)

Considerations for Student Inclusion in Decision-Making

Another activity that can be useful is to list all the school decisions that students are currently engaged in making and then use a chart like the following one for placing a dot representing each decision and indicating where each falls in terms of relevance and importance.

Relevance: How much will this decision have direct impact on students' day-to-day experiences?

Importance: How connected to the overall vision and mission of the school or district is this decision?



Consider the following:

- How might it feel for students to see this chart? Will they be encouraged by the level to which their input influences their experiences at school?
- Who determines relevance and importance? In other words, are the decisions that students are involved in making important? Are the decisions relevant to them or to the adults in the school?
- Are there other decisions that reach into the upper right quadrant that students could be involved in? How?

One adaptation of this activity is to change the size of each dot to indicate how many students have influence over these decisions—use a small dot if it is only a small handful of students and a larger dot to indicate more student input.

Conclusion: Moving from “Doing For” to “Doing With” the Communities Being Served

“Student voice is so much larger than just one student or even just a few students speaking up.”

—Zachary Patterson, San Diego Unified School District Student School Board Member

“We know that solutions that are co-created with students and other important stakeholder groups tend to be better solutions because these are the groups who know exactly what they need.... You are going to be creating solutions that really address the nuance of the student experience.”

—Zoë Jenkins, Kentucky Student Voice Team, Civics Unplugged Fellow, and Creator of DICCE Anti-Racism Curriculum

Any student voice and leadership initiative is likely to fall short of success if it does not include a diverse range of perspectives and student participation (Jenkins & Patterson, 2021). Elevating the voices of students is an opportunity to explicitly provide equitable opportunities for input and decision-making that can lead to equitable outcomes and experiences.

Considering the elements of how schools cultivate student voice and leadership in terms of internal, external, individual, and collective domains can help schools identify opportunities for improving their student voice initiatives through a lens of equity.

References

Austin, G., Hanson, T., & Voight, A. (2013). *School connectedness and academic achievement in California high schools. S3 Factsheet #5*. WestEd.

Benard, B. (2004). *Resiliency: What have we learned?* WestEd.

Blum, R. W. (2005). A case for school connectedness. *Educational Leadership*, 62, 16–20.

Brooks, R., Brooks, S., & Goldstein, S. (2012). The power of mindsets: Nurturing engagement, motivation, and resilience in students. In S. L. Christenson, A. L. Reschly, & C. Wylie (Eds.), *Handbook of student engagement*. Springer.

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/310773130_Handbook_of_Student_Engagement

Buckner, L. (2021, August 9). To achieve racial equity in education, include students as co-creators. *WestEd Insights*. <https://www.wested.org/wested-insights/achieve-racial-equity-in-education-include-students-as-co-creators/>

CalSCHLS Secondary Student Data Dashboard. (2017–19). Retrieved December 23, 2021, from <https://calschls.org/reports-data/public-dashboards/secondary-student/>

Center for American Progress. (2019). *Elevating student voice in education*. <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/elevating-student-voice-education/>

Cornell University Cooperative Extension. (n.d.). Hart's ladder of participation. *Cornell Garden-Based Learning*. <https://blogs.cornell.edu/garden/program-tools/planning-organizing/effective-youth-engagement/harts-ladder-of-participation/>

Danielsen, A. G., Samdal, O., Hetland, J., & Wold, B. (2009). School-related social support and students' perceived life satisfaction. *Journal of Educational Research*, 102, 303–318.

Fullan, M. (2007). *Leading in a culture of change*. Jossey-Bass.

Hammond, Z. (2014). *Culturally responsive teaching and the brain: Promoting authentic engagement and rigor among culturally and linguistically diverse students*. Corwin.

Hanson, T. (2011). *Teacher support: High expectations and caring relationships*. WestEd.

Hart, R. (1992). *Children's participation from tokenism to citizenship*. UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre.

Institute of Education Sciences. (2020, April 3). *Six strategies to promote student resilience* [Video]. YouTube. <https://youtu.be/NEp50EwNgG0>

Institute of Education Sciences. (2020, August 19). *Trauma-informed strategies for building relationships with students* [Video]. YouTube. <https://youtu.be/n3lu9dkZc5g>

Jenkins, Z., & Patterson, Z. (2021). *Stakeholder voice, agency, and co-creation for equity in education* [Webinar]. WestEd. <https://www.wested.org/resources/stakeholder-voice-agency-and-co-creation/>

Malecki, C. K., & Demaray, M. K. (2003). What type of support do they need? Investigating student adjustment as related to emotional, informational, appraisal, and instrumental support. *School Psychology Quarterly, 18*, 231–252.

McLaughlin, M. W. (2000). *Community counts: How youth organizations matter for youth development*. Public Education Network.

National Research Council, & Institute of Medicine. (2004). *Engaging schools: Fostering high school students' motivation to learn*. The National Academies Press.

O'Malley, M. D., & Amarillas, A. (2011). *What works brief #1: Caring relationships and high expectations*. WestEd.

O'Malley, M., & Poynor, L. (2014). *Climate connection toolkit: Low and no-cost activities for cultivating a supportive school climate* (2nd ed.). WestEd.

Pate, C. M., Glymph, A., Joiner, T., & Bhagwandeem, R. (in press). Students as co-creators of educational environments. In S. W. Evans, J. S. Owens, C. P. Bradshaw, & M. D. Weist (Eds.), *Handbook of school mental health – Innovations in science and practice* (3rd ed.). Springer.

Waddell, S. (2011). *Global action networks: Creating our future together*. Palgrave Macmillan/Bocconi University Press.

Weinstein, R. S. (2002). *Reaching higher: The power of expectations in schooling*. Harvard University Press.

Wilber, K. (2001). *A brief history of everything* (rev. ed.). Shambala Publishing.

Zeng, G., Hou, H., & Peng, K. (2016). Effect of growth mindset on school engagement and psychological well-being of Chinese primary and middle school students: The mediating role of resilience. *Frontiers in Psychology*. <https://www.frontiersin.org/article/10.3389/fpsyg.2016.01873>

©2022 WestEd. All rights reserved.



Suggested citation: Equity Accelerator. (2022). *Elevating student voice, agency, and co-creation*. WestEd.

WestEd is a nonpartisan, nonprofit research, development, and service agency that works with education and other communities throughout the United States and abroad to promote excellence, achieve equity, and improve learning for children, youth, and adults. WestEd has more than a dozen offices nationwide, with headquarters in San Francisco. For more information about WestEd, visit <http://www.WestEd.org>; call 415.565.3000 or, toll-free, (877) 4-WestEd; or write: WestEd / 730 Harrison Street / San Francisco, CA 94107-1242.