

# Student Voice

## GOAL: INCREASED MEANINGFUL YOUTH ENGAGEMENT IN DECISION MAKING

Meaningful youth engagement is defined as: *When young people are taken seriously as active participants and valued partners with adults in both their own education and decisions that affect the academic and social climate and culture of their learning environment.*<sup>1</sup> There is some evidence, largely anecdotal, about the importance of youth engagement and participation in school and community settings.<sup>2</sup> There is more evidence that when youth are meaningfully engaged, they gain psychological and behavioral benefits such as higher self-esteem or self-concept, sense of belonging, sense of purpose, reduced delinquency, and greater community participation.

### Examples of Research Findings:

- ◆ Students have key developmental needs met through opportunities to express their voices and meaningfully participate in school. These needs include: developing the belief that they can transform themselves and institutions that affect them; gaining competence in various areas such as research methods, communications and critical thinking; and finding a sense of belonging through meaningful connections with caring adults and peers<sup>3</sup>.
- ◆ Participation in school-based leadership activities such as student council is positively linked to liking school and has predicted college attendance<sup>4</sup>.
- ◆ One study focused on the benefits of youth participation on adults and organizations and found that working with youth enhanced the energy and commitment of adults, and having young people as decision makers often brings clarity and focus to the organization’s mission<sup>5</sup>.

### Rating the Research:

Scientifically Supported	Green
<b>Some Evidence</b>	Light Green
Expert Opinion	Light Blue
Mixed Evidence	Yellow
Insufficient Evidence	Orange
Evidence of Ineffectiveness	Red



Some evidence in support of youth voice and participation exists, but it has not yet been given sufficient attention in the literature. The literature on youth engagement is often descriptive and highlights examples where the practice was beneficial in improving relevant outcomes, based on a specific intervention (see examples below). From a developmental perspective, youth engagement or participation in decision-making has been shown to provide psychological and behavioral benefits (e.g. sense of belonging, competence). The study of youth engagement and voice is a developing field with great potential for further growth. What we do know, based on the evidence, is that when youth are valued and empowered, not only do they experience various psychological benefits (e.g. increased self-concept) but the involved adults and institutions can also be positively affected as well.

\*Adapted from the County Health Rankings  
 Evidence Rating: Search, Selection and Assessment  
<http://www.countyhealthrankings.org/roadmaps/what-works-for-health/our-methods>

## Strategies

This section summarizes promising intervention strategies to increase meaningful youth engagement in decision-making for policy change both directly in schools and on issues that affect schools, which can be addressed by community organizations.

### Promising Strategies:

#### Schools deliberately and meaningfully incorporate youth in school and district-wide reform efforts.

- One school designed a model allowing students to **practice democratic self-governance** in weekly town meetings. To facilitate this, the school divided into clusters, meeting as a whole and in small groups once a week to discuss issues, decide cluster activities, propose school improvements, and recommend policies. The students tackled issues ranging from improving the quality of the food service to proposing and implementing school climate changes to fostering more effective inclusion of foreign-born students within the school<sup>1</sup>.
- Another form of youth governance is a strategy in which youth participate in school and district-wide reform efforts **in partnership with adults**. In this model, students **participate in governance decisions** about policies and procedures by serving on the Board of Directors and Board Committees<sup>6</sup>. This strategy aligns with the idea of having “youth-driven spaces”, which promotes youth development through skill building. Benefits for students include heightened self-confidence and a sense of potential to succeed<sup>7</sup>.

#### Schools and communities form youth participatory action research (YPAR) groups to address student issues and concerns.

- Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) is a participatory approach that involves youth in identifying, researching, and working to resolve social problems (e.g., poverty, poor educational attainment) that affect them, their peers, and their communities. YPAR enhances individual and group competencies and skills, engages youth in meaningful work, and incorporates them into transformational activities that help them to re-vision themselves and their communities empowered and with increased opportunity for advancement. This type of youth involvement **provides opportunities for young people to improve their social conditions** and those of their peers<sup>8</sup>. One YPAR intervention, The Youth Action Research for Prevention, **utilized youth empowerment** as the cornerstone of a multi-level intervention designed to reduce and/or delay onset of drug and sex risk, while increasing individual and collective efficacy\* and educational expectations. A quasi-experimental evaluation showed that the intervention improved social cohesion and collective-efficacy, while shifting peer norms about drug disapproval in a positive direction<sup>9</sup>. [*\*Individual efficacy – one’s belief in one’s ability to succeed in specific situations. Collective efficacy – a group’s shared belief in its capacity to work together towards a common goal.*]

#### Community-based organizations adopt youth friendly policies that invite young people to be involved in community-based efforts, at all levels (e.g., strategizing, decision-making, implementing).

- Partnerships between youth and adults represent an innovation in community development work<sup>10</sup>. Community organizations can create boards that allow for **youth governance at the neighborhood level**. This practice is most effective when not done in a token fashion—that is, having a youth on the board for show—but rather when a number of youth are given positions of influence and when their ideas are listened to and taken seriously by the adult partners. Adult domination (intended or unintended) has been shown to be detrimental to efforts to include youth in governance<sup>7</sup>.
- School issues can be addressed from outside the school when youth are involved with youth-friendly community-based organizations. For example, in Philadelphia, youth are organizing against corporations and politicians that want to privatize the public school system. Youth and their adult allies have succeeded in keeping some local control over the schools by **combining sound research and direct action**. In one case they prevented a for-profit corporation seeking access to public dollars from taking over the entire school system<sup>11</sup>.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Joselowsky, F. (2007). Youth engagement, high school reform, and improved learning outcomes: Building systemic approaches for youth engagement. *NASSP Bulletin*, 91(3), 257-276.

<sup>2</sup> Scales, P., & Leffert, N. (1999). *Developmental assets: A synthesis of the scientific research on adolescent development*. Minneapolis, MN: Search Institute.

<sup>3</sup> Mitra, D. (2004). The significance of students: can increasing "student voice" in schools lead to gains in youth development?. *The Teachers College Record*, 106(4), 651-688.

<sup>4</sup> Eccles, J. S., & Barber, B. L. (1999). Student Council, Volunteering, Basketball, or Marching Band What Kind of Extracurricular Involvement Matters?. *Journal of adolescent research*, 14(1), 10-43.

<sup>5</sup> Zeldin, S., McDaniel, A. K., Topitzes, D., & Calvert, M. (2000). *Youth in decision-making: A study on the impacts of youth on adults and organizations* (p. 68). Chevy Chase, MD: National 4-H Council.

<sup>6</sup> What is so important about being "youth-driven"?: A white paper on youth voice and leadership *Neutral Zone Publication*

<sup>7</sup> Cook-Sather, A. (2007). What would happen if we treated students as those with opinions that matter? The benefits to principals and teachers of supporting youth engagement in school. *NASSP Bulletin*, 91(4), 343-362.

<sup>8</sup> Schensul, J. J., Berg, M. J., Schensul, D., & Sydlo, S. (2004). Core elements of participatory action research for educational empowerment and risk prevention with urban youth. *Practicing Anthropology*, 26(2), 5-9.

<sup>9</sup> Berg, M., Coman, E., & Schensul, J. J. (2009). Youth action research for prevention: A multi-level intervention designed to increase efficacy and empowerment among urban youth. *American journal of community psychology*, 43(3-4), 345-359.

<sup>10</sup> Camino, L. A. (2000). Youth-adult partnerships: Entering new territory in community work and research. *Applied Developmental Science*, 4(S1), 11-20.

<sup>11</sup> Delgado, M., & Staples, L. (2008). *Youth-led community organizing*. New York: Oxford University Press.

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