

Ladder of Student Involvement in Schools

By Adam Fletcher

For a long time, the only formal position every young person holds in society is that of student: Every young person is a learner who attends school in order to meet society's expectations of them. That has changed. Today, young people increasingly have more important positions, including that of decision-makers, planners, researchers, and more. The following *Ladder of Student Involvement in Schools* was created to encourage students and adults to examine *why* and *how* students participate throughout schools. Think of specific activities students are involved in, and measure them against this tool.

Ladder of Student Involvement in Schools



Adapted by Adam Fletcher (2011) from work by Roger Hart, et al. (1994)

It is important to recognize that the Ladder is not meant to represent the whole school at once. Instead, it represents each specific instance of student involvement. That means that rather than say a whole classroom is rung 4, several students could be experiencing that they are at that rung while others are experiencing that they're at rung 6. For a long time, determining which rung a student is at was left to perception and position: If an adult believed the students on their committee were at rung 6, and the students believed they were at rung 8, they simply agreed to disagree. The following rubric can help provide a clearer explanation of what student involvement looks like.

Student Involvement Rubric

Description	Challenge	Reward
1. Adults manipulate students	Students forced to attend without regard to interest.	Experience of involving students and rational for continuing activities.
2. Adults use students to decorate their activities	The presence of students is treated as all that is necessary without reinforcing active involvement.	A tangible outcome demonstrating thinking about student involvement.
3. Adults tokenize students	Students are used inconsequentially by adults to reinforce the perception that students are involved.	Validates student attendance without requiring the work to go beyond that.
4. Students inform adults	Adults do not <i>have</i> to let students impact their decisions.	Students can impact adult-driven decisions or activities.
5. Adults actively consult students while they're involved	Students only have the authority that adults grant them, and are subject to adult approval.	Students can substantially transform adults' opinions, ideas, and actions.
6. Students are fully equal with adults while they're involved. This is a 50/50 split of authority, obligation, and commitment.	There isn't recognition for the specific developmental needs or representation opportunities for students. Without receiving that recognition students lose interest and may become disengaged quickly.	Students can experience full power and authority, as well as the experience of forming basic youth/adult partnerships.
7. Student-driven activities do not include adults in positions of authority; rather, they are they to support students in passive roles.	Students operate in a vacuous situation where the impact of their larger community isn't recognized by them. Student-driven activities may not be seen with the validity of co-led activities, either.	Developing complete ownership of their learning allows students to drive the educational experience with a lot of effectiveness. Students experience the potential of their direct actions upon themselves, their peers, and their larger school community
8. Students have full equity with adults. This may be a 40/60 split, or 20/80 split when it's appropriate. All are recognized for their impact and ownership of the outcomes.	Requires conscious commitment by all participants to overcoming all barriers.	Creating structures to support differences can establish safe, supportive learning environments, ultimately recreating the climate and culture in schools.



Roger Hart, a sociologist for UNICEF who originally developed the Ladder, originally intended the first three rungs to represent forms of *non*-participation. However, while the first rung generally represents the nature of all student involvement in schools with the threat of “attend or fail”, there are more roles for students than ever before throughout the education system. Rungs 6, 7, and 8 generally represent “student/adult partnerships”, or intentional arrangements designed to foster authentic student engagement in schools.

Today, students are increasingly engaged as researchers, planners, teachers, evaluators, decision-makers, and advocates. With this knowledge in mind, the rungs of the Ladder can help students and adults identify how students are currently involved in schools, and give them goals to aspire towards.