

MEANINGFUL STUDENT INVOLVEMENT IDEA GUIDE

2003 (Version Two)

Definition

Meaningful Student Involvement is the process of engaging students as partners in every facet of school change for the purpose of strengthening their commitment to education, community, and democracy.

ADAM FLETCHER

PURPOSE

By promoting meaningful student involvement, schools can ready students for a lifetime of significant participation. Alfie Kohn concluded that meaningful student involvement in school decision-making has four distinct outcomes on school climate¹:

1. **Effects on general well-being.** Its good for all people to experience a sense of control over their lives.
2. **Effects on behavior and values.** If we want children to take responsibility for their own behavior, we must first give them responsibility, and plenty of it.
3. **Effects on academic achievement.** Students who feel empowered through self-determination will likely have greater motivation.
4. **Effects on teachers.** Educators who are willing to share power may well find that they benefit directly as one's job becomes a good deal more interesting when it involved collaborating with students to decide what is going to happen.²

Introducing Ideas

This idea guide will introduce several ideas and examples of meaningful student involvement in schools, and provide resources for teachers and administrators increase and enhance meaningful student involvement in their schools.

MEANINGFUL STUDENT INVOLVEMENT IDEA GUIDE

Principles of Student/Adult Partnerships

Students can become partners in their educations. Adults—including teachers, principals and others—need to learn new ways of interacting with students.

Respect

Respect is mutual: You give it, you receive it. A culture of respect shatters stereotypes based on age. Students respect teachers who listen and ask challenging questions. A culture of respect provides all people the opportunity to act on their dreams and learn from their mistakes.

Communication

Listen up: An honest and open exchange of ideas is crucial. Students are best heard when teachers step back and students speak up. Teachers are best heard when they are straight up and explain where they're coming from. All people's ideas and opinions are valuable and must be heard.

Investment

It takes time: Investing in the future is accepting that students are leaders today. Students and teachers must first set their fears aside and take a chance on each other. Teachers must provide students with the information, education and support they will need to succeed. They must also develop their own ability to engage students. Strong partnerships require patience and courage.

Meaningfulness

Count us in: Decisions about students should be made with students. Teachers need to support students in taking on responsibility based on what they can do, not what they have done.

- Reflection helps everyone appreciate the importance of their education - for themselves, for their communities and for their lives. Students and teachers must hold each other accountable for all their decisions and actions. Students and teachers should continually challenge the impact of schools in their lives.³

Background

In schools today, students are often addressed as passive learners, merely participants in their educations, as opposed to partners. Opportunities for meaningful and significant student involvement in education planning, school leadership and self-governance are primarily offered to gifted and advanced students only, and even then with reservation from the teachers and administrators. However, a recent survey³ summarized the following conclusions:

1. Students need to become directly involved with the decision-making processes in schools;
2. Stakeholders, including teachers, counselors and administrators, need to believe that students' needs are important and that their attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors are key to their success in school;
3. Schools must find an organized way in which students' needs, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors are reverberated through the system and become an integral part of the problem-solving process; and
4. That students need feedback and validation that their voices have been heard.

The actual practices of meaningful student involvement vary, and include all grade levels and capabilities. Examples include students in kindergarten having an hour a day to choose what to do, and high school students being involved in hiring teachers and administrators. Through effective, empowering opportunities to use their voice, experience and knowledge to make meaningful decisions, all students can have ownership in their learning, and the investment to succeed.⁴



MEANINGFUL STUDENT INVOLVEMENT IDEA GUIDE



Ideas for Teachers

Student-led parent conferences –

Students facilitate parent conferences, with the teacher as a supportive partner in the process. In preparation, students evaluate their learning, and as an outcome, co-create plans to continue and expand their learning (see below).

Self-directed learning – Students, in partnership with teachers and parents, implement learning plans in particular subject areas, developing learning goals and meeting assessment criteria throughout.

Advocacy education – Students educated to advocate and support concerns in their peer groups, school, community and nation.

Service learning – Students research, plan, implement and

evaluate a community service project linking academic learning from classroom with action in community settings. All projects include reflection activities to increase learning.

Student-teacher team teaching/student-run classes –

Students work with teachers to facilitate classroom learning in subjects that they have expertise in, including history, business and science. Students teach their peer groups or cross-grade courses.

Student evaluations of classes and/or teachers –

Students provide input and considerations for teachers and administrators regarding the effectiveness of curriculum, quality of teacher instruction methods and student voice in the classroom (see below).

MEANINGFUL STUDENT INVOLVEMENT IDEA GUIDE

Ideas for Teachers, continued

Student Peer evaluations of classroom performance – Students providing constructive feedback regarding student-led teaching and presentations, as well as behavior and learning attitudes.

Encouraging student voice in learning – Students encouraged to express their concerns, intentions, attitudes and opinions through the arts, media and advocacy opportunities.

Student designed courses and curriculum – Teachers train students to research, plan, design and evaluate course curriculum throughout schools.

Curriculum emphasizing meaningful student involvement – Schools and teachers incorporate innovative programs for teaching students, including those designated progressive, democratic, open, free, experimental, or alternative; or educational philosophies called developmental, constructivist, holistic, or learner-centered; in specific innovations such as whole-language learning, discovery-based science, or authentic assessment; they may include experiential and applied learning methods, or service learning, collaborative or group teaching; and they support the daily practice of teachers whose natural instinct is to treat children with respect.

Ideas for Building Leaders

Training for student decision-makers – All students are engaged in constant and meaningful decision-making opportunities in their own education, school-wide and community issues. Schools train students and adults to be effective and empowered members of decision-making groups.

Student-based school needs assessments – Students voice their concerns and praise on topics including school climate, student ownership and teacher/principal responsiveness.



Student-Led Conferences

Student-led conferences foster student ownership of learning, teaching and leadership in schools. The goals of student-led conferences include...

- Encouraging students to accept personal responsibility for their academic performance;
- Teaching students the process of self-evaluation;
- Facilitating the development of students' organizational and oral communication skills and to increase their self-confidence;
- Encouraging students, parents, and teachers to engage in open and honest dialogue; and
- Increasing parent attendance at conferences.

Schools that use student-led conferences frequently report that, as a result of involvement in student-led conferences, parent and teacher bonds are strengthened. Both teacher and parent are more likely to initiate subsequent contacts throughout the remainder of the school year.⁵

MEANINGFUL STUDENT INVOLVEMENT IDEA GUIDE

Ideas for Building Leaders, continued

Curriculum development committees – Student voice is included when new courses are added or dropped at the local and district levels. Student voice is included in course selection, implementation and review.

Curriculum development committees – Student voice is included when new courses are added or dropped at the local and district levels. Student voice is included in course selection, implementation and review.

School and/or site councils – Students engaged in community-wide discussions about school policy. Students have full membership, and are empowered to go to meetings by the validation of their concerns and beliefs. Students are encouraged to push for what they need and want in their education.

Ideas for District Administrators

Student-led teacher training – Students facilitate professional development for teachers including (but not limited to) service learning, diversity and using technology in the classroom. Students' teaching is evaluated by teachers and administrators in attendance, and guided by supporting adults.

Students on local boards of education and/or district school boards – Students have equal effect and full participation in decision-making processes through education about issues, insurance of transportation for regular attendance, pointed inclusion in discussions and debate, and full voting rights.

Formal student involvement in school, district and state staff hiring – Students have equal voice on interview panels and application review teams. Students are encouraged to engage applicants about student and community concerns and viewpoints without parroting adults.

Ideas for Students

Show interest – Schools don't assume that students want to be involved. Let your teachers and principals know that you want to be involved meaningfully in your high school. Give supportive adults a list of your desires, and be prepared to act on them.

Identify supportive teachers – Students working in partnership with supportive adults to affect change in school practices can greatly enhance success.

Offer direction and support to state agencies – Students providing suggestions and advice based on their experience and opinions to the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction demonstrates concern and investment in their education.

Student organizations – Take advantage of current school groups to involve students meaningfully throughout schools. By working together with supportive adults, ASBs, student councils and students on site councils can have a significant voice in school decision-making.

MEANINGFUL STUDENT INVOLVEMENT IDEA GUIDE

Ideas for Students, continued

Student/school forums – Student organized and facilitated forums focused on pertinent issues with full school involvement, including students, teachers, staff and administrators.

Student press – Encouraging student voice through the press increases participation in school by fostering ownership and critical thinking skills in students, and responsiveness from adults.

Build Allyships – Find teachers, school staff or community partners who will support students as they work to improve schools, with or without adult participation.

Use SoundOut.org – The SoundOut website is a super student voice database packed with examples, research, tips and other information for students, teachers and others who care about Meaningful Student Involvement, student engagement and more.

Students Evaluating Teachers

When students evaluate teachers, there are countless questions they can ask. Research has identified some of the following as key topics:

- Does the teacher understand the students' point of view?
- Does this teacher seem to care whether students learn?
- Does this teacher behave differently towards students of different grades or academic performance?
- Has this teacher been helpful to you in your learning efforts this year?
- Does the teacher usually know what he/she is talking about?
- Does the teacher give students the opportunity to confirm and get a firm grasp of what they've learned?
- Is the teacher enthusiastic about the class?⁶

Decisions for Students

In the early 2000s, a Kentucky-based study by George Patmor found that students wanted to be involved in these decision-making topics...⁷

- Deciding the number of employees in each school position
- Selecting textbooks and instructional materials
- Selecting a new principal when there is a vacancy
- Consulting with principal when other vacancies are filled
- Deciding what is to be taught
- Deciding which teaching methods will be used
- Deciding which classes teachers will teach
- Deciding which classes students will take
- Deciding how time will be used during the day
- Making discipline and classroom management policies
- Deciding how the school building will be used
- Deciding which classes students will take
- Deciding how time will be used during the day
- Deciding how the school building will be used
- Making discipline and classroom management policies
- Deciding issues concerning extracurricular activities
- Determining how available funds are to be spent
- Planning activities for teacher in-service days

Moving Towards Meaning

Do you want to foster Meaningful Student Involvement in your classroom, school or district? SoundOut's experience with schools shows us that the following steps can help educators and students move towards meaning:

1. Partner with students to learn about Meaningful Student Involvement and school improvement together.
2. Establish a project to foster Meaningful Student Involvement in your class, school or district.
3. Promote Meaningful Student Involvement throughout your school or district and use your project as an example.
4. Build support for Meaningful Student Involvement among decision-makers, including funding, class credits and influence.
5. Show students, educators and others the advantages you've experiences through Meaningful Student Involvement.
6. Share your story with SoundOut by visiting <http://soundout.org>.



1. Sharon Kruse, "Student Voices: A report from focus group data," NASSP Bulletin, National Association of Secondary School Principals, Sept 00 pp. 77-85.
2. Ruthanne Kurth-Schai, "The Roles of Youth in Society: A Reconceptualization," The Educational Forum, Winter 98, pp. 112-132.
3. Alfie Kohn, "Choices for Children: Why and How to Let Students Decide," Phi Delta Kappan, Sept. 93, pp. 8-20.
4. The principles listed are adapted from a product of the Youth Voice Project at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill. The Youth Voice Project produced a series of informational brochures, written by young people and adults, on how better to involve youth in planning and operating organizations. The Project's writers talked with over 500 people in more than 40 states encompassing dozens of schools.
5. Hackmann, Donald G, Student-Led Conferences at the Middle Level, ERIC ED407171, 1997-05-00, ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education Champaign IL.
6. Look Who's Talking Now: Student Views of Learning in Restructuring Schools, 1997, School Change Collaborative, Portland.
7. Patmor, George and McIntyre, John D. (1999) "Involving Students in School Decision Making," NASSP Bulletin, pp. 74-78.

For More Information...

SoundOut

Phone (360) 489-9680

Email info@soundout.org