

Family and Community Collaboration Spotlight: Including Student Voice in District Decision-making

Key Strategies

Districts can engage students in decision-making by:

- **Involving students in strategic planning** to ensure their needs are reflected in district priorities and funding.
- **Forming student advisory committees** that provide ongoing opportunities for collaboration with district leaders.
- **Valuing student perspectives** alongside those of families, community members, and educators.

Student perspectives offer vital information school districts can use when designing strategic plans and strategies for engaging families and communities. Yet, incorporating student voice at the district level is not a common practice. Creating ongoing opportunities for students to partner with district leaders in important planning and strategy decisions is a key element of family and community collaboration (FCC). Students are members of every school community. If a district commits to including all voices in their community, youth voice can't be ignored. To ensure district decisions represent all community needs, district and school staff must be accountable to students.

While there are many ways to integrate youth voice and student perspectives, this strategy spotlight highlights two examples.

»»» Strategies in Action

Involving students in strategic planning: Moreno Valley Unified School District in southern California hosts a virtual meeting each month to *train students on the annual strategic planning process*. Though all districts in the state are required to create Local Control and Accountability Plans (LCAPs) and collect family feedback, Moreno Valley goes the extra mile to teach students how the process works, ask for their ideas, and ensure their perspectives are represented. Moreno Valley also offers *paid internships* for students so they can learn about the district's inner workings, like nutritional services or the superintendent's office. These work-based learning experiences help youth build meaningful connections to the educational system and the people in it while at the same time helping them develop college and career skills that support future success.

“I wasn't used to interacting with like higher ups like that, but I've enjoyed it. It's taught me I have to make communications with other people. I have to establish connections.”

- Student

Forming student advisory councils: Cleveland Heights-University Heights School District, located just outside Cleveland, OH, uses student advisory councils with the superintendent to *review specific policy issues*. The superintendent brings policy questions to a high school group that meets monthly and a middle school group that meets quarterly. Topics have included the dress code, cell phone policies, and school climate. According to the superintendent, student voice was critical to making sure the district's decisions reflected all groups' needs, saying, "I truly believe that students that are thoughtful and empowered within their school spaces make the spaces better, but also hold all the adults accountable."

Tuscaloosa City Schools in Alabama also instituted student advisory councils to ensure that students can inform and advise the district's top decision makers. Principals and teachers at each high school nominate about 15 students to serve on the council, which meets in person with the superintendent every quarter. Each meeting centers on a topic suggested by the superintendent and students in the council. Students also help administer *school-wide surveys* to gather ideas from the broader school community and discuss them with the superintendent. In 2022-23, topics included school safety, the dress code, and unity among the multiple high schools in the district. Student suggestions informed revisions to the dress code, as students shared that the previous dress code disproportionately targeted female students.

Elevating student voice strengthens planning and decision-making and is an important step for any district's journey in creating productive and welcoming learning environments. District and school staff can borrow and adapt these strategies to ensure student voice informs policy and planning decisions, and to promote collaboration and trust between all members of school communities.



"[School staff] could be just walking around with the students, but if you're not actually listening to what they have to say, I feel that level of trust sort of deteriorates."

- Student

About the Connected & Engaged Initiative

This initiative investigates common barriers to achieving authentic partnerships between school districts and families and offers research-based strategies to address those challenges. This initiative aims to support school districts, community-based organizations and caregivers as they consider their own challenges and work to nurture and promote a connected and engaged school community.

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