STUDENT VOICE:
How Young People Can Shape the Future of Education

"It's all about the students." How often do we hear this sentiment—or something similar—in conversations on educational policy and practice? Yet one voice that's usually missing in discussions about how best to support student outcomes is the one that arguably matters the most: students themselves. What experiences do they value most about their education? How do they measure their success in school and real-world settings? Students' ideas on these issues, so core to any debate over improving education, are not always part of the conversation.

Year after year, Massachusetts faces challenges in preparing all students for lifelong success, with substantial disparities in both opportunities and outcomes. The persistence of these disparities across student populations points to the need to look deeply into the root causes of ineffectiveness and inequity, while also bringing voices into the conversation that represent the diversity of students' backgrounds, cultures, and perspectives. This year's Condition of Education Action Guide reexamines the current way of doing business, looking at how we can incorporate student voice into decision-making processes in order to help all learners construct a pathway to success in college, careers, and life.

Student Voice: What It Is and Why We Need It Now

We define student voice as student participation and decision making in the structures and practices that shape their educational experiences.[1] Student voice in the decision-making process can help inspire and inform new approaches to teaching and learning. Authentic learning experiences can bolster student voice by building students' sense of efficacy and elevating their opinions, promoting students' investment in their long-term success and advancing core democratic values like participation and leadership.[2] When students have a say in their own learning, they are more likely to engage deeply in challenging academic work. In addition, by helping students see and express themselves within a larger social environment, the exercise of student voice can develop skills such as creativity, communication, and collaboration, all of which are essential civic—and workforce—attributes.[3]

Over the past year we've seen young people become increasingly involved in public activism, leading the National Student Walkout and voting at higher rates in the mid-term elections than we've seen in 25 years. Meanwhile, states are recognizing the need for schools to prepare students to be engaged and active citizens. A new civics education law requires Massachusetts students to complete a civics project that builds skills in critical thinking and analysis. Elevating student voice taps into students' desire to share their views on critical issues while building the civic skills and mindsets they need to thrive inside and outside of school.

The *2019 Condition of Education Action Guide* examines how student voice and leadership can be put into action to support equity and effectiveness at three levels of the system: classroom, school, and community.

Measuring our Progress: Equity and Achievement

The Rennie Center's Data Dashboard provides an in-depth look at school performance by compiling 25 state-level indicators that illuminate areas of success and areas for continued improvement. The current indicators—such as high-quality early education and chronic absenteeism—provide a starting point to investigate disparities in student experience, as well as the equity and effectiveness of our education system. Over the next year, the Rennie Center will be digging deeper into how we can use data to create a more holistic picture of student experience within the Commonwealth. Our aim is to roll out an updated Data Dashboard in 2020 that allows users to analyze the diverse inputs and outcomes that contribute to inequity in students' learning experiences.

For more on our current indicators, see our online data dashboard (renniecenter.org/data). It allows users to monitor general trends in the data over time and disaggregate results based on a range of student characteristics (e.g., race and English Learner status).

ENDNOTES
1 Cook-Sather, A. (2006), Hadfield, M., & Haw, K. (2001; 2 Bron, J. & Veugelers, W. (2014); 3 Bron, J. & Veugelers, W. (2014).
Full citations are available in the 2018 Condition of Education Action Guide.

CLASSROOM

How can educators provide the support and facilitation needed to allow students to participate in developing their own learning experiences?

CORE FEATURES
- Applied learning activities
- Development of non-cognitive competencies
- Deconstructing adult-student power dynamics

LOCAL SPOTLIGHT

Generation Citizen

Through Generation Citizen, students have the opportunity to exercise their voice in a meaningful way, while learning how to tackle a community issue through action steps that involve collaboration, communication, and creativity. Classes collectively determine a topic of focus, then research the issue to understand the context and identify a specific, local policy goal. Students work in small groups to generate and implement an action plan to build support for a proposed policy change.

Generation Citizen, which is currently partnering with ten districts across Massachusetts, also places a heavy emphasis on building teachers' capacity to support student voice and youth development.

To learn more about Generation Citizen, see pages 8-9.

SCHOOL

How can schools bring students into the process of identifying a diverse and comprehensive set of learning opportunities?

CORE FEATURES
- Positive, inclusive school climate
- Institutionalized channels for students to exercise voice
- Opportunities for student leadership

LOCAL SPOTLIGHT

Andover Public Schools & Monomoy Regional School District

Andover Public Schools and Monomoy Regional School District see social-emotional learning (SEL) and student voice as intertwined— and mutually reinforcing—pillars of improvement within schools.

Andover schools have intentionally approached the work of SEL and student leadership, including the establishment of inclusive communities that support students' connections to each other and to school.

Monomoy Regional School District has brought students into the process of school improvement through multiple formal leadership roles, including student membership on district-wide steering committees.

To learn more about Andover and Monomoy, see pages 11-12.

COMMUNITY

How can we work together to build a dynamic, culturally responsive education system prepared to hear, support, and validate the needs of students at critical transition points?

CORE FEATURES
- Experiential learning
- Cultural competency and responsiveness
- Reciprocal dialogue

LOCAL SPOTLIGHT

Sociedad Latina & Youth on Board

Student participants in both Sociedad Latina and Youth on Board have multiple ways to exercise their voice in settings that offer valuable experiential learning opportunities.

Sociedad Latina works in partnership with Boston youth and families to create the next generation of Latino leaders. Sociedad Latina's Youth Community Organizers participate in decision-making processes that particularly affect themselves, their peers, and Boston's Latino community.

Youth on Board (YOB) addresses community-based issues through youth-led activism. One of YOB's main projects is co-administering the Boston Student Advisory Council, a citywide body of elected student leaders that acts as the district's student union.

To learn more about Sociedad Latina & YOB, see pages 14-15.

Recommendations

Placing student experience and leadership at the center of education conversations will require new ways of thinking and acting at multiple levels. To advance this work, we propose a set of district and state practices that begin to address individual and systemic needs.

DISTRICT PRACTICES

- Create authentic opportunities for students to exercise their voice in school and district decision-making. District leaders should seek to integrate student voice into a range of decisions related to practice and policy.
- Offer training for educators on reciprocal and respectful dialogue. Districts should provide educators with tools, resources, and training to ensure that student opinions (and students themselves) are heard and valued.
- Facilitate community-wide conversations to ensure a cohesive approach to student support. Districts should convene a cross-section of community partners to discuss how to invest holistically in student empowerment.

STATE PRACTICES

- Share survey results on school and district climate. State leaders should consider ways to communicate the highlights from school climate surveys with students and parents.
- Make the accountability system more culturally responsive by considering measures of equity and effectiveness. By allowing districts to pilot the use of innovative measures, Massachusetts can study various indicators that address how well districts are meeting the needs of historically marginalized students.
- Ensure that student outcomes and data systems support effective school-community partnerships. State leaders should explore ways to better link data and support systems across agencies so educators and community leaders can provide more seamless learning opportunities.

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