

# Introduction: It's Time to Listen

*Student voice is when a student expresses their opinion, it is heard by the teacher, and something is done.*

—sixth-grade male student

*I actually have a lot of ideas that could make school better for everyone—even the teachers. I don't know how to share my ideas.*

—ninth-grade female student

Every weekday morning, in every part of the world, young people embark on a journey. By bus, car, bike, or on foot, they travel from their homes, headed to what could be the best or worst, most or least important part of their day: *school*. For all the differences that could be observed across these schools, in most classrooms there would be little question as to who is the teacher and who are the learners. Age, the arrangement of desks in the classroom, how people interact, and who most often is talking, make the traditional roles perfectly clear. On the more traveled road throughout our educational history, there has always been someone older and more experienced in front of the class, firmly in the driver's seat and in charge of what is happening, and when and how it happens. Playing their part in this arrangement the learners are, ideally, a compliant group, willing to do as instructed without question, complaint, or suggestion, like children in the backseat of a car.

However, we know that this “student along for the ride” way of education is not our only option. We have been hearing about another way for some time now, though for all its endorsement in keynote presentations and research articles, it remains a road less taken: student voice. Sure, we have had student protests, student marches, student sit-ins, and student walkouts, but we are talking about student voice not that reactively opposes something, but rather *proactively participates* in the greater good of learning. We are talking about genuine and authentic student voice, where teachers ask for their students' opinions, listen—*really* listen—to what

students have to say, and incorporate what they learn and students themselves into the leadership of their classrooms and schools.

The fact of the matter is that student voice is not yet a reality in most classrooms and schools. The national My Voice survey, administered to 56,877 students in Grades 6–12 in the 2012–13 school year by the Pearson Foundation, reports that just 46% feel students have a voice in decision making at their school and just 52% believe that teachers are willing to learn from students (Quaglia Institute for Student Aspirations [QISA], 2013). In that same survey, even though nearly all students (94%) believe they can be successful and two thirds (67%) see themselves as leaders, less than half (45%) say that they are a valued member of their school community. There may be thousands of students in our schools, maybe hundreds in any particular school, who, confident in their ability to succeed and ready to lead, feel shut out by adults they perceive as unprepared to listen to or value their ideas. Throughout this book we intend to listen to these students, learn from them, and lead the educational community forward in partnership with them.

All human beings want their voices to matter. We like giving our opinions and offering ideas. We want to be the subject of our activities, not the objects of someone else's. We want to be active agents, not just passive spectators. From the “terrible” 2-year-old's insistent “I do! I do!” to the adolescent's “rebellion” against adult rules, young people want to be heard and taken seriously. It's only terrible and rebellious from a certain point of view—that of the adults! From the young person's point of view, it is part of the relentless inborn drive to become a self. From his or her point of view, “My voice matters.”

In the traditional school model, there is little room for student voice, so it is no surprise that less than half of students in secondary education in this country feel that they have a voice in decision making in their schools. While a clear majority of students (61%) believe they have a voice upon entering middle school, one third (37%) say they do by 12th grade (QISA, 2013). In other words, the more our students mature, the less opportunity they have to offer their opinions and participate as leaders in meaningful ways. This finding from our work—that students experience less voice the longer they are in school—has not adequately found its way into our local, state, or national conversations and indicates we have a long way to go toward including students as partners in their education.

Students are generally self-confident and have a desire to achieve. Yet the data we present in this book show that schools typically struggle to engage, support, and make school relevant to at least half of our students. This gap could be a recipe for frustration as well as reduced performance, dropout, and ultimately a squandering of the full potential of our youth. *Or* student voice and adult listening could be the ingredients for a meaningful partnership, focused on charting a way forward

together. If schools are to be places in which teaching and learning thrive, we must choose this latter, less traveled path. Listening to the voices of students can and should be the first step.

There are many ways in which student voice can have a positive impact on the educational challenges we face. When students believe their voices matter, they are more likely to be invested and engaged in their schools. When students believe teachers are listening to them, mutual trust and respect are likely to flourish. When students believe they are being heard and influencing decisions, schools become more relevant to students' lives and are more likely to be seen as serving their needs. When adults and students partner, schools become laboratories for the multigenerational, collaborative, shared decision making that is part of most contemporary businesses, organizations, and companies. In addition, students' insights, creativity, energy, and confidence offer important perspectives that can help schools improve.

As it turns out, the issue in most of our schools, both nationally and internationally, is not that we neglect to ask students questions; there are countless surveys commonly used to solicit students' thoughts on a wide range of scholastic, personal, and social issues. However, in far too many cases, these surveys are, at best, lightly regarded by adults and, at worst, dismissed as merely what the kids think. In either case, adults fail to motivate change or even initiate basic discussion with students to further understand the data. Mere asking does not qualify as listening. Listening is, in many ways, characterized by what happens next—a change in the current status quo or a clear acknowledgment that students have been heard. While it would be unrealistic to think we could, or should, accommodate every desire expressed by students, we must at the very least show that we have understood their perspective, considered it, and invite them to join us in finding solutions. Meaningful and engaging dialogue that is focused on real and important issues between teachers and their students is where student voice truly takes off.

We have listened. Our fundamental question has been: What do students think about school? Those for whom school is working generally describe it as “great”—a place to interact with friends, where teachers care, and learning happens. In its most extreme negative form, we hear students describe school as a “prison”—a metaphor for being completely voiceless. Schools as designed by adults are intended to be places where students develop both academically and socially, where they build the skills they will need to be successful beyond graduation and learn to relate and interact with others. For some students this is happening, but for far too many it is not. But how could we expect to reach 100% of students, or even most of them, *without any input from them*? Far from asking the inmates how they would run the asylum, this question—*What do students think about school?*—is critical if we are to improve our schools for all students.

## Scope, Sequence, and Student Voice

“Open your text books to chapter 1, page 1” is a traditional and common way for teachers to begin their classes. And so it goes: Chapter 2, page 14; Chapter 3, page 23; etc. Most curricula have a scope and sequence that teachers follow to unfold their curriculum. Add standards and pacing guides, and you can predict a pretty prepackaged approach to pedagogy.

One ninth-grade math teacher who engaged in Aspirations work decided to consider student voice alongside these curricular directives. Unit by unit, he asked his students to skim ahead in the chapters and share with him what they already knew or had previously covered in middle school. In one case, it led him to rearrange the chapters in a unit. In another case, he skipped a chapter completely. “We totally did this last year, like, a million times!” whined one student. An informal quiz led him to conclude that his students had indeed mastered the material in that chapter. In a third case, he learned from the students that there was a gap in their understanding that had to be filled before continuing. He drew on an eighth-grade textbook to fill that void. In addition (pun intended), as he previewed each unit with his students and checked for understanding, he discovered that most of what they knew was not connected to application. In other words, students knew about angles, but didn’t know that they could use their knowledge of angles to see why some ping-pong shots work and others don’t.

In every case, had he plugged along without seeking student input he would have bored some students, left others behind, and created the general impression that his teaching was more important than the students’ learning. In the effort to cover material that is exactly what he would have done—covered it, obscured it, hidden it. Instead, he and his students became partners in a discovery process related to math. And for some chapters instead of reteaching the concept, he took out the ping-pong balls.



We have learned. For more than 30 years, we have been asking students and staff about their perceptions of school. We ask questions that any school could ask their own students whether in formal focus group settings or informally in classrooms, cafeterias, or corridors. Questions such as: What are your hopes and dreams? What makes you proud to be a student at our school? What does it mean for a teacher to show a student respect? Describe a lesson you found engaging and why? Share a time you felt you were a leader at school? What opportunities do you have to voice your opinions and thoughts at school? Does it matter when you speak up? Can you explain? These simple yet powerful questions are the starting point for listening to students.

Through observations, surveys, interviews, and focus groups; in assemblies, classrooms, and faculty lounges, we have invited students and staff to share what

school is like from where they stand. The data we have pored over and the tales we have heard have deepened our understanding of schools and led to a profound conviction about the conditions necessary to help students and staff be successful. This book represents what we have learned from students from all over the world, and it is our hope that it will serve as a compass to inspire a new direction in education. It is time for student voice to lead us on a new journey.

## CONNECTING STUDENT VOICE TO ASPIRATIONS

Let's say you have a choice in the morning to send your child on Bus A or Bus B. Bus A goes to a school with high academic standards and a strong, structured curriculum that is rigorous. Virtually all students are doing well academically. Yet they are doing this in an environment where teacher-student relationships are cordial at best, students are not listened to, their opinions are not sought, and creativity is an afterthought—as is students' passion for learning anything beyond what will be tested. Your student's reading skills and math skills will improve on a steady pace as they move from grade to grade.

Bus B, conversely, leaves for a school where students love to go. They can interact with each other openly, have input into what goes on every day in the classroom, and have great relationships with their teachers. The schedule is entirely flexible, conforming to the needs of the learning from week-to-week, day-to-day, and even hour-to-hour. Most assessment is formative. People come and go as they please. Driven by self-motivation, some students are doing really well, while other students are struggling. Skill level may not increase but your student will fall in love with reading and learn the everyday relevance of math.

Which bus would you put your child on?

Neither one, of course! We are looking for some combination of the two, yet when it comes to educational policy, we act as if it is an either/or proposition. Giving students a voice in their learning does not constitute chaos. And schools with high academic standards do not need to treat students like they are on a forced march to get results. There can be a third bus. One that takes students to a school where high academic achievement *is a result of* students being heard, engaged, and happy to be there. A school where reading skills improve *because* students learn to love reading. The driver of that bus is student voice.

Reading specialists, for example, know that students love to read books that interest them. This means students of all ages need to have a voice in the choice of what they read. Although *The Great Gatsby* is a classic and part of the canon of American literature, there are other well-written books that demonstrate similar themes and represent the same time period. Does every student in every 10th-grade class in a state have to be on page 20 of *The Great Gatsby* on October

30 in order to be learning effectively? Students will read and they will learn when they are given choices and options. Consider yourself as an adult learner. How engaged and involved are you when your district forces you to read a specific book, yet the book is unrelated to your job or your interests. Of course, there are times when we all must read and discuss a common text, but this should be the exception, not the rule.

Suppose we agree to put our students on Bus C, which takes them to a school where they celebrate high academic achievement *and* students are listened to, valued, engaged, and purposeful. Even this school, good as it is, is not the end of our journey. We must realize that *school is not a final destination*, but rather part of the journey that helps transport students to their futures.

### “4 Years, 4 Choices”

Recently, while visiting an urban high school in Ohio, the principal and assistant principal asked us to tag along for a new initiative they called “Principal Talking Points.” Twice a month, administrators visit every classroom and convey a message. On this particular day, the message was “4 Years, 4 Choices.” They shared with students that high school is a four-year process, and at the end of those four years, students could do one of four things:

1. Go to college.
2. Go to a two-year program.
3. Go into the military.
4. Begin a career (not a job, but a career).

All four choices were given equal weight and importance. The message was powerful, as administrators made it clear that it was not a choice to graduate from their high school and do nothing. We frequently heard, “Nothing is not an option” and “Our graduates do something with their lives.”

Administrators talked further about what students need to do now in order to follow any one of the four paths. In addition to encouraging all students to prepare for ACTs, students thinking about the military were informed about the upcoming Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB) exam. This exam determines what career a person will pursue in the military and how the scores translate to high-level jobs. Students who wanted a career right after high school were encouraged to aim high. One administrator said, “If you want to work in a restaurant, plan to manage or maybe even own that restaurant some day.”

Schooling is *a means*, not an end. That is not only true in the big picture (some have made college the goal of K–12 education, but that is like saying the goal of school is more school), but also of all the components of schooling (including assessments). Few educators would argue that the purpose of school is simply to deem students proficient on the local standardized test and graduate them. Yet our current and often myopic focus on the yearly achievement of “adequate” test scores has led us down a blind alley. The real goal (i.e., purpose/end) of school is what lies beyond the walls of K–12/16 schooling for our young people: the rest of their lives. Schools must exist for the sake of helping each and every student toward a further destination—his or her aspirations. We can only know this further destination, and so help students get there, if we are ready to listen to students’ thoughts, hopes, and dreams. In this way, student voice and student aspirations go hand in hand. Thus, in *Part I: Listening*, we present the Aspirations Framework that has emerged from listening to students.

In order to truly teach our students, we must be willing to learn from them. Only they can tell us where they would like their journey to take them beyond school, and that is essential information if we are to do the important work of successfully inspiring and equipping them for what lies ahead. By inviting and encouraging their voices, and being open to what they have to say, educators create a community of collaborative learners. Far from the traditional model of teacher as the sole distributor of knowledge, in an environment of collaboration every member of the community has something to teach the group, as well as much to learn. In *Part II: Learning*, we share what we have come to understand about the principles and conditions that support students’ aspirations, based on what students have told us about their experiences in school.

In *Part III: Leading*, we discuss how, given the present circumstances in education, we can move forward *in partnership with students*. Whatever the nostalgic past (open class room, back to basics, ed reform, etc.) or supposed future (21st century skills, Common Core, online learning, flipped classrooms, blended instruction, etc.) holds, we know we will not get there in our father’s Oldsmobile! We need a hybrid, one that keeps the best of what has fueled effective education until now and combines it with the energy and enthusiasm of our students’ hopes and dreams.

In fact, the kind of coaching that happens when we teach our children to drive a car is an excellent metaphor. The longer we work together, the more they are in control, the more they steer, the more they decide where to go. We believe all students have something to teach us, but we need to take our foot off the brake pedal and our hand off the wheel. Parents know this is no easy task. Experience, trust, and a fair bit of courage are required. But anything less and we could never hand our students the keys to their future with confidence. Letting them drive will make all the difference.