

# Student Voice: Pump It Up

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Talking and listening to students should be top priority in schools.

Involving students in school decision-making increases their engagement and encourages their growth.

Just because students want to have a voice doesn't mean they know how—teaching them how to contribute is key.



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**T**he importance of strong relationships is a common denominator in the thousands of books and articles about principalship. Relationships with peers, teachers, parents, community members, and even politicians are paramount for the survival and success of most school leaders. Rarely, however, is the importance of building relationships with students addressed. It's as if everyone is content with the message that "If you're a student, you don't want the principal to know your name." Meaningful relationships between principals and students are important and can amplify student voice to support aspiration and achievement.

It is well-documented that the academic and social success of students is influenced by:

- Relationships with teachers—whether students feel supported, respected, and inspired by their teachers
- Relationships with the other students—whether students are mutually supportive, feel free to speak in class, and trust that there will be no negative social repercussions for academic success



Figure 1

## Shifts in Principal Behavior to Build Relationships With Students

DECREASE	INCREASE
Isolation in the office	Visibility throughout the building
Students as the problem	Students as the solution
I know best	Students have something to teach me
Managing student behavior	Encouraging student responsibility
Command and control	Students as partners
Obsession with test scores	Knowledge of students' hopes and dreams

- The aggregate of relationships among students and between students and a teacher—whether the classroom community is positive; team oriented; and generally free of distraction, especially regarding disciplinary issues.

Principals must support, build, and maintain teachers' capacity to develop stronger relationships with students in a way that contributes to a safe, positive peer environment that is conducive to learning. Before any of that is possible and meaningful, however, principals must model the importance of direct relationships with students.

### Students as Partners

Let's begin with a self-reflection. On a scale of one to five (with five being the best), how would you rate yourself on the following items?

1. I spend more time with students than in my office having meetings
2. I know most of my students' names
3. I also know the hopes and dreams of the students whose names I know
4. When I ask a student how he or she is doing, it is a genuine question and I wait for a response
5. I believe students have something to teach me
6. I am comfortable asking students their opinions
7. I set aside time each week to listen to the voices of students
8. I ensure that students are actively engaged on the most important committees and ad-

visory groups (e.g., staff interviews, curriculum committees, the disciplinary board)

9. Students know that I think that being successful in school is more than doing well on tests

10. I create an environment in which students are comfortable asking me questions.

If you scored 45–50, you should be writing for *Principal Leadership*.

If you scored 40–44, you are moving in the right direction.

If you score 35–39, you have potential to be a principal rock star, but you have likely lost sight of the objective: the students.

If you scored below 34, it may be time to reconnect with students and rethink your priorities.

Wherever you find yourself, there is always room to grow. The approach we are calling for is a focus on students—not on adequate yearly progress, state tests, or the myriad other distractions that the principalship is prone to. To be sure, those are very real concerns, but they should not be at the heart of what principals care about. Principals must consider students their partners in leading the school toward all of their goals—the goals of the school as an organization, the professional goals of the staff, and especially the goals of each and every student for him or herself. This is far different than seeing students as the clients or customers of the well-meaning work of adults. To this end, we firmly think that there are behaviors and attitudes that administrators need to decrease and others that they need to increase. (See figure 1.)

We have seen administrators who encourage an “us versus them” attitude and others who make clear that everyone is on the same journey, albeit at different stages. Principals who expect adults and students to learn with and from one another clearly operate with the intent to build relationships.

### Giving Students a Voice

To develop relationships with students, principals must start with being visible and letting students know they matter. Being visible goes beyond walking the hallways like a cop on a beat. It is about being meaningfully engaged in the day-to-day life of students. The principal of a school in South Carolina started a program called “In Their Shoes.” Teachers were invited to spend a day shadowing a young person to develop a new perspective on what it is like to be a student. Teachers were expected to ride the bus, eat in the cafeteria, and complete homework assignments. All administrators spent a day shadowing students to kick-start the program.

Effective, student-centered principals know that students have something to teach them and must be part of any school solution. Those principals habitually seek feedback from students formally and informally. Such principals not only have student advisory councils and insist on student presence on committees and in team and department meetings, but they also regularly, informally poll students about their ideas for how to improve their schools.

One of the most creative ways we have seen a principal interact with students is by serving food in the cafeteria. Almost every student goes through the cafeteria line. Serving food gives principals an opportunity to be seen as a “real person” and not the one constantly admonishing everyone to get to class or slow down in the hallways. It also can be a daily occasion to ask students questions and, after serving, sit with students to hear what they have to say.

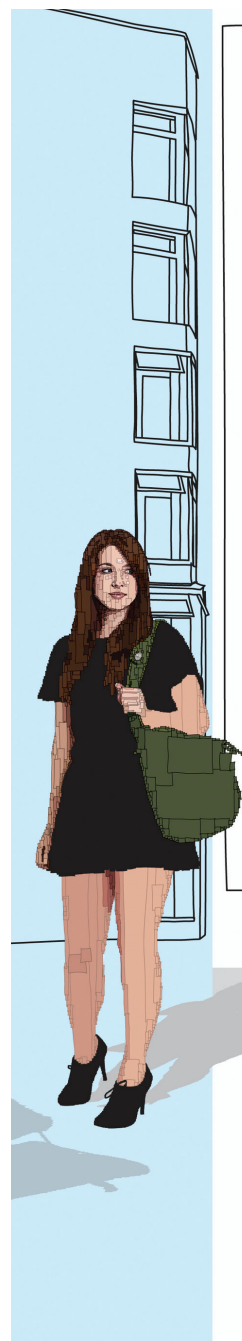
We have seen the importance of student voice operationalized in many other ways. After seeing the viral video *What Does the Fox Say?* one principal called her new initiative “What Does the Student Say?” She created

time and space to run ideas, new programs, and the school’s goals by students before implementation. “What does the student say?” became a catchphrase, and students knew that when she asked, she was really listening.

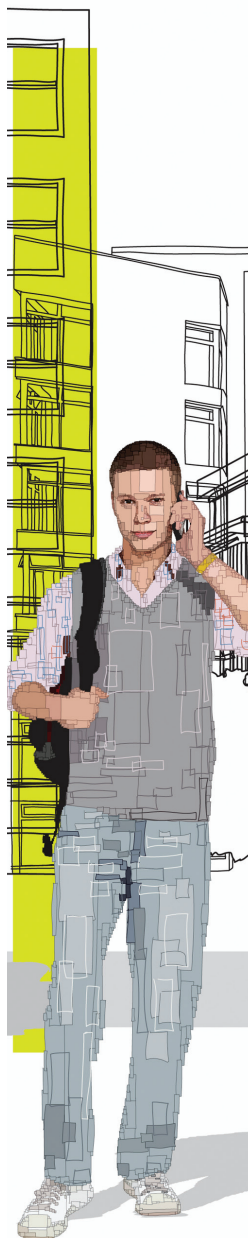
Effective principals make sure that students know their voices matter collectively and individually. One principal in California developed a new policy: any student absent for three or more days must first stop by the principal’s office upon his or her return—not to be cross-examined, but to be welcomed back. The principal’s primary purpose was to demonstrate to the student that people at school care and that he or she is an important part of the community. The principal intentionally doesn’t reference missed schoolwork or give the student a lecture about the importance of being at school.

Command and control had its time and place, but most organizations (even the military) have learned the importance of communication up and down the chain of command and have flattened their hierarchies. It is past time for schools to catch up. We have seen no downside to having students present at any meeting where information is communicated or decisions are made—with the exception of when another student’s confidentiality is at stake. When faculty meetings become school meetings, far fewer teachers arrive late or correct papers while someone is presenting. When students participate in department meetings, math teachers learn tutoring tricks from the math geeks and English teachers expand their reading lists based on the recommendations of students who read more books than are on those lists. When students contribute to decision making, schools move away from arbitrary, punitive policies that make little sense to students and do little to correct unwanted behavior (e.g., if you have 10 unexcused absences, you will receive an out of school suspension). Instead, schools incorporate policies that restore broken relationships and teach the important lesson that actions have natural consequences, not just those handed down by someone with power.

One way to build trust and let students know that their opinions are important is to



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have students interview new staff members. This usually includes the practice of having candidates teach in front of a group of students and then debriefing with them. It also includes training students to interview prospective teachers and ask questions about their goals, means of engaging students, and classroom management strategies. We have heard students ask potential teachers how they planned to get to know their students, how they would relate students' aspirations to what they teach, and what they would do if a student was having trouble in class. This strategy also applies to support staff members. For example, when a new custodian is being hired, students should have a voice.

### First Things First

Although the world of education seems obsessed with testing at the moment, most students are not similarly preoccupied. Rather, students want to feel like they matter to their teachers and school leaders as a person, not just as a test score. The primary goal of schools and principals ought to be inspiring students to work diligently toward the dreams they have set for themselves. First and foremost, students must be asked what their hopes and dreams are. Then, all of the school's systems, structures, policies, and procedures must be aligned to the effort to help students reach their goals—academic, personal, and social.

Thinking that the goal of school is to produce ever-better test scores is to put the cart before the horse. It's no wonder why offering carrots or threatening with sticks does little to advance the cause. But when students' hopes and dreams come first and the rest of the school is aligned to their inwardly motivated desire to be successful, then schools and students can achieve their goals together—including better test scores.

One way we have seen schools reorient themselves is to have a report card section titled "Hopes and Dreams." To build relationships with students, teachers and administrators must know what kind of person they want to become and what goals they are working toward. It is a very simple thing to do, yet

has the power to not only inform teachers and administrators about what students value but also give students a clear benchmark and reason to do well in school.

A common misstep in the effort to improve student voice in schools is to assume that because students want to have a voice, they know how to have a voice. Really listening to students means teaching them the skills they need to colead. One principal decided she wanted students to receive training in creative thinking, setting priorities, and effective communication. At the beginning of every school year, a small group of diverse students attend a two-day workshop designed to teach skills that are usually developed only in adults. Skills include how to negotiate, how to think "blue sky," how to move from ideas to implementation, and so forth.

### Conclusion

Above all, providing an environment for teachers to build stronger relationships with students begins with modeling that behavior as a principal. It is one of those "opportunities" that looks a lot like more work...and it is! The traditional school model was not designed to be personal or to foster healthy relationships. The approach we are suggesting may be unfamiliar to some principals and requires a personal rethinking of their role. But being purposeful about connecting with students will pay high dividends, such as increased student engagement in learning; fewer absences among students and staff members; fewer student discipline issues; and a teaching and learning environment that is thriving in an atmosphere built on trust, mutual respect, and responsibility.

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They are the coauthors of *Student Voice: The Instrument of Change* (Corwin, 2014).