

Principal[®]

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Student Voice

Getting elementary students involved in their learning produces results.

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Why wait until students are in high school to actively listen to their voices? Listening to the voice of students provides benefits to both students and educators. Students develop ownership and responsibility for their education while teachers gain new understandings and insights from listening to student voice.

Recent research highlights the clear advantages of listening and talking to students in order to gain their opinions and perspectives on classroom teaching and learning. Seeking and listening to the voice of elementary students elicits fresh ideas and new understandings that enable educators to create better learning experiences for all students.

Elementary and high school students across the country have had opportunities to express their voices for over two decades through the work of the Aspirations Research Center at the nonprofit [Quaglia Institute for Student Aspirations](#). Between September 2006 and June 2009 the [My Voice™ survey](#), designed to gather student perceptions of their school experiences, was taken by 42,969 students in grades 3 to 5. Through listening to the voice of students at this age, a great deal can be learned about what matters to them. Some student responses are grounds for celebration. For example, 96 percent of students responded “Yes” to the statement, “I want to do well in school.” Likewise, 85 percent of students reported that they want to go to college. However, other responses should give educators pause. Slightly more than half of students think bullying is a problem at their school. Only two-thirds of students feel that their teachers care if they are absent from school. Given all the efforts schools make to improve attendance, it is disheartening that students believe teachers do not even care if they attend.

During focus groups with elementary students, I have found that what matters to elementary students ranges from the seemingly trite issues of cafeteria rules to systemic issues related to grades, homework, and learning. Students’ thoughts and insights can be quite enlightening. Recently, I had the

opportunity to listen first hand to the ideas and concerns of early elementary students during a school visit. I met a kindergarten student, Luke, who repeatedly told me that he was always thirsty. As I inquired more about Luke’s thirst, I began to get concerned about his health. Both the parent and administrator sides of me began to wonder, “Does Luke have diabetes? Does he have contaminated water at his home?” He could not elaborate on his thirst, but Luke smiled and said, “I can show you.” I was a bit nervous about what he might show me, but I dutifully followed him down the hallway and soon learned that he was not tall enough to reach the water fountain! I chuckled and realized that the school had forgotten to put the steps up in front of the water fountains at the beginning of the school year. This seemingly minor, but clearly significant, issue was immediately fixed. Luke grinned from ear to ear and said, “Okay, now I can go to school.” To an adult this may not seem like a life-changing discovery, however, to a six-year-old steps to a water fountain are the difference between being able to “go to school” or not.

“I feel important in my class.”

Some survey responses require educators to dig deeper into what students are saying and why they are saying it. Despite the fact that the vast majority of elementary educators continually strive to make each and every child feel they belong and are valued, merely 45 percent of students responded that they feel important in their classroom. How can such a vital problem be remedied? In my conversations with students, I hear that they feel important when teachers ask about life outside of school, when teachers use their name, or when teachers involve them in classroom decisions. Often due to the pressures of tests and the need to do more in less time, educators have forgotten that children need to feel important each and every day they walk into our classrooms. Feeling important keeps students engaged and interested in their learning.

To help students feel important, teachers and other school staff should:

- Greet students individually each morning.
- Incorporate student interests and hobbies into lessons;
- Provide students meaningful, personal, written feedback;
- Let students self-assess their work as one measure of success;
- Ask students to provide feedback on their learning experiences; and
- Involve students in solving classroom problems or issues.

Elementary educators must ensure that all students feel they belong, are valued, and are important members of the classroom community. Students who feel like they belong to their school or classroom want to attend school. Given that low school attendance has become an issue even in elementary schools, increasing belonging is one easy way to encourage students to attend.

“If I have a problem, I have adults at school I can talk to.”

This statement relates to whether students not only have access to adults, but also feel adults care enough to listen to what they have to say. In our survey, 12 percent of students responded “No” to this question. Though perhaps on the surface this relatively low percentage might appear positive, it nonetheless suggests that a sizable number of students feel disconnected and unsupported by their teachers, principals, and other school staff. To improve student-adult relationships at school, school leaders and their staff could:

- Develop advisor/advisee type programs at the elementary level;
- Be consistent and available for students;
- Realize that not all students will connect with their classroom teacher;
- Create after school opportunities based on student interests; and
- Develop mentoring programs for students.

One example of a successful mentoring program is evident at The Captain Albert Stevens School in Belfast, Maine. The school’s principal, Susan Inman, began actively soliciting student voice over six years ago using the My Voice survey.

What she and her leadership team gleaned from the results led them to change several school practices. The team recognized that not all students connect with their classroom teacher, even though the vast majority of the teachers in the school reported that they felt all students need to feel personally cared about at their school. One action the school took was to develop a community-mentoring program. The school-based mentoring program paired trained community mentors with two students, who with extra adult support have the potential to soar both academically and socially. Mentors engage regularly with the students; on any given day they might eat lunch with students, read, play basketball, or just drop off a note of encouragement to their mentees. To date more than 275 students have been mentored in this school. As a result, all students at this elementary school have opportunities to have at least one caring adult available to listen to their problems and ideas. The principal and teachers report that students involved in the mentoring program demonstrate increased levels of confidence as well as a desire to never miss a day of school when students know their mentors will be there.

“I see myself as a leader.”

Students who see themselves as leaders are more apt to express their ideas and be involved in their education. Ronald L. Sodoma Elementary School in Albion, New York, represents a school that listens to student voice in myriad ways. In addition to surveying students and conducting student focus groups, the staff involve students in important school decisions. For example, recently a selected set of students interviewed candidates for new positions in the cafeteria. One might think that student interview questions would relate to serving more chicken nuggets or pizza for lunch, but this was not the case. Student-generated questions involved:

- Tell us about yourself.
- Please outline your experiences in working with children.
- Please give us your philosophy on discipline. How would you deal with students being noisy or too rambunctious?
- Outline your strengths and weaknesses, as they apply to this position.
- How do you work with other adults?
- What would you do to make the students’ half hour lunch time a positive experience?
- Some students will complete their lunch in 10 minutes. What seat activities would you recommend they do to occupy their remaining time?
- Any questions for us?

These questions were not only insightful, but more important quite useful in the overall process of deciding who would be the best candidate to hire. The average percentage of affirmative responses on the My Voice survey to the question, “I see myself as a leader” across the full sample was 36 percent, while at Ronald L. Sodoma Elementary 48 percent of students responded “Yes.” This school also has a well-developed service learning program where students practice and display leadership skills.

Teachers can adopt a variety of practices to develop and support student leaders, including:

- Teach all students leadership skills;
- Create leadership opportunities beyond student council;
- Involve students in classroom and schoolwide decisions;
- Provide opportunities for students to watch decision-making in action; and
- Share your ideas and opinions on what it means to be a leader.

“I am excited to tell my friends when I get good grades.”

Another survey item worthy of particular attention is “I am excited to tell my friends when I get good grades.” Sadly, only 56 percent of students responded “Yes” to this statement. This suggests that already in elementary school, it is not “cool” to be an academic student. By listening to what students are saying, school leaders can work toward bridging the gap between their priorities and student priorities. It is challenging, if not impossible, for students to do well on mandatory state tests and assessments if they do not feel proud of doing well in school and getting good grades. To encourage students to be proud of scholarship, teachers and other school staff should:

- Recognize many forms of achievement including effort and perseverance;
- Help students make the connection between doing well in school and their futures;
- Invite middle school students to share their positive experiences and perspectives on getting good grades;
- Share your academic struggles and successes with students; and
- Ask students to create portfolios of work they are proud of accomplishing.

Listening to Elementary Student Voice: Start Now!

As educators we need to recognize that students of all ages have something important to say and share. Listening to students involves talking directly to them, conducting focus groups, administering surveys and, perhaps most importantly, involving students in actions related to their responses. In *The New Meaning of Educational Change*, Michael Fullan poses the question, “What would happen if we treated the student as someone whose opinion mattered in the introduction and implementation of reform in schools?” By establishing practices that encourage elementary students to be actively involved in their learning, elementary educators are creating students who will feel empowered and responsible as they progress in their educational journeys.

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