





TEACHER VOICE: Problem or Potential?

Take steps to enrich the voice of your vocal and not-so-vocal teachers. By Russel J. Quaglia and Lisa L. Lande

“I GET IT; I KNOW! I need to listen and learn from the voices of students. But this teacher voice thing is something else.” For those who can relate to this statement, you are correct. This “teacher voice thing” is something else: It is something unique and it is something that principals need to pay attention to.

It’s usually not difficult to persuade principals that *students* do not have a voice in schools, or at least not a genuine one. But the concept of teacher voice is another matter. That is because teachers have historically been perceived as the leaders in the classroom. And since leaders inherently have opportunities to use their voice, convincing you that teachers do not have a voice is a bit more challenging.

Teacher voice as defined in our work is teachers’ ability to speak openly about opinions, ideas, and suggestions in an environment that is driven by trust, collaboration, and responsibility. Teacher voice is about listening to others, learning from what is being said, and *leading* by taking action together (Quaglia & Lande, in press).

Interestingly, as former principals, we experienced many days when we thought teachers had too much voice. There is no doubt that teachers inherently have more voice than students in our current educational system, but that voice is mostly confined to their classrooms. Outside of that, however, teachers feel their voices are not being heard, appreciated, or respected.

A Vital Priority

Before we delve into the ways to increase teacher voice in your school, let's first tell you why you should make it a priority, as outlined in *Teacher Voice Report 2010-1014*.

- Teachers who are comfortable expressing honest opinions and concerns are four times more likely to be excited about their future career in education;
- When teachers have voice, they are three times more likely to value setting goals and work hard to reach those goals; and
- When teachers have a voice in decision-making, they are four times more likely to believe they can make a difference and three times more likely to encourage students to be leaders and make decisions.

Think about how teacher voice plays out in your school. Is there a negative perception attached to it? Is the teacher voice you currently hear one that is primarily full of complaints? Accusatory in tone? Does teacher voice generally lack a willingness to take responsibility and action? If you answered yes to these, what you are hearing is not teacher voice, but perhaps the sound of individuals who should seek a different career.

The type of teacher voice we are urging you to support is one that is used for the benefit of others. When used for this purpose, teachers listen at least as often as they speak, put more energy into learning than trying to convince others, and lead by taking action with the best interests of all concerned in mind.

Clearly, there are important reasons for teachers to have a voice. But there are several issues that need to be addressed, according to *Teacher Voice Report 2010-1014*:

- 41 percent of teachers are not comfortable expressing their honest opinions and concerns;
- 52 percent of teachers do not believe they have the skills to effectively communicate in their school;
- 40 percent of teachers think principals are not willing to learn from them; and
- 47 percent of teachers report not having a voice in decision-making at their school.

If teacher voice is ever to be fully realized in your school, a few critical dynamics need to be in place between principals and teachers:

- Teachers need to feel their voice matters to the principal, and have confidence in expressing their ideas and opinions in a safe environment;
- Principals need to be willing to listen and learn from what teachers are saying; and
- Principals and teachers (and students) must be prepared to work collaboratively to take action on what has been learned.

Underlying all of this is the relationship that exists between principals and teachers. Principals may not control everything, but they can certainly take action to promote strong relationships with teachers. Establishing an atmosphere of trust and respect is the first step.

Listen, Learn, Lead

The best way to elicit a meaningful voice and build relationships with others is to listen, learn, and lead. First, you must truly listen to all teachers—not just the ones who talk the loudest or most often. As a principal, you need to make a conscious effort to seek out opinions. Do not assume that every opinion will find its way to you. Avoid identifying just a few teachers as token representatives for the entire staff. All teachers should be provided with opportunities to voice their opinions in ways that will make a difference. Leaders can seek out voices that tend to be missing and personally invite those individuals to join the conversation.

Colleagues who are more comfortable expressing their voice can self-monitor the time they spend talking and provide space for new voices. They can also encourage their quieter colleagues to share their ideas and perspectives. Every individual has a responsibility to step up, even if out of their comfort zone, and engage in the school community.

Next, take what you have heard and learn from it. Accept that there are multiple paths to reaching any destination. Be willing to adopt an idea different from your preferred approach. Trust your teachers and be ready to expand your comfort zone; you will be pleasantly surprised at the support and collaboration you experience along the way. The key step during the learning phase is to resist dismissing teacher opinions that you disagree with or do not fully understand. Ask questions that help you understand why teachers feel a certain way.

Finally, take action and lead in partnership with your teachers. The juncture between learning and leading is where positive momentum



WHAT'S NEXT?

Russell J. Quaglia will tackle the concept of principal voice in the May/June issue of *Principal* magazine. Make plans to hear his keynote address on the subject at NAESP's Best Practices for Better Schools Annual Conference this summer, July 6-8, at National Harbor, Maryland. Register today at naespconference.org



3 STEPS

to Elicit Teacher Voice

LISTEN

- Get out of your office. Don't wait for teachers to come to you with ideas;
- Seek out opinions from all your staff, not just the ones who are easiest to hear;
- Take notes on what is being said. Do not rely solely on your memory. This also demonstrates to others that you are truly listening; and
- Build relationships. By putting in the time necessary to make sure everyone is heard.

LEARN

- Be prepared and willing to learn from others;
- Do not dismiss anyone's idea just because it does not align with yours;
- Gain clarity—ask questions about things you do not understand; and
- Build trust by learning your teachers' professional hopes and dreams and determining how to work together to make them a reality.

LEAD

- Provide teachers the support and time they need to be successful;
- Be present—show your support by working collaboratively with teachers;
- Spend less time directing and more time facilitating; and
- Build momentum—the pace can vary, as long as everyone is moving in a positive direction.



and change occurs. Invite and expect teachers to share their ideas and concerns, and to generate solutions to identified problems with you. Provide the support and resources needed for teachers who accept these leadership opportunities. Keep in mind that support does not always mean release time and additional pay (although those would be well received). Your willingness to be present, working side-by-side with teachers, is a priceless form of support.

Facilitating Teacher Voice

Honoring teachers' genuine voice will take some time, as it runs counter to how educational systems have functioned for decades. Building relationships, trust, and momentum takes time. And even though dedicated teachers already give 100 percent to their profession, their voice remains an untapped resource.

Don't wait for teachers to come to you, but go to them. Flip the concept of an "open door policy" and consider the door open for you as a principal to go *out*. Seek out teacher voice not just during staff meetings or through an annual survey. Have lunch with small groups of teachers on a regular basis, approach individual teachers whose voices are missing and let them know you are interested in their perspectives, and provide alternate opportunities to express voice beyond

face to face. Invite teachers to email you their thoughts with a guarantee that you will respond within 24 hours, start a GoogleDoc that is shared with the staff for providing feedback and brainstorming solutions on a continual basis, and collect informal and anonymous feedback as a regular practice at staff meetings. Instead of a "Suggestion Box" establish a "Voice Box" and post comments and your responses in the staff room on a regular basis. Staff want to have a voice and more importantly they want to be assured they are being heard, understood, and valued.

We are sensitive to adding to the myriad of responsibilities you already have, but we know that it is crucial for teacher voice to be high on your list of priorities. We truly believe that when teacher voice is fully used and understood, you will find it has the potential to positively affect the learning environment for everyone. When teacher voice is present, and you take action as a direct result of that voice, you will realize that teacher voice is not a problem at all. Rather, it's an abundance of potential. □

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