Voice Definition

It is crucial to have a clear definition of voice that is equally applicable to all voices in school. There should not be one definition for student voice, a different definition for teacher voice, and so on. Voice is voice, and it is critical that we have a common understanding of what it means, the expectations that encompass using one's voice, and how the power of voice can be operationalized for the good of the whole.

> ***Voice*** *is sharing thoughts and ideas in an environment underpinned by trust and respect, offering realistic suggestions for the good of the whole, and accepting responsibility for not only what is said but also what needs to be done.*

Voice Definition, Component One

Sharing thoughts and ideas in an environment underpinned by trust and respect.

In the age of social media, it would be easy to presume that sharing one's thoughts is easy—a normal way of being. There is no question that thoughts and ideas are expressed on a regular basis, but when we talk about genuinely using your voice to make a difference, we need to look deeper. In order to share ideas and suggestions that will impact decision-making, there must be a foundation of mutual trust and respect.

Trust: It sounds cliché, but trust does not just happen. It takes effort and sincerity to build a culture of trust in schools. New principals know it takes time to gain the trust of veteran teachers who can be skeptical and more than willing to test whether you are committed to their school or not. Students also do not offer up trust on day one; it is developed as teachers and administrators display a genuine interest in them and their learning. Students and staff may be willing to take the first step and offer their ideas, but they will be paying close attention to how those ideas are received, and they'll ultimately weigh the risk-reward for future sharing. Eye contact, appreciation for shared ideas, and open dialogue about different viewpoints will all help ensure that others feel their ideas are appreciated rather than judged. Students and teachers have countless new ideas; they need to be able to trust that there is always room at the table to share them.

Respect: Simply put, people are more willing to share their honest ideas and suggestions in a culture of respect. Students respect teachers who take the time to listen to and are honest with them. They respect teachers who get to know them as unique individuals with equally unique and important perspectives to share. And teachers appreciate those same characteristics in their colleagues and administrators. When mutual respect is established, all participants become more comfortable sharing their thoughts and ideas. This open dialogue leads to an improved overall learning experience for everyone.

Building a foundation of trust and respect forges positive relationships, which increase everyone's willingness to express their ideas and listen to others.

Voice Definition, Component Two

Offering realistic suggestions for the good of the whole.

With trust and respect as the foundation, it is important to be able to express not only what you think, but to offer realistic suggestions that benefit *others*.

It is important to acknowledge the distinction between *voice* and *noise*. Encouraging the sharing of ideas is great, but if those ideas aren't realistic, then it's just noise! Students asking for fewer math requirements because math is boring to them is not a viable suggestion. Staff members requesting money for an overseas educational conference during a budget freeze is not realistic. Suggestions must be within the realm of the possible in order to guide positive change. We need to think creatively *within necessary parameters*. Even when we think within the box, there are countless possibilities. We want people to be creative and offer realistic suggestions for improvement that are imaginative, inspiring, innovative, and achieveble. It's OK if you need to break free of the box momentarily to do that, but keep in mind that you need to return to the box to implement your ideas!

It is also important to remember that the space inside the educational box is a shared space committed to supporting everyone's success. However well intended, suggestions are sometimes too narrowly focused on the benefit of a few instead of the larger school community and goals. All stakeholders must recognize that they are part of a larger community and be willing to contribute ideas that consider the needs of others—not just their own.

Voice Definition, Component Three

Accepting responsibility for not only what is said but also what needs to be done.

When well-planned action is taken, voice reaches its pinnacle. Too often, great ideas collect dust because no one takes responsibility for implementing the next steps. "We are all responsible for the outcomes" is a frequent thought in schools. In theory, that is collaborative and correct. However, sometimes when "everyone" is responsible, the reality is that no one is responsible. Once suggestions are made and discussed, solutions do not magically happen; they are not someone else's issue to deal with. Voice includes not only accepting responsibility for your own ideas and suggestions but also taking action to make them a reality.

Take, for example, the common student claim that a particular class is not relevant or teacher feedback that says the staff is divided. In these instances, there is one crucial question to ask: *What are YOU doing about it?* It is not always someone else's responsibility to take action (and even if it is, you can still inquire about it and offer suggestions). Each of us must accept responsibility for bringing about the change we seek. Fully implementing voice includes taking ideas and turning them into purposeful action and accomplishments.

When the potential of voice is fully realized, schools will look and feel different. Cooperation will replace competition and conflict, collaboration will replace isolation, and confidence will replace insecurity. Most important, the entire educational community will work in partnership with one another for the well-being of students and teachers. Is this idealistic? Absolutely. Is it impossible? Hardly. Our work in schools shows that schools that take the initial steps to implement voice have seen improvements across the board. We have seen fewer discipline problems, better attendance, more engaged students and teachers, and greater self-worth and respect between and among various community members. When the students', teachers', and parents' voices are valued and respected, everyone benefits.

For information on how the power of voice can be operationalized for the good of the whole in schools, please see the School Voice Process and The Power of Voice in Schools.

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