



SEL INDICATOR: YOUTH VOICE AND ENGAGEMENT

The key to making improvements: Ask the students.

Washoe County School District, Nevada

The **Practices of Promise** series provides snapshots of districts across the country bringing social and emotional learning (SEL) to life in their communities. Each of these real stories offers a glimpse into how one district is navigating a few of the opportunities and challenges that arise as part of their broader efforts to systemically implement SEL. The series expands on each of [CASEL's Indicators of Districtwide SEL](#), the essential components of systemic implementation.



THE OPPORTUNITY

How do you maintain a focus on student voice during distance learning?

An important way for young people to practice social and emotional learning (SEL) is by sharing their perspectives, leading discussions, and contributing to decision-making. When students are heard, they develop confidence in their expertise and strengthen their sense of identity and agency, making them more engaged and invested learners. Schools, and the adults who work in them, benefit as well. By listening closely to students' perspectives, educators better understand students' strengths and needs, build stronger relationships with them, and can offer more meaningful, engaging learning opportunities. With their ability to offer fresh perspectives on the school's priorities and issues, as well as difficult topics such as racism and inequities, students are valuable partners for producing change that neither adults nor students could accomplish alone.

Recognizing these benefits, student voice has long been a priority at Washoe County School District (WCSD) in Nevada. However, when the 62,000-student district switched to remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, the district needed to rethink how to elevate student voices by adapting existing SEL efforts to support the well-being of young people and adults.

For comprehensive guidance on elevating and supporting student voice, visit [CASEL's District Resource Center](#).



THE STARTING LINE



Educators in the district recognize student voice and SEL as high-impact levers for enhancing both academics and culture and climate. But student voice wasn't always viewed this way in WCSD.

In 2012, the district's first school climate survey indicated that 25% of students felt that teachers and staff did not listen to them. Some students who were struggling academically revealed they felt powerless to make changes in their own education.

It wasn't until the district undertook an effort to improve dropout rates that district leaders fully recognized the power of student voice. Partnering with WestEd, the WCSD team uncovered the key to addressing the dropout problem: *engage meaningfully with students who were dropping out*. Once they did, they found that when all students became actively involved in their education and had a forum to be heard, they not only helped develop solutions, they also experienced growth and a shift in mindset—as did the district team members involved.

Since then, WCSD has made steady progress to create structures that elevate and listen to student voice:

- In 2015, a district-level committee formed and began planning a student voice initiative. Jennifer Harris, the program evaluator for student voice, says the goal is “Not only to listen and ‘take’ from students but to build the capacity of adults to hear, act upon, and commit to follow through on student voice.” Professional learning on student voice is now in the [Board policy](#), part of the district's staff conferences on trauma and MultiTiered Systems of Support (MTSS), and embedded into school-level coaching.
- The district started a formal [student voice program](#), with a full-time student voice coordinator in the Office of Accountability (OA), where students have opportunities to develop skills in analyzing and sharing data. The student voice program spawned related initiatives including Student Advisory Council (SAC), [student voice web resources](#) (including a [student voice blog](#)) and the development of a [student voice toolkit](#). Students are included in district data summits and in meetings with the board of trustees.
- Through SEL implementation efforts, the district made explicit connections between student voice and the SEL competencies.
- Students were part of analyzing the cultural responsiveness of SEL lessons and will also be involved in an upcoming collaborative effort with the state to revise the language of the SEL standards around equity and student voice.

What structures do you use to elevate and listen to student voice in your community? What additional structures could be leveraged?

WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS ABOUT STUDENT VOICE



1. Student voice may be the most powerful lever available to improve student learning in schools. Students learn better when they are engaged partners throughout the educational process.

(Beaudoin 2005; Olsen 2004; Dorman & Adams 2004; Cook-Sather 2003; House 2000; Kordalewski 1999; Newmann 1994; Wehmeyer & Sands 1998; Holdsworth 1996; Kohn 1993; Johnson 1991).

2. Involving students can significantly improve adult leadership throughout education.

Listening to student voice can encourage adult leaders to make important decisions and to effectively prioritize those decisions in schools. (Association of Alaska School Boards 2006; McLaughlin & Mitra 2003; Critchely 2003; Cook-Sather 2002, 2001; Wilson & Corbett 2001; Shultz & Cook-Sather 2001).

3. Students can become more effective learners when their emotional, intellectual, and social needs are met. Involving students throughout education can build participation skills young people need today and in the future.

(Pittman, 2004, 2005; Mitra 2004; Cushman 2003; Cook-Sather 2002; House 2000; Kurth-Schai 1998; Rudduck, Day & Wallace 1996).

4. The attitudes, policies, and structures of education may change when students are engaged as partners in schools. Involving students in their decision-making transforms the attitudes and systems that underlie the culture of organizations, schools, and communities.

(Young & Sazama 2006; Flutter 2006; Flutter & Rudduck 2004; Critchely 2003; Cushman 2003; Cook-Sather 2002; Zeldin, Kusgen-McDaniel, & Topitzes 2001; Rudduck & Flutter 2000; Kruse 2000).

5. Embracing a diversity of perspectives can make student voice the most significant tool in the school improvement toolbox. Engaging student voice can ensure cultural, racial, economic, and social diversity in school improvement efforts.

(Rubin & Silva 2003; Cushman 2003; Glenn Paul 2000; McDermott 1998).

6. When students are partners throughout schools, they can learn about the necessity of active citizenship in their schools and throughout their lives. Engaging students in school improvement activities can lead to increased feelings of belonging and purpose in schools.

(Beaudoin 2005; Cushman 2003; Apple & Beane 1995; Project 540 2004; Rudduck 2003; Wood 1998; Dewey 1916).

– from SoundOut Research Summary (contains [full reference list](#))



ROUNDING THE CURVE



Along with schools everywhere, COVID forced WCSD to re-imagine education across their 100 schools, and consequently one of their biggest student voice initiatives, the student-led [Strength in Voices Conference](#). Drawing on a successful five-year history of hosting this 200+ student event, the district worked to find a new structure.

In response to student feedback from the [COVID surveys](#) and input from student leaders, they arrived at a format involving three virtual student-led town halls co-hosted with the Equity and Diversity, Counseling, MTSS/SEL departments. Each town hall would center on one of three timely themes selected by the students: (1) Distance Learning, (2) Equity and Inclusion, and (3) Student Mental Health and Social and Emotional Well-Being.

About 150 students attended each event, 93% of whom indicated that they were likely or very likely to attend another town hall in the future. Here's how staff and student organizers made it happen:

Reaching Students

Every middle and high school student received multiple emails daily inviting them to the town halls. Continuing a previously successful strategy of inviting randomly selected students—as opposed to only students nominated by teachers—and personal email invitations were also sent to 10-12 students per school.

Facilitating Virtual Dialogue

Students had multiple opportunities to be involved as emcees, moderators, guest speakers, and participants. Youth facilitators incorporated Zoom features (e.g., breakout rooms, chats) to prompt discussions, hashtag activities for students to describe what they heard from other students, and giveaways and surveys to keep student participation high.

To prepare student moderators to lead discussions around the high-stakes topics discussed during each town hall, staff coached students on both the content and facilitation skills - including how to elicit participation, guide a discussion without revealing bias, and respond effectively to heightened emotion, challenging behavior, or even hateful comments. "This helped me feel more confident when I led a breakout room because I was able to bounce ideas off students rather than feel like I was giving them a questionnaire," remarked student emcee and moderator Victoria Gomez.

Adults were also trained to serve as co-facilitators and intervene if warranted. To ensure that adults did not dominate the event, adult facilitators and guests were encouraged to turn off their video camera and be listeners, not speakers.

Ensuring Meaningful Input and Follow-up

To ensure ongoing engagement, the OA included students in analyzing data from event audio and video, Zoom chat dialogues, hashtags, and session feedback surveys. The call for accountability and action was magnified by the context of the pandemic. One member of the SAC, Ivy Batale, joined other students in asking adults, "Please don't make this an event where we just sit there and tell you about the issues we're having and ways we'd like them to be solved, and then have nothing happen afterwards."

A [summary](#) and three briefs ("The Top 5 Things We Learned from Students") related to [distance learning](#), [equity and inclusion](#) and [emotional well-being](#) that included findings as well as a discussion of themes and outcomes were shared directly with district leaders as well as distributed broadly throughout the district.

The district's Student Advisory Council has since used the summaries to identify next steps, including integrating SEL throughout an existing academic [peer tutoring program](#), proposing an addition to an English Language Arts curriculum that would add a social justice component, developing a summer program for students and families, and rolling out a program that trains teachers on providing a space for students to discuss difficult topics.



Reaching Students

Email to all students and personal invite to randomly-selected students to attend the town halls.



Facilitating Virtual Dialogue

Youth facilitators moderated virtual discussions on:

- Distance Learning
- Equity and Inclusion
- Student Mental Health
- Social and Emotional Well-Being



Ensuring Meaningful Input and Follow-up

Students worked with district leaders to analyze data and feedback from townhalls.



Summary of findings shared widely and used to identify district improvement efforts



CONTINUING FORWARD



Insights from the town halls are already influencing decisions about remote learning, SEL COVID-recovery efforts, and ongoing student voice initiatives. Some of these insights include:

- **Students are more vocal when they feel there are “real life” ramifications for their input.**

Students’ survey responses reflect both their need to express themselves and their ability to do so. Trish Shaffer, the director of SEL, points out, “A silver lining of COVID is that we are hearing more and more about what students need, and they are becoming more self-aware about what they need to thrive.”

- **The virtual format helped students feel more connected and unified.**

While social isolation was communicated through hashtags (e.g., #wemissconnections), many students clearly benefited from listening to and feeling solidarity among their peers. Students began to organically provide peer support to one another with supportive hashtags (#notalone, #howareyoureally?), comments (e.g., “I hear you...”), and by sharing email addresses.

- **The chat box is an effective tool for students to share their opinions.**

Laura Davidson, Director of Research and Evaluation, noted, “Chat box is the new best friend of student voice” and observed that students who might never have spoken up in an in-person setting were “blowing up the chat with comments and ideas.”

- **The town halls built student and adult capacity to support their peers.**

Many students who participated in youth voice efforts felt empowered to guide fellow students in rebuilding the community as they recover from the shared effects of the pandemic. The town halls also were opportunities for adult capacity-building in addition to professional development and coaching.

Post-event surveys showed that there is still room for growth despite high engagement. Responses focused on improving outreach and participation (e.g., shorter in duration, earlier in the day, enlist adults to advertise), supporting dialogue (e.g., larger group discussions, more inclusive), and ensuring follow-up. There continues to be a need for increasing participation and representation across age, gender, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic level, interests, and academic levels.

The biggest challenge is that student voice efforts remain a district-led initiative, but the virtual town halls offer a template that schools can now replicate in different formats. There is also potential to extend to younger students and a cohort of six elementary schools already committed to this work.

With stronger interdepartmental partnerships, a larger SAC, and a wealth of valuable data, plans are already underway for expanding youth voice projects. Using pre-post surveys and a quasi-experimental design study, the OA plans to focus continuous improvement on the connection between students who participate in student voice and development of SEL competencies. And the student voice program has laid out ambitious goals of expanding SACs at the school level, developing a middle school mentorship program, and launching a student-led effort to protect the environment.



APPLYING THIS STORY TO YOUR JOURNEY



KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Prioritize student voice as part of your district's or school's strategic plan for SEL and identify flexible ways to elevate young people's ideas across virtual, hybrid, or in-person opportunities.
- Involve students from all schools, grade levels, and academic experiences to ensure broad participation and representation across age, gender, racial, ethnicity, and socioeconomic factors.
- Involve students in developing strategies to address urgent, relevant, real-time issues that will motivate them to invest and engage. Build in data collection methods with which they can prioritize and share major findings and move toward solutions.
- Build the capacity of adults who are supporting student voice engagements, carefully considering adult roles in supporting student voice work and events at both school and district levels.
- As an adult facilitator: **DON'T** ask if you don't plan to act or set up situations that are not within your collective sphere of influence. **DON'T** over-promise what student input will lead to. **DO** intentionally connect students to opportunities and **DO** plan for follow-through on all student voice engagements with next steps. This will ensure that the experiences are a part of a continuum of work, not standalone, one-off events.



REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- What examples have you seen of organized student voice opportunities, whether virtual or in-person, benefiting students, adults, and schools in your school and/or district?
- How can opportunities for student voice expand beyond traditional student leadership roles? What do adults need to do that would encourage students to participate in these experiences and roles?
- How can students' voices be promoted in a way that does not perpetuate the results of previous experiences, e.g., mistrust of adults, loss of agency, or apathy?
- How can you ensure that school or district leaders not only speak about valuing student voice but invite students to be part of decision-making in meaningful ways?
- What can your school or district do to act on the ideas and opinions of students even when those ideas might not be consistent with your current course of action?



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES RELATED TO THIS TOPIC

[CASEL Guide to Schoolwide SEL: Elevate Student Voice](#). CASEL offers guidance and resources for elevating student voice as part of schoolwide SEL implementation.

[Washoe County Student Voice Toolkit](#). The Speak Out, Listen Up! toolkit is a set of tools that educators can use to elicit and listen to students' ideas and use their input to help develop solutions and shape change.

[Students at the Center Hub](#). This resource helps educators understand and make use of current research on student-centered approaches to teaching and learning.

[SoundOut Student Voice Toolbox](#). Research, articles, tips, and resources to support meaningful student involvement in schools and communities.

[CASEL SEL Trends Volume 2, July 2018: Empowering Youth Voice](#). A brief describing the value of promoting youth voice in schools with examples from three districts.

Districtwide Indicators of SEL Implementation

High-quality SEL implementation can take three to five years to fully scale across a district. The indicators provide evidence of high-quality implementation throughout the process. Learn more <https://drc.casel.org/what-is-sel/indicators-of-districtwide-sel/>



Shared ownership



Systems & structures



Sustained commitment



Staff SEL



Explicit SEL programs



Instruction & climate



Youth voice



Family partnerships



Community partnerships



Continuous improvement