



Championing Children and Young People in England

## HOW TO GUIDE: Student Voice for Schools

This guide suggests how schools can improve how they involve students in decisions.

It is drawn from research in 16 schools in England with a reputation for excellent student voice practice. This research was conducted by Involver, a social enterprise that supports schools to create effective school councils and student voice.

This guide will not improve student voice overnight, but will help you to ask the right questions about how to make positive changes.

### Why bother?

The 16 schools see student voice as a vital and fundamental part of education, with a range of positive, tangible outcomes. These include:

- Making learning more challenging, flexible and fun
- Driving improvements to teaching and learning
- Improving behaviour; reducing number of exclusions
- Improving relationships for all
- Reducing vandalism
- Reducing rate of 'Not in Education Employment or Training'
- Improving Ofsted rating
- Improving attainment
- Better school policies
- Wider range of extra-curricular activities

### How have they done this?

The schools studied have very different circumstances and take a variety of approaches to student voice, but these approaches share some important elements:

#### Laying the foundations



**Take a look at what school is for.** Think about what your school is actually trying to do. Distinguish between the aims (e.g. creating able learners) from the external measures (e.g. exam results). Ensure the school's ethos and practice flow towards these aims.



**Put student voice at the heart of learning and school life.** Schools see better learning when student voice is included. Giving students control over aspects of their learning leads to much more engagement.



**Make sure that your ethos is applied consistently.** Whatever the ethos of your school, both staff and students must be treated with respect. That means senior leaders, teachers, teaching assistants, lunch time staff, students and parents all giving each other a voice and being given respect.



**Start small.** Some schools found it useful to start with small projects with younger students that gradually 'grow up through the school'. Students then can demonstrate concrete results and improvements which they then use to convince reluctant staff.



**Do it for real, rather than as a simulation.** Students learn from being exposed to real life issues and challenges. They should learn that they don't always get what they want, but that their voice is heard in real decision making about things that matter to them.

## Creating the right structures



**Everyone is included.** Make it clear that the aim is to include everyone in the school. Respect ideas wherever they come from, and work hard to hear quieter, less confident students.



**Have a wide range of ways to be involved.** This will encourage a wide range of students to get involved. The schools researched did not see a school council as enough on its own.



**Encourage regular interaction between students.** Set up ways for students to get quick access to space to meet, resources, permissions and each other. This might be regular class council meetings or a student voice room.



**Reflect your ethos in policies and governance.** The school's values should feature in school policies, job descriptions, the curriculum, school development plan and governance. Make sure that key documents are written together with students and made accessible.

## Making it powerful



**Show impact.** Student voice is about action, so make sure that success and achievements are visible to students, staff and the community. Collect research and evidence to prove it. Student voice will not work if nobody can see what it's for and what it does.



**Link with the core work of the school.** Student voice shouldn't be seen as an add-on. Students can be involved in teaching and learning.



**Trust students.** Have trust as a starting point, rather than something that they have to earn. "Yes you can" was the common default answer in the participating schools.



**Show commitment by giving student voice a budget.** This doesn't have to be large, even a small budget for the school council shows trust and that student voice is taken seriously.



**Communicate regularly through different channels.** Encourage students to lead on keeping up good communication with students, teachers, parents and governors.

## Maintaining it



**Support student voice with staff time.** Successful schools give staff time and resources to support student voice. It doesn't just happen without this. Make student voice news a standing item in staff meetings, and ask students to get involved in keeping teachers up to date.



**Link with governors.** Encourage students to input into governors meetings, have a standing item on their meeting agenda. Ask a governor to come along to school council meetings.



**Experiment, evaluate and reflect.** Look back and evaluate student voice projects and events. Participating schools are not complacent about success, but trying new methods, evaluating them to improve things the next time around.



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