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The Power of Student Voice

by Monte Selby

Voice equals inspiration. Show me a student with authentic opportunities to have a voice at school, and I'll show you an inspired student. On the other hand, it is hard to locate inspired students in a school where they are perceived as "just another brick in the wall". If your school is seeking inspired students, read on.

We can increase authentic opportunities for student voice through structured events or with strategic processes. Our leadership roles as engaged listeners and facilitators can provide all students an open avenue to affect academics, behavior, or character at school. When authentic voice is accompanied by student-driven problem solving and action, whining decreases. Let me first illustrate the power of student voice with a descriptive journey of my typical day in a school; gaining student vision and involvement for change through my role as an artist-in-residence songwriter. Then, I'll share other effective options for events or processes, with a few cautionary notes embedded along the way.

Through the course of a day, my goal is to actively involve 320 student problem solvers in writing a song that will change their world. I'll have four groups of 80 students for 90 minutes each. The song is our final product to share at a school assembly. The product could also be a poster, action plan, drama production, wall graffiti, web site or video. The important idea here is the process that helps students identify how to improve academics, behavior, or character at school.

Group One

Ironically, it starts by prompting students to generate topics that are typically the focus of a student whining session. I tell them, "Whining is a sign of intelligence - quality whining requires observation and articulation". With a strategic process, whining can lead to problem solving. We wrestle with this question, "What would make your life better?". I give examples. Free candy? More foreign language classes? Friendly classmates? Less bullying? World peace? A date?

I highly recommend a very structured think-pair-share strategy. Make sure every student has paper and pen. Allow students to spread out for the "think" time, and establish a safe, quiet, respectful atmosphere for brainstorming. No one is required to share their ideas. If it's safe, they will. Brainstorming is about quantity of ideas, not quality. Don't judge. Every voice counts.

During the "pair" time, ask small groups to look for ideas that two or more people have in common. A group looking for common ideas will access everyone's ideas. This precedes discussion. When groups begin with discussion, only the loudest voices are heard.

Begin the "share" time by asking for a group's common ideas. Use markers on giant post-it notes to document the process. Then, ask for other favorite ideas that were not "in common" within the groups. Crazy ideas will emerge. Profound ideas will emerge. The goal is to identify *one* idea that will make many students' lives better. Give each student three "sticky dots" to place next to the ideas that would make their life better.

The idea identified becomes our main idea, typically the chorus of a song. Students make sure the lyrics of their chorus paint a clear picture of what they want to see; *not* what they want to eliminate. For example, the chorus needs to express, "this is a vision of the ultimate school lunchroom", not, "get rid of what is wrong with the lunchroom." This is true for nearly all approaches to problem solving - paint the picture of what you want to see. Group one will now select the style of music that best represents their idea.

Group Two

The second group of 80 students receives a quick recap of group one's work. Their role is to create a vivid, attention-getting introduction (verse one) to the main idea (chorus). They help adults understand the problem and the need for a solution. Using the same think-pair-share process, every student has an opportunity to give voice to the issue at hand.

Group Three

After a quick review of the previous work by classmates, a third group of 80 students begins the think-pair-share process of problem solving. Their job is to create engaging imagery (verse two) that clarifies *who*, needs to do *what* by *when*. Here, I am careful that their solution does not stop with an assignment for the principal. Verse two must include *their* personal role and commitment in making this change for a better world. A powerful song (meaning, their action plan) is full of personal action, not delegation.

Group Four

Not all songs have the same format. Similarly, action plans, websites or videos will reflect the nature of the problem to be solved. In this example, group four will think-pair-share to write the bridge for the song. This is an opportunity to inject a caution ("If we don't make this change...") or encouragement ("We can all be part of the solution...") or humor ("I can't believe I'm part of the solution when I used to be the problem..."). The group has a chance to look at the main idea, the introduction of the problem, and the solution, and then add necessary detail.

Can typical students do this?

To stick with the song writing theme, click the following links to hear the extraordinary thoughts of rural, urban, and suburban middle school students across North America. As problem solvers, they address bullying, belonging, appearances, international tragedy, local poverty, and change. I also included a sixth grade

group who dealt with an immediate issue--an upcoming science test covering the unit on matter! Simply click the song link to listen.

1. [Where Everyone Belongs](#) (White Pine Middle School, Saginaw, MI)
2. [Helping Haiti](#) (Fort Riley Middle School, Junction City, KS)
3. [Hair](#) (Williston Middle School, ND)
4. [I Believe in Us](#) (Fallingbrook Middle School, Mississauga, ON, CA)
5. [Poverty](#) (Mountain Pine Middle School, AR)
6. [Extraordinary](#) (recorded "live" with students at Pioneer Middle School, Fort Lauderdale, FL)
7. [We Don't Do That Here](#) (Pioneer Middle School, Walla Walla, WA)
8. [Everything is made of matter](#) (Manhattan Middle School, Boulder, CO)
9. [Change](#) (Mike Moses Middle School, Nacogdoches, TX)

Events

Performing the song at an all-school assembly or community concert is an event. Events often help draw attention to an issue and spur action. Even though they rarely offer creative engagement (problem solving and action planning), they do encourage participation (voice in supporting the message). This is a perfect opportunity to invite local radio, television, print media, etc.

An event might be a rally for change or a speech to campaign for student council. Students can gain voice through an event when they are allowed to make posters that illustrate important environmental changes. Events typically allow for involvement in one aspect of change, whereas an ongoing *process* might allow for involvement in the initiation, design, implementation and evaluation of change.

A survey of student perceptions of school climate is a one-time event for input. If students know that each semester of their high school career they will be asked to update the survey, it becomes part of a process for change. If students are allowed to review and interpret the data, create teams to problem solve and implement, and evaluate their progress, they will experience intense levels of authentic voice.

I believe that student opportunities for casual input (voice without accountability for change) are helpful, but of limited value. One selected student representative who is a member of the "school improvement committee" may offer insight. It does not offer every concerned student an avenue to be actively engaged in making their own school better. At its worst, when input is requested and regularly ignored, the negative energy can take the form of resentment and rebellion against authority.

Beyond the Squeaky wheel

My life as a school leader was changed dramatically when Ron Alexander involved me as a staff member with the Governors Center for Teen Leadership (GCTL). I learned how to facilitate student-led change by speaking less (no more, "Kids, this will never work"), and doing less ("So, who is going to present this idea to the school board?"). My work was organizing them for change, not being their puppet

for change. The process was powerful and energizing - and something that an individual school could replicate within the building!

The GCTL event offered Kansas schools an opportunity to send ten students on an adventure to change their school. Five boys and five girls from each school were selected, ideally representing a cross section of the school. The *event* was a retreat held at Rock Springs 4-H Ranch. The *process* used for creating change was all about action.

All students attended presentations and workshops to learn about leadership, high performance teams, and "the power of one". Each school team used "team time" to identify strengths and weaknesses in their school. They engaged in strength bombardment activities, learning about the benefits of having diverse team members and thinkers. Together, their brainstorming and prioritizing led to an action plan to improve one aspect of their school.

We sent multiple teams of students to several retreats during the year. Some teams made dramatic changes to areas where we had failed miserably as a staff (increasing school spirit, for example). Teams thought of improving the involvement of special education students in school activities. One team created an outdoor science classroom. They inspired me to be a better school leader through empowerment and facilitation, rather than with control and positional power. Later, when student whiners approached me to fix a problem, I turned to the GCTL model to give them an authentic voice and process for change. If you give a kid a "fix", he'll be satisfied for a day. Teach a kid a process for change, and he'll be a change agent for life.

The GCTL model offers a principal an authentic avenue to give voice to school staff and parents. It influences my approach to instruction in roles as a professor, staff development presenter or when serving on committees. Family vacations are another opportunity for team problem solving. The GCTL action plan format has allowed me to use artist-in-residence songwriter work as an opportunity to give thousands of students a voice for positive change.

Got Voice?

- Do students at school have events and processes to affect change regarding their own academics, behavior, or character?
- Do school avenues for student voice affect change (generating excitement) or is input often ignored (generating resentment)?
- Is there an avenue for interested students to review and interpret important data, create teams to problem solve and implement strategies, and evaluate their progress?
- Do student-driven strategies describe their own involvement? Who needs to do what by when?
- Can students express their strategies through creative products? A song, video, poster, drama production, art, graffiti, or web site?
- Do involved students represent (reflect) the school? Gender, race, socio-economic status, informal social affiliations, etc.

The Buck Stops Here

There is a reality for principals in the old slogan, "The buck stops here." The implication that a principal is ultimately responsible for everyone and everything begs us to drift toward control oriented approaches to leadership. It takes courage, skill, defined limits, and a clear process to openly offer students a voice in their academic, behavior, or character leadership at school. Authentic student voice requires a bold leader who is willing to let students influence the vision of "their" school.

Our schools need powerful principals. Control is not power. Power is about effectiveness. Effective leaders release their tight grip of control to allow leadership to breathe through student voice. Voice equals inspiration. Inspired students are our hope for powerful change.

Monte Selby's work in education is based upon an award-winning career as a teacher, principal, and professor. He is the author of eight books and over 100 published songs for students, teachers, and parents. Today, he works with students throughout North America as an artist-in-residence songwriter, and provides training for teachers at conferences and through dynamic staff development. Contact Monte at monte@monteselby.com.

Middle Level Leader, April 2011