

**WHAT IS THE STATE OF STUDENT VOICE IN KENTUCKY?  
A GROUP OF HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS FINDS OUT**

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**Abstract**

What is student voice? Is it giving students a survey at the end of the year? Is it allowing students to serve on school governance bodies? Is it simply a student's opinion on a particular policy? For the purposes of this article, student voice is defined as student contributions to school decisions or education policy discussions and the serious consideration of this feedback and perspective. In an effort to understand the current state of student voice efforts in Kentucky, a group of students called the Prichard Committee Student Voice Team (SVT) contacted every principal and superintendent in the state to determine whether student voice opportunities were offered to students in their school or district. In examining the survey responses of 89 school districts and 189 schools, we determined that few districts/schools had student voice programs. However, we did discover locations with strong student voice initiatives that could serve as examples for the numerous superintendents and principals who expressed interest in developing more opportunities for their students. This article shares important success stories and argues that students, who spend 35 hours in classrooms every week, are in a position to offer valuable perspectives on whether and how schools are working. Listening to students not only generates important feedback, but also creates a sense of agency and ownership which potentially leads to higher student performance.

## Introduction

The goal of a high school education is to prepare students to be productive members of society and to create citizens who will vote in elections, volunteer in their communities, and participate in the job market. Involving students in school governance engages them in democratic processes from a young age and teaches them the importance of civic engagement (Patmor, 1998).

This proposition is particularly relevant given the school system's never-ending struggle to re-engage students at risk of dropping out. According to the Education Alliance (2004), schools must allow students to own their own education, thus fostering a sense of ownership and buy-in. Such an approach ensures an engaged student body and can actually lead to increased student performance. This hypothesis is reinforced by the 2013 Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) study, which compared students from 65 cities and countries across the world and found that in the top tier of schools, students felt a real sense of ownership over their education (Friedman, 2013). Students will not try in school if they do not understand its importance and relevancy and do not feel—as PISA manager Andreas Schleicher puts it—"that they personally can make a difference in their own outcomes" (Friedman, 2013, para. 5).

So how can schools increase student buy-in? According to renowned psychologists Alfred Bandura and Mary Gist (1987), buy-in is closely tied to self-efficacy (one's belief in one's ability to do something), which in turn leads to higher performance. In the case of education, self-efficacy would refer to a student's belief in his/her importance within the school system. Gist observes that self-efficacy correlates with several factors.

1. **High expectations.** This is also known as the Pygmalion effect. If adults treat students as if they are important to the school system—for example, by allowing them a formal vote on school governance bodies—their self-efficacy will increase, thus increasing their performance levels.
2. **Internal locus of control.** When people feel like they have a certain degree of control over a situation, they have a better understanding of their environment and an increased sense of urgency. If schools allow students to formally participate in school governance, they will own their own education. This understanding and buy-in is instrumental in raising students' performance levels.

These psychological principles have been more widely tested by businesses seeking to engage consumers. For example, the D.C.-based Censeo Consulting Group advises companies to prioritize stakeholders according to "the degree of influence they have on program outcomes" and "their attitudes toward the program" ("Stakeholder Engagement," 2008, p. 4). Engaging stakeholders makes them feel involved, educates them on the product or service, and allows the company to gather valuable data and feedback. Conversely, failing to engage stakeholders can result in negative consequences for the business ("Stakeholder Engagement," 2008). Although students are not mere consumers of education, the consumer stakeholder engagement model closely parallels the student voice model in the following ways:

1. Students, like consumers, are the recipients of a service.
2. The success of both schools and businesses depends on an engaged student body/consumer base.

Because the principles of the consumer engagement model also apply to student voice, schools should prioritize student feedback, as student test scores are a primary measure of school performance and students—the only stakeholders who are not consistently engaged in the decision-making process—are more likely to feel marginalized. Engaging students is not only a feel-good “democratic” practice, it is actually necessary for school improvement.

The purpose of this article is to share the findings of a collaborative study conducted by a collective of high school students called the Prichard Committee Student Voice Team (SVT). In an effort to better understand the current state of student voice efforts in our state, we contacted every principal and superintendent in Kentucky. Overall, we found that few districts/schools had student voice programs. However, we did discover locations with strong student voice initiatives that could serve as examples for the numerous superintendents and principals who expressed interest in developing more opportunities for their students. This article shares important success stories and argues that students, who spend 35 hours in classrooms every week, are in a position to offer valuable perspectives on whether and how schools are working. Listening to students not only generates important feedback, but also creates a sense agency and ownership, potentially leading to higher student performance.

## Why Student Voice?

According to the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation’s Measures of Effective Teaching Study (2013), information gleaned from student feedback is vital in predicting teacher performance (p. 12). This principle can readily be expanded to a school-wide level. Teachers, parents, and administrators are currently represented on school governance bodies because each sees the school system from a very different vantage point. This also holds true for students, who can add to this diversity of perspective in two ways.

Students can offer a fresh, unadulterated opinion on school issues. Students’ ideas for the future are less tainted by what has always been done in the past. When they approach a situation, they are less inclined to interpret their reality through stigmas and paradigms hardened by past experiences. While this contextual knowledge is necessary to an extent, it is also helpful to have someone in the room whose only focus is the present and future. In addition to being less hindered by the past, students are less hindered by personal agendas. But students’ opinions are more than just *different*; they are vital to a comprehensive understanding of the school system. Some problems that go unnoticed by adults are readily identified by tapping into the student experience.

For example, when the SVT performed a Student Voice Audit at a Kentucky junior high school in 2015, the student investigators observed large gaps in student and teacher responses. Similar to Mansfield’s (2014) work, although not a single adult commented on bullying in his/her survey responses or interviews, a supermajority (two-thirds) of the students complained of an ineffective discipline policy, resulting in a major bullying problem. Taking into account opinions and requests from students, the Student Voice Team was able to make several suggestions for school improvement efforts.

Likewise, in Calvert County, Maryland, student member of the board Alexya Brown could see what her fellow board members could not: the unequal distribution of students among the four high schools was negatively affecting the performance of programs in the under-capacity schools. When she brought this to the Board's attention, members realized the problem was far greater than they initially thought and began to look into redistricting (A. Brown, personal communication, January 1, 2016). This important policy change was prompted by a student, highlighting the important role student voice can play in schools.

### **What Does Student Voice Look Like?**

It is increasingly evident that student feedback, as well as its psychological effects, are vital to a thriving education system. But what happens when schools institutionalize student voice by including students as formal, voting members on school governance bodies? Case studies from Kentucky and from around the country suggest such practice leads to significant benefits to learning.

Federal Hocking, the first case, is one of the poorest school districts in Ohio: 85% of its high school students are “economically disadvantaged” and 82% of those economically disadvantaged students qualify for free lunch. However, 91% of its students are proficient in reading, 90% of its students are proficient in math, 56% of its students scored either accelerated or advanced on reading assessments, and 60% of its students scored accelerated or advanced on math assessments (“Overview,” 2013). 95% of its students graduate, 70% go to college, and former students earn a B+ average in college classes (“Overview,” 2013). Former students are also active members of their communities through volunteering and voting (“Overview,” 2013). This success is highly unexpected in such a poor, rural district. So, what’s their secret?

According to the superintendent George Wood (2013), student voice is key. He asserts that “change has to begin with the perceived needs of those to whom the change is going to happen.” (para. 19) Students run all student activities and serve as full members on all school governance bodies, even participating in personnel decisions.

As a District of Innovation exempted from certain Kentucky laws, Eminence Independent—the second case—adopted a similar model. Every SBDM in the district—elementary through high school—has a voting student member, though the elementary school member must be a fifth grader and cannot participate in discussions involving teacher impropriety (B. Berry, personal communication, November 18th, 2015). Candidates for the position self-nominate and give a three- to five-minute speech. According to superintendent Berry, “the kids that show their passion and have the best talk usually win” (personal communication, November 19th, 2015). The election has yet to devolve into a popularity contest. In fact, Berry added that when it comes to electing someone to formally represent them on a school governance body, students know better than to simply pick the most popular candidate. “I honestly believe kids are better than adults at separating popularity from position,” he said (personal communication, November 19th, 2015).

The addition of the student member has led to rich dialogue on curriculum, purchases, and hiring. For example, feedback on whether a particular textbook or piece of software actually benefitted students’ learning is extremely valuable when the school makes new purchases. When asked if there had ever been a problem or argument when the adults and students disagree, he said, “No. Usually they work out the kinks and make a compromise before

it gets to voting. The feedback loop really works" (personal communication, November 19, 2015).

Eminence Independent and Federal Hocking are not the only two school districts where students serve on school governance bodies. For example, in Annapolis, Montgomery, and Anne Arundel counties in Maryland, students have served as voting members on the school board for more than 37 years (Fletcher, 2003). Brison Harvey, a high school Social Studies teacher, was a non-voting member on his county's Board of Education when he was a high school student in Maryland. He received the same training that all board members receive. In Maryland, Boards of Education, not school-based councils, make all decisions regarding the operation of the education system. He said the following of his experience:

In my role as a non-voting member I would add input on how the budget was created, the various policies that were being considered and provided input on the various programs that were run across the county/district. I felt that in my position I was respected at the table and all participants listened to my input. In the past, previous student board members were not as vocal, but the shock of having a student provide adequate feedback was quickly dissipated by having an informed view (personal communication, December 10, 2015).

This model has been repeatedly proven to be effective at including students into meaningful school leadership positions across the country. A cursory internet search revealed 18 states with students serving on the state board of education and 49 school districts with students serving on the local board of education, some as voting members.

It is clear that education leaders are beginning to recognize the value that students can bring to education policy discussions. Prince George County, Maryland Board of Education Chair Segun Eubanks said:

We represent students. Everything we do is for students. To do this work, and not have the voice of students in the room would be disingenuous to what we say our mission is all about. So, to have students who are committed, who are ambitious and are intelligent, who understand what it is the students need and want and what their challenges are—that keeps us honest (Keyes, 2015).

## **Important Definitions**

Before sharing how we approached this research, we would like to give an overview of important definitions that guide our discussion.

**Student voice:** student contributions to school decisions or education policy discussions and the serious consideration of this feedback and perspective.

**Meaningful/real student council/student voice programs:** any survey response that demonstrated that the school seriously sought out and considered the feedback of students. For example, consulting students before making a policy change or asking for monthly recommendations.

**Non-meaningful student council/student voice programs:** any survey response that failed to demonstrate that the school seriously sought out and considered the feedback of students. For example, student councils that focus only on dances and fundraisers or a superintendent lunch group.

## Research Methods

Because we were interested in understanding the current state of student voice efforts in our home state of Kentucky, we chose to gather data by using a survey. This survey was designed to measure how student voice is currently utilized in Kentucky schools and to assess the attitudes of school and district administrators towards including student voice. We wanted to know specifically:

1. Are students formal parts of school governance bodies?
2. Would administration be willing to support students as full partners in decision making?
3. What sort of student voice programs are available to students across Kentucky?

In total, 89 Superintendents participated in the district-level survey, and 189 School-Based Decision Making (SBDM) coordinators, middle school principals, and high school principals participated in a school-level survey. SBDM coordinators serve as representatives of a geographical area to the Kentucky Association of School Councils. While participants volunteered their responses, we actively targeted certain participants in order to ensure a geographically representative sample.

We gathered responses through two surveys. The first, entitled “Student Voice Survey,” included the following questions:

1. Name
2. District
3. Email
4. Is there a student serving on the school board? (yes or no)
5. If not, would you support the addition of a student member to the school board?
6. If so, to what extent do they influence debate and decisions?
7. Describe any district-wide student voice programs.

The second, entitled “Student Voice at the School Level,” included the following questions:

1. Name
2. District
3. School
4. Email
5. Is there a student member on your school’s SBDM?
6. If yes, to what extent does he/she influence debate/decisions?
7. If no, would you be open to adding a student member? Why or why not?
8. Does your school have a student council?

9. If yes, describe some of its projects/responsibilities.
10. Are there any other organizations within your school that have students working as partners with adults to improve it? If so, please describe them.

### **Procedure**

First, we pieced together the email addresses of every principal and superintendent in Kentucky using the [firstname.lastname@district.kyschools.us](mailto:firstname.lastname@district.kyschools.us) email format. We then sent a mass email to each administrator. We corrected email addresses that bounced back. Then, we sent a second follow-up email to administrators that did not respond the first time. We spent three weeks calling district offices to secure responses from superintendents who had yet to respond and secured 10 additional responses. We requested names of SBDM coordinators from the Kentucky Department of Education and pieced together their emails. We then sent a mass email to every SBDM coordinator. We also sent a second email to the SBDM coordinators who represented areas we still needed responses from. At this point, we had a geographically representative sample, with 89 district responses and 189 school responses.

### **Limitations**

We did not take a random sample of Kentucky schools. Instead, we sent the survey to every principal and superintendent in Kentucky, analyzed the geographic distribution of the responses we received, and targeted specific areas accordingly. This might have resulted in some bias.

As with any survey, there is a risk of response bias. The people who responded to our survey chose to respond for a reason—most likely to publicize their school’s student voice programs or to express their skepticism regarding the advantages of student voice. We estimate that the numbers we obtained are slightly inflated. Principals or superintendents would be more likely to answer a question or elaborate on student voice programs if they believed their response would reflect favorably on their school or district. They may also be hesitant to go on the record against something like student voice. Several superintendents contacted us saying they would not fill out the survey because it was not anonymous.

Finally, despite our best efforts, we had trouble making contact with principals and superintendents in Eastern and Western Kentucky. We did obtain responses from every section of the state. However, Central and Northern Kentucky were overrepresented in our results. Again, this most likely inflated our numbers. We did survey the principals of both middle schools and high schools; however, we did not differentiate between the groups in our analysis because there were no significant differences in the two groups’ responses.

### **Results**

In reporting our results, we first share the raw data from the school level, followed by the raw data collected at the district level. After sharing nominal data collected for each survey question, we then share some of the qualitative results in the form of participants’ open-ended responses.

## Quantitative Data

### At the School Level

<b>Question: Is there a student member on your school's SBDM? If so, to what extent does he/she influence debate and decisions?</b>		
Yes, voting	3	1.6%
Yes, advisory	12	6.3%
No	174	92.1%
Total	189	

<b>Question: If no, would you be open to adding a student member? Why or why not?</b>		
Yes	82	47.1%
Yes, advisory only	11	6.3%
No	36	20.7%
Maybe	13	7.5%
No response	32	18.4%
Total	174	

<b>Question: Does your school have a school council? If yes, describe some of its projects/responsibilities.</b>		
Yes*	23	12.2%
Yes, meaningful*	47	24.9%
Yes, not meaningful*	70	37.0%
No	45	23.8%
No response	4	2.1%
Total	189	

<b>Question: Are there any other organizations within your school that have students working as partners with adults to improve it? If so, please describe them.</b>		
Yes*	1	0.5%
Yes, meaningful*	44	23.3%
Yes, not meaningful*	26	13.8%
No	116	61.4%
No response	2	1.1%
Total	189	

92% of SBDMs in Kentucky do not have a student member. Of the 8% who do, 6.5% have an advisory student member and 1.5% have a voting student member. 53% of those without a student member expressed willingness to add one. In all, only 43% of schools provide their students with meaningful student voice outlets, allowing for active student participation in decision making. Though 74% of schools have a student council, just 40% of those councils serve a role beyond social planning. 38% of schools have student voice programs beyond just the normal student council, 63% of which provide a meaningful outlet for student voice.

### At the District Level

<b>Question: Is there a student serving on the school board? If so, to what extent to they influence debate and decisions?</b>		
Yes	8	9.0%
No	81	91.0%
Total	89	

<b>Question: If no, would you be open to adding a student member? Why or why not?</b>		
Yes	27	30.3%
Yes, advisory only	10	11.2%
No	29	32.6%
Maybe	3	3.4%

No response	12	13.5%
Total	89	

<b>Question: Are there any other organizations within your district that have students working as partners with adults to improve it? If so, please describe them.</b>		
Yes, meaningful*	31	34.8%
Yes, not meaningful*	20	22.5%
No	35	39.3%
No response	3	3.4%
Total	89	

91% of school boards in Kentucky do not have a student member, though 46% of districts expressed a willingness to add one. Existing student members of the board serve in an advisory capacity. 60% of districts have additional student voice programming, with 61% of additional programs empowering students to make meaningful contributions to decision making.

### Qualitative Data

Below, we report quotations from participants who included additional information in the open-ended part of the survey.

**Table X: Kentucky Superintendents and Principals on Student Voice**

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Additional Feedback</b>
Brad Phipps, High School Principal	“I am not sure how much they would understand at first, but I am willing to educate them just as we do new parents and teachers.”
Malissa Hutchins, High School Principal	“It would give us another view of all the issues that we discuss or make decisions about.”
Tara Howard, High School Principal	“Every decision being made is impacting students. It makes sense for them to have representation at the table.”
Matthew Madding, High School Principal	“If we as a school are truly about students, it is wise to have student input on decisions that impact students.”
Julie York, SBDM Coordinator	“I think having buy in from the student population is an integral part of culture building.”

John Ritchie, Middle School Principal	“It would give us a better understanding of what the students are experiencing and where we can improve from their perspective without compromising our objectives.”
Kim King, Superintendent	“Our jobs are about kids, and they are the [best] evaluator anyone can get!”
Donna Patterson, Superintendent	“Any time we can get student feedback on issues that directly affect them → positive impact.”
Houston Barber, Superintendent	“I think with student voice there is an opportunity to provide a unique insight and perspective on reaching goals for the district.”

## Discussion And Conclusion

The Prichard Committee Student Voice Team finds the results of this study encouraging. Student voice clearly has a strong foundation of support in Kentucky, as demonstrated by the above quotations. We are pleased to see that over a half of school councils and nearly half of school boards would be willing to add a student member, as indicated in the survey results.

That being said, there is still much room for growth. While many schools and districts offer their students opportunities to voice their opinions, a significant portion of these opportunities do not empower students with a vote, or true representation. Rather, they consist of councils or advisory boards that look good on paper but rarely convene and/or wield little real influence. While many districts at least attempt to include students, we find it alarming that the majority of schools do not offer their students meaningful platforms from which to voice their opinions. Additionally, less than one-tenth of school councils and school boards had student members. The majority of those that did only included students as advisory members.

## Moving forward

The good news is that educational leaders in Kentucky show openness to change. Around half of both superintendents and principals appear willing to work towards student representation on school governance bodies. But they shouldn't stop there. Based on our research, the Prichard Committee Student Voice Team recommends that schools:

1. **Develop a culture of respect.** Of the four recommendations, this is the most important. Students should know that if they come to a teacher or an administrator with a problem, their concerns will not be dismissed without further discussion. This cannot be accomplished through a policy change or task force. It will require a paradigm shift on the part of teachers, administrators, and students. It will take time. Schools can start by acknowledging that students offer valid feedback and working to treat students as partners rather than consumers.
2. **Support students to serve as full voting members on school governance bodies.** This allows students formal representation in the decision-making process, ensures their informed opinions will be taken as seriously as that of any other informed stakeholder, and models the democratic values to which our public schools aspire.

3. **Create a formal space or platform where students can share their perspectives with educators.** This will look different for each school but might include a student council that does more than plan bake sales and dances. In addition, schools could include students in a forum or committee where students and teachers work together to address pressing education or school climate issues.
4. **Disseminate student voice surveys to gather information and input before making policy changes that directly affect students.** School administrators should use this data to make informed decisions.

Implementing these changes holds potential to: bring much-needed perspectives to the decision-making process, create schools where students feel their opinion is valued, encourage students to engage in the community and the classroom, raise performance levels, and ensure the leaders of tomorrow (and today) will thrive.

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