# Seen and Heard:

Benefits of Incorporating Student Voice, Choice, and SEL Into the Academic Framework

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# Elevate, Engage, and Empower

In the "real world," outside of the classroom, initiative, self-efficacy, and creative problem-solving are encouraged and often required for success. We can begin cultivating these skills in the classroom. Student voice and choice can engage students in their learning and give students the agency they need to develop self-regulation and become self-directed learners. Giving students voice and choice also helps them feel valued and encourages them to realize their interests and potential.

Research shows that giving students agency and influence in their learning makes them more engaged and invested in their education as well as empowers them to take control, show initiative, and adopt leadership roles. This in turn can lead to improved academic outcomes (Bridgeland et al., 2006; Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012; Mitra, 2003; Benner et al., 2019).

Student voice/choice is also closely connected with social and emotional learning (SEL). Much research demonstrates the benefits of SEL on student engagement and achievement (Durlak, et. al, 2011). SEL helps students develop agency because it teaches students to engage authentically as leaders, problem-solvers, and decision-makers. Students also improve their communication skills and their ability to advocate for themselves. In these ways, SEL and student voice/choice help students develop a sense of ownership over their learning (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL], 2018).

Student voice/choice can be elevated in virtually every dimension within a school. More than just involving students in planning big events or celebrations, student voice/choice can be a way of life where adults prioritize time to learn from students and hear their perspectives. This framework can help educators identify and support a broad range of student perspectives and experiences.

# What is Student Voice/Choice?

Just like every school and district is unique, there is no one-size-fits-all definition of student voice/choice. Some take a fairly broad definition: "The many ways in which youth have opportunities to share in school decisions that will shape their lives and the lives of their peers" (Mitra & Gross, 2009). Schlinger (2020) offers a more specific explanation, describing student voice/choice as "(encouraging) students to generate their own ideas on how they'd like to elevate their voices to make change." Student voice/choice has also been referred to as "student input in their education ranging from input into the instructional topics, the way students learn, the way schools are designed, and more" (Benner et al., 2019).

For the purposes of this report, we consider student voice/choice to be the following:

*The practice of integrating students' perspectives into education practices, which may include decisions that impact the day-to-day life of the school, equitable learning practices, SEL implementation, etc. It also includes giving students agency through authentic opportunities to act as leaders, problem-solvers, and decision-makers toward the goal of getting students to believe that active participation in their education matters (CASEL, 2021).*

## Student Voice/Choice and SEL

Student voice/choice and SEL go hand in hand. SEL is the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions, achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions. SEL advances educational equity and excellence through authentic school-family-community partnerships to establish learning environments and experiences that feature trusting and collaborative relationships, rigorous and meaningful curriculum and instruction, and ongoing evaluation. SEL also helps students build agency and develop and practice the skills they need to become leaders, decision-makers, and problem-solvers (CASEL, 2021).

In many ways, effective SEL instruction is enhanced by student voice/choice. For example, giving students a sense of agency and the ability to affect their education helps them develop meaningful goals and intrinsic motivation (Osher et al., 2016). When students are engaged and understand the importance and relevance of their education, their decision-making and self-management skills improve and they are more likely to take an active role in strengthening their own competencies (National Practitioner Advisory Group [NPAG], 2019; Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012).

At the same time, SEL can facilitate the practice of student voice/choice in schools. SEL requires a safe and supportive learning environment where students feel valued and respected. Strong educator relationships are fostered through mutual respect and by educators listening and valuing what students have to say. Students learn confidence and self-efficacy and develop agency when their opinions are heard and respected and when they are given opportunities to shape SEL initiatives, instructional practices, and school climate (CASEL, 2021; CASEL, 2018).

## Increasing Attention on Student Voice/Choice

Why is student voice/choice getting so much attention right now? A main reason is that student engagement among U.S. youth is concerningly low. A recent Gallup Student Survey found that most U.S. high school students are disengaged, and many students do not feel their educators care about them (Gallup, 2017). A survey of nearly 22,000 high school students conducted by Yale researchers found that a staggering 75% of students report feeling negatively toward school. Feelings of boredom and stress are also high (Belli, 2020).

Schools are prioritizing student engagement and finding creative ways to increase it. Longstanding and recent efforts include SEL, personalizing learning, focusing on mental health and well-being, implementing flipped classroom models, etc.

## Benefits of Student Voice/Choice and SEL for Students

Improved academic achievement is a chief benefit of student voice/choice and SEL. Giving

students agency increases their engagement and investment in education. Students are also empowered to become self-learners, and they develop leadership skills, intrinsic motivation, and other skills critical to strong social-emotional competence. Educational equity improves and implicit bias is reduced. All of these contribute to improved academic outcomes.

### Academic Achievement

Much research shows a connection between building social-emotional skills — which includes agency achieved through student voice/choice — and improved academic outcomes. For example, Aronson (2002) found that when students are more self-aware and confident about their learning capacities, they tend to work harder and try to overcome challenges. Duckworth and Seligman (2005) found that students tend to have higher grades when they set high academic goals, are self-disciplined, and have intrinsic motivation. Additionally, when students have strong problem-solving and responsible decision-making skills, they often experience better academic outcomes (Zins & Elias, 2006). All of these examples of SEL can be enhanced by giving students agency through student voice/choice.

### Social-Emotional Competence

As described earlier in this paper, student voice/choice strengthens social and emotional competence. Let's consider goal-setting abilities as an example. Students often do not know why they are working toward a particular goal or understand the purpose of completing a project. The learning experience becomes "overly sterile to them — something that they need to do rather than a chance for them to explore and learn"

> Student voice/choice is getting more and more attention as a growing body of research shows that students' experiences in school — including the ability to be heard and participate in shaping their educational experiences — positively influence their engagement, goals, and current and future success (CASEL, 2021; Reckmeyer, 2019; Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012).

(Doyle & Gastauer, 2019). Giving students a say in setting their learning goals and explaining why the goals are important helps students become more invested in their learning and increases the likelihood that they will meet their goals (NPAG, 2019). Here, SEL and student voice/choice work together to give students the skills needed for success.

### Educational Equity

Student voice/choice also helps students learn more equitably. Many studies show that by integrating student voice into instruction, teachers can create culturally responsive learning environments. These environments can lead to improved equitable access to education, more fair opportunities, and improved outcomes (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2015; Levitan, 2019; Gay, 2018).

Hearing the "cultural assets of youth, their identities, their lived experiences, and their inherent strengths" brings awareness to students' backgrounds and unique learning needs (NPAG, 2019, p. 15). This information can guide many aspects of learning, such as school-wide language and communication, lesson planning, instruction, and classroom management. These practices can be applied to both in-person and virtual classroom settings (Goodwin & Holquist, 2020).

### Implicit Bias

Student voice/choice can expand educators' own perspectives, which could reduce implicit bias. Research shows that most people have some degree of implicit bias, and this can cause educators to unwittingly engage in behaviors that are harmful to students (Dhaliwal et al., 2020). For example, students of color tend to be impacted by school disciplinary policies and procedures at higher rates than white students (Gregory et al., 2017). There are also larger racial disparities in test scores and academic achievement in areas with higher rates of implicit and explicit bias among teachers (Chin et al., 2020).

Addressing implicit bias is complicated, especially since it has a large contextual component. Yet some promising evidence shows that when teachers understand their students' values, beliefs, backgrounds, experiences, etc., they are more likely to develop and deliver more equitable academic and SEL instruction (Emmer & Sabornie, 2014).

## Benefits of Student Voice/Choice and SEL for Districts and Schools

*"As adults, we think we're running the school, but the reality is that when children want to do something, they can make it happen. We must involve them as collaborative partners."* — Denine Goolsby (CASEL, 2018)

Simmons, Graham, and Thomas (2015) found that student voice/choice can promote a more supportive school climate, give students a stronger sense of belonging in school, enhance academic and social motivation, and improve student empowerment. And a qualitative, semi-structured student focus group revealed that students are capable of "providing rich, nuanced accounts of their experience that could potentially inform school improvement." Their research shows that students benefit when educators have a greater understanding of marginalized youths' needs and issues.

Incorporating student voice/choice into instruction can also make educators' jobs easier. Students become more motivated to succeed, engaged in their learning process, and ready to learn. They also become more active in identifying problems, generating solutions, organizing responses, and advocating and/ or educating for change both in and outside of school contexts. They develop leadership skills such as making decisions and accepting responsibility for outcomes (CASEL, 2021).

# Ways to Integrate Student Voice/Choice

Integrating student voice/choice is most effective when educators include multiple student voices, especially of those who have been historically marginalized. Trust is also critical, and educators should create a universal design framework (that is, a framework to improve and optimize teaching and learning for all people based on scientific insights into how humans learn) to ensure all students, including those with special learning needs and English learners, can participate and are included (Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012).

Student voice/choice experts often define this framework as a spectrum. For example, Mitra and Gross (2009) explain that different forms of student engagement foster different levels of

agency. At one end of the student voice/choice spectrum, students' perspectives, feedback, and opinions are gathered for the purpose of informing change. On the other end, students participate in decision-making for the purpose of enacting change. Student agency increases as students assume more leadership and have greater responsibility and accountability in instruction or policy changes (Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012).

Toshalis and Nakkula (2012) provide a helpful and widely used model that includes activities ranging from simple classroom tasks to more complex practices that involve foundational operational changes within the school or district.

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# Student Voice/Choice Activity Spectrum

**Districts, schools, and educators can integrate student voice/choice in a variety of ways, ranging from low, medium, and high involvement.**

| Low Involvement Activities | Medium Involvement Activities | High Involvement Activities |
|---|---|---|
| **Expression/Consultation** | **Participation/Partnership** | **Activism/Leadership** |
| • Demonstrating expression through art; volunteering opinions, complaints, objections, and praise | • Participating in decision-level meetings when issues are defined and actions are planned | • Actively involved in identifying problems, creating solutions, organizing responses, and advocating for change in both in-school and out-of-school contexts |
| • Providing consultation through invited opinion-sharing and feedback (i.e., focus groups, surveys) | • Taking on a partnership role in the decision-making process; operations teams require student involvement; educators receive training on how to work collaboratively with student partners | • Leading through (co-)planning, making decisions, and accepting responsibility for outcomes |
| • Student/Classroom-Level Example: Students are able to reflect and give their own opinions on their strengths. | • Student/Classroom-Level Example: Students set a SMART goal in a subject that interests them and receive support from mentors while working toward their goal. | • Student/Classroom-Level Example: Students are involved in choosing an SEL assessment, such as Aperture Education's the DESSA High School Edition Student Self-Report (HSE SSR). The assessment is administered, and students examine the data to set goals for themselves. They decide they want to set aside time in their class each week to check in with their accountability partners, provide progress updates, and conduct recurring re-assessments to determine which areas are going well and which need improvement. |

*This framework is adapted from Toshalis, E. & Nakkula, M. (2012, April). Motivation, engagement, and student voice. Students at the Center. http://www.howyouthlearn.org/pdf/Motivation%20Engagement%20Student%20Voice_0.pdf.*

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## Examples of Student Voice/Choice In Practice

Many schools are utilizing student voice/choice within their SEL frameworks and educational practices. Here are a few examples.

### Student Leadership

All students at Johnson Senior High School in St. Paul, Minnesota, have leadership opportunities. A youth recommendation resulted in a student-led advisory model that has become the "backbone of the SEL structure within the school." Students collaborated on the best way to implement the program and decided on daily, 15-minute blocks that facilitate an SEL curriculum they created for a mixed-grade group of 20 students using a community-building circle format. The students have taken ownership of this SEL program, from its conception to its implementation (CASEL, 2021). This is an example of how Toshalis and Nakkula's (2012) model for Leadership/Activism can work in schools.

### Data-Driven Decision-Making

Inviting students to examine and reflect on their SEL data can improve their self-efficacy and goal-setting skills. This could be a simple conversation about their data, if they agree with it, and what they can do to improve. For example, students at Oak Creek-Franklin Joint School District in Wisconsin complete the DESSA-SSR. They review their assessment results and work with educators to set goals within Aperture Education's High School Student Portal. This tool provides a way for students to express their own voice, set goals, and work toward their growth opportunities in a personalized and effective way.

The DESSA HSE SSR also helps educators utilize student voice to better understand students' needs. After students at Oak Creek-Franklin completed the assessment, educators noticed that many of their students were scoring below expected levels, particularly with the SEL competencies of Self-Awareness and Optimistic Thinking. A data team determined that many students likely lost these skills due to the pandemic. To respond to this need, the group created advisory lessons based on the identified SEL competencies. Oak Creek-Franklin is another example of how Toshalis and Nakkula's (2012) model can work in schools.

### Adult/Student Collaboration

At Fenton High School in Chicago, Illinois, each staff committee includes a student member. These students are actively involved in the administration of the SEL program, data analysis, and presenting school climate survey results. Students have had an active role in creating an SEL mission statement for their school and even create marketing materials for its attendance campaign (CASEL, 2021). This is an example of how Toshalis and Nakkula's (2012) model for Participation/Partnership can work in schools.

### Student Expression

Washoe County School District (WCSD) in Nevada hosts virtual town halls that are open to all WCSD students. Once a month, students are invited to attend and speak about topics ranging from distance learning challenges and success to equity and inclusion to students' social-emotional well-being (CASEL, 2021). This is an example of how students can be encouraged to express their opinions and experiences (Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012).

# Getting Started with Student Voice/Choice

There are many ways districts, schools, and teachers can incorporate student voice/choice into their SEL and educational practices. Our SEL experts at Aperture Education have outlined six practical ways to get started.

**1. Gather student perspectives.**

Student surveys can help educators better understand students' perspectives on schoolwide SEL implementation, school climate, academic engagement, adult-student relationships, and other important components of their school experiences. Continuing the conversation through focus groups or interviews can help staff contextualize survey data and answer questions that emerge from it. Go further by involving young people themselves in the process of research and analysis, a strategy called youth participatory action research (YPAR).

*Adult Support:* Elevating student voice isn't just about hearing from young people. It is about sharing power and ownership and being transparent about the process as well as the results. Make it clear that you hear students' feedback and share what you plan to do with it. Let students know how they can help or be part of the planning process. With your students, develop a survey (or adapt this sample) to better understand their perceptions of school climate, student support, and creating a sense of belonging.

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## 2. Recruit student members for the SEL team and other leadership teams.

Students need to have an authentic voice in decision-making about school events and policies that impact them, and adults need their voice to co-create equitable learning environments. Student representation on the school's SEL team, school improvement, or equity and diversity teams can be of great value to both the school and the students. While all voices are important, it is especially critical to hear from those who may feel disconnected from school as their experiences can provide a critical perspective on how to continuously improve a learning environment that supports all students, not just those who are already thriving.

*Adult Support:* Listen to youth. For some, it may be a shift to listen actively while resisting the urge to show students the "right way." Prepare adult team members to receive student input in a way that is respectful and encouraging, particularly when student feedback is critical or delivered in unconventional ways. In addition, provide students with opportunities to practice leadership skills such as public speaking and meeting facilitation. See further guidance on supporting student team members in this tool.

## 3. Encourage student-led advocacy.

Students can work with their peers around issues they care about. They can do this through clubs and activities such as a student voice committee, gay-straight alliance (GSA), peer jury, student council, or youth advisory committee. Students also need outlets to react to current events in their school, community, or the country. Finding a productive way to exercise their voice (e.g., awareness campaigns, peaceful protests) is an ideal opportunity for students to develop new skills and make an impact.

*Adult Support:* Based on a clear understanding of their concerns, help students develop the skills they need to lead, including public speaking, meeting planning, and marketing to organize and engage their peers.

## 4. Build student-centered classrooms.

Creating environments where students drive learning helps to develop problem-solving skills and prepares students for lifelong success. Schools can place students at the center of their learning by including them in decision-making about the why, what, and how of their learning experiences — shaping learning activities, making choices, and evaluating their own progress.

*Adult Support:* Support teachers to use strategies such as interactive pedagogy, classroom community building, and project-based learning to keep students at the center of learning. Establish classroom leadership roles on a rotating basis so all students have an opportunity to guide projects and classroom activities. Introduce narrative feedback as a way for students to assess their own performance and continue learning until they master a particular subject or skill.

## 5. Involve students in teaching about SEL.

In some schools, students facilitate learning around SEL or related subjects based on their interests or the needs of the school. Students may partner with another student or teacher to co-teach their peers or other grade levels. Student-led SEL can include students leading activities such as mindfulness, advisory lessons, discussions, or community-building circles. Students may also want to use social media as a mechanism to inform and educate their peers about SEL.

*Adult Support:* Prepare students to lead SEL activities by introducing them to the content, giving them options about what they want to present or facilitate, providing talking points, and engaging students in role playing or rehearsing how content will be delivered.

## 6. Establish student-led conferences.

The opportunity to prepare for and conduct their own conferences about academic, social, and emotional progress with their parents or guardians gives students a sense of ownership of the learning process and cultivates skills in communication and self-awareness (Berger et al., 2014).

*Adult Support:* Prepare students to lead conferences by having them gather work samples to review, write a reflection on their strengths and challenges, and set goals for the next quarter. Support the student in this conference by shifting from a directive role (e.g., "do it this way") to a consulting role (e.g., "let's develop a plan for improvement together").

## Quality SEL Assessment Data

**Quality SEL data is an important element of SEL and student voice/choice frameworks and can help educators and their students guide decisions about instruction and learning needs.**

One example of a popular evidence-based SEL assessment is the DESSA-SSR, as administered through Aperture Education's new Student Portal. This tool provides districts, schools, and OST programs with access to reliable student voice/choice data and accurately assesses high school students' social-emotional competence.

With Aperture's Student Portal, high school educators can quickly understand student social-emotional competence and student voice. Students immediately receive their results and personalized strategies that they can use to improve their social-emotional skills. Students can also use the platform to set personal SMART goals toward anything they want to achieve, from academic improvements to hobbies to financial savings.

# Conclusion

Schools are facing a serious problem with student engagement. Most high school students in the U.S. have negative feelings about education, and many do not see the connection between their education and future success. Giving students a say in how they learn, what they learn, and how they can work to overcome obstacles is an opportunity to improve student engagement and academic outcomes. Student voice/choice and SEL work together to help students develop agency, leadership and communication skills, and self-advocacy. When students develop a sense of ownership over their learning, they are more empowered to achieve positive outcomes.

Student voice/choice can be integrated in many ways within a school, from simple classroom activities to highly involved initiatives that address foundational school or district educational practices. SEL assessment data can enhance student voice/choice frameworks and can give students and teachers the data they need to facilitate conversations, examine strengths and areas that need improvement, and guide instruction and supports. Schools and districts can learn from other schools' programs and experiences described in this report as they get started with their own student voice/choice programs.

Aperture Education is committed to helping schools empower students through student voice/choice. Contact our SEL experts to learn more about how the DESSA and the Student Portal can strengthen your SEL and student voice/choice frameworks.

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Aperture Education empowers over 3,000 schools and out-of-school-time programs across North America to measure, strengthen, and support social and emotional competence in K-12 youth and educators. This system enables education leaders can make strategic, data-based decisions about SEL within their organizations. The Aperture system includes the DESSA suite of strength-based assessments, CASEL-informed intervention strategies, and robust reporting, all in one easy-to-use digital platform. Aperture has supported over one million students in their social and emotional growth and continues to develop innovative solutions to bring the whole child into focus. To learn more, visit www.ApertureEd.com.