

Principals Want to Know

A tip sheet for principals that focuses on practical issues faced in schools.

Drawn from existing resources, these tips are designed to support instructional leadership practice.

Issue #4 January 2011

Student Voice Initiative

The Question:

"How might we invite students to co-create environments that promote student engagement?"

The Answer:

Invite students to join the conversation about what engages them by:

1. Learning about Student Voice and the Student Voice Initiative
2. Encouraging students to apply for the Minister's Student Advisory Council (MSAC)
3. Encouraging students to apply for *SpeakUp* Projects
4. Learning about the 9 Student Voice Indicators that emerged from Regional Student Forums
5. Ordering *SpeakUp in a Box*

1. LEARN ABOUT STUDENT VOICE AND THE STUDENT VOICE INITIATIVE

Student Voice describes the many ways in which youth are encouraged to participate in school decisions that will shape their lives and the lives of their peers (Fielding, 2001, Levin, 2000).

The key goals of the Student Voice Initiative are to:

- re-engage students and close the gap in achievement for students who are not experiencing success, by learning more about how they learn and what helps them learn;
- ensure that all students feel a sense of belonging in their classrooms and in their school and are able to participate in decisions impacting on their educational experience;
- involve students meaningfully in articulating what would help to strengthen their engagement in their learning environments, in which they are required to stay until age 18 or graduation (Bill 52).

"Engagement should not be viewed simply as a precursor to academic achievement... students would likely benefit from school policies and practices that increase their sense of belonging and participation" (Willms, 2003)

The three main components of the initiative are:

1. Minister's Student Advisory Council (MSAC)
2. *SpeakUp* Projects
3. Regional Student Forums

Five questions to ask in your school:

1. What opportunities do students have for meaningful participation in their learning communities?
2. Whose voice is heard in the school?
3. Are students and educators familiar with the 9 Student Voice Indicators?
4. How might schools invite students to help co-create their learning environments?
5. Do students have an opportunity to be action research partners in examining questions about learning?

2. ENCOURAGE STUDENTS TO APPLY FOR THE MINISTER'S STUDENT ADVISORY COUNCIL (MSAC)

Sixty students in Grades 7 to 12 from across the province meet twice a year with the minister to share their ideas and perspectives and provide recommendations. Applications are available at www.ontario.ca/speakup. The 2009 MSAC cohort recommended that in order to increase student engagement in school and hear all student voices:

1. The *school culture* becomes one where students feel that they belong;
2. The *classroom culture* become one where the individual needs of all students are met;
3. Improvements be made to the curriculum (e.g. Civics, Career Studies) to encourage greater student engagement in education and learning;
4. School guidelines and policies be student driven/centered and representative of students' educational needs.



“Decades of calls for educational reform have not succeeded in making schools places where all young people want to and are able to learn. It is time to invite pupils to join the conversations about how we might accomplish that.” (Ben Levin, 2000)

3. ENCOURAGE STUDENTS TO APPLY FOR SPEAKUP PROJECT GRANTS

Over 4000 student-led *SpeakUp* projects in Grades 7 to 12, in over 900 schools, have received grants since 2008. Examples include:

1. *The Ideas Exchange: Student Education - Student Action*, a city-wide conference in an alternative education setting;
2. *Saving Our Selves* a teen health and wellness fair;
3. *IMPACT- Random acts of kindness*, a campaign to abolish bullying and create a safe school environment through positive actions.

4. LEARN ABOUT THE 9 STUDENT VOICE INDICATORS THAT EMERGED FROM REGIONAL STUDENT FORUMS

Regional Student Forums are one-day consultations with students who share ideas on how to respect all students' voices and how to strengthen their engagement in learning. The 9 Student Voice Indicators, which drive the Student Voice Initiative, emerged from Regional Forums in 2009.

In 2011, the focus for discussion will be Student Councils and how they can respect all student voices to strengthen student engagement. Delegates will be selected from a range of destinations and level of engagement (whether on council or not), student trustees, and MSAC members.

The 9 Student Voice Indicators

A school that engages students and ensures all voices are heard would:

1. Have activities outside the classroom
2. Help students learn life skills
3. Offer a socially inclusive environment
4. Be an academically inclusive environment
5. Empower students to speak their mind
6. Allow students to give feedback on learning experiences
7. Keep students informed
8. Give a high-quality education
9. Encourage eco-friendly practices

5. ORDER SPEAKUP IN A BOX

Students stated that they want to hold *SpeakUp* forums in their own schools. In response, the ministry created *SpeakUp in a Box*, which contains everything required to run a student-led forum for 30 participants. The box includes facilitator tip sheets, a step-by-step forum guide, forum supplies, and an envelope in which to submit to the ministry the big ideas generated in the forum. To order *SpeakUp in a Box*, go to www.ontario.ca/speakup.

“Students say they want opportunities to be involved, to contribute and to have self-directed learning. They say that the truest form of engagement is self-directed and led. They want creativity, integrated technology, effective student governments and effective student representation. They want a voice to communicate with their teachers constructively, in the interests of improvement.” (Andrew Pawluch, Student, 2008)



SpeakUp in a Box

REFERENCES

- Fielding, M. (2001). Beyond the rhetoric of student voice: new departures or new constraints in the transformation of 21st century schooling? *Forum* 43(2): p. 100-109.
- Levin, B. (2000). Putting Students at the Centre in Education Reform; *International Journal of Educational Change*: 1 (2), p.155-172.
- Willms, J.D. (2003). Student Engagement at School: a sense of belonging and participation: Results from PISA 2000. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development: p. 34.