

Student Voice

Schoolwide Self-Assessment

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Overview

This self-assessment tool is intended to support educators and students in assessing the student voice practices (SVPs) in their schools and identifying ways to better incorporate student voice into school decision making. It is developed based on a partnership between Search Institute, Dr. Dana Mitra of Pennsylvania State University, Dr. Samantha Holquist of Child Trends, Dr. Jerusha Conner of Villanova University, and school and district partners, which includes students, educators, and district staff. It is the product of a research study conducted to understand and capture SVPs in schools and classrooms. This self-assessment tool serves the following purposes:

- To formalize the concepts of SVPs in your school,
- To be used as a low-stake peer/self-assessment tool for strengthening SVPs in your school, and
- To be used as a formative or summative evaluation tool for assessing the structures and operationalization of SVPs in your school.



Blueprint for Schoolwide Student Voice

Based on our research findings from student and teacher surveys, interviews, focus groups, and observations, we developed a blueprint for understanding SVPs in school settings. To ensure that all students within a school have multiple opportunities to share their voice, schools should have three different structures of SVPs present in their school setting:



Speak: SVPs where students are invited by educators to provide input or feedback on school improvement efforts.



Lead: SVPs where students are given the authority by educators to make decisions on school improvement efforts.



Collaborate: SVPs where students and educators partner to make decisions on school improvement efforts.

Each structure of SVPs represents a different way in which students can participate in decision making within schools. To ensure SVPs are enabling students to participate in decision making, we highlight four criteria for operationalizing the SVP structures within schools:

- **Availability:** the extent to which the type of SVP is present in school improvement efforts,
- **Access:** the extent to which students in the school can participate in the SVP,
- **Intent:** the extent to which the reason, or motivation, behind the type of SVP is rooted in making long-term and equity-focus school improvements, and
- **Responsiveness:** the extent to which students and adults (for example, teachers, principals, vice principals) participating in an SVP make (or do not make) school improvements and inform the broader school community that a SVP contributed to school improvements.

While the criteria are separated for ease of assessing the operationalization of SVP structures, they are intricately linked to one another as they inform how the different SVP structures are being experienced by educators or students within a school setting. Within the self-assessment tool, educators and students can evaluate the structures and operationalization of SVPs in their school settings.

Instructions

The following is guidance on how to use the self-assessment tool.

- 1. Context:** Any middle or high school that is striving to involve students in school improvement efforts.
- 2. Age groups:** This tool was developed based on the experiences of middle and high school students and their educators. It is designed for students and educators learning and working in middle and high schools.
- 3. Read the success and misdirection stories:** For each structure of SVPs, we highlight a success and misdirection story from our research. These stories were collected through focus groups, interviews, and surveys with students and educators. These stories were slightly changed to protect the confidentiality of the students and educators. Each success story represents an example of how a SVP within a structure was effectively implemented to support student voice in school decision making. Each misdirection story provides an example of how a SVP within a structure could have been better implemented to support student voice in school decision making.
- 4. Review the items and rate:** We recommend that you spend some time getting acquainted with the self-assessment tool before you start the observation and rating. Some people find it helpful to rate through ongoing conversation with students and educators and observation of SVPs; others like to rate the whole self-assessment tool when conversations and observations are finished. You may choose to pilot it beforehand to get yourself familiarized.
- 5. Rating scale:** The rating scale is 1 (Doesn't Exist) to 5 (Embedded); we provide specific descriptions for each score 1, 3, 5. You may find that sometimes your SVPs are above the lower score but not yet reaching the higher one. If you find yourself in between rating scores (i.e., 3 and 5), it is perfectly fine to rate a behavior as a 4. If you find an item is not applicable, check N/A.
- 6. Note-taking:** You may use the blank space at the end of each row to take notes and provide rationale for scoring. We have found it helpful especially for sharing the results with your peers or for improvement purposes.
- 7. Total score:** A summary of the scores is available at the end of each SVP structure and overall.

- 8. Reflection:** Within each SVP structure section, we include examples of successful SVPs and misdirections of the SVPs. We also include recommendation questions to help identify strengths and area for improvement within each SVP structure.





Speak

SVPs where students are invited by educators to provide input or feedback on school improvement efforts. Prior to assessing your Speak SVPs, review success and misdirection stories of how middle and high schools have designed and implemented Speak SVPs. The total score for this structure can range from 4 (Doesn't Exist) to 20 (Embedded).

Success Story:

Quiana, a middle school principal, sent out a survey via email to all students. But, it was not filled out by the majority of the students. The results of her survey were important. With her leadership team, she was planning on using the results to inform different ways to make the school community more inclusive. She particularly wanted to hear from students who she had limited engagement with, or students who had other obligations that prevent them from having a strong relationship with her.

Due to the low response rate, Quiana decided to change her approach. In collaboration with the student council, she posted the survey to the school instagram account, which received much more engagement. She held office hours for students who wanted to directly speak to her about changes they wanted. She put a suggestion box outside of her office for students who wanted to share their ideas, but didn't want to directly speak with her or take a survey. Finally, Quiana held a schoolwide assembly to spotlight how she planned to make schoolwide changes to let the students know she was taking their input seriously.

In partnership with her leadership team, Quiana used information collected from the survey, office hours, and suggestion box to identify changes to make the school community more inclusive. During a schoolwide assembly, she shared the changes with the students and detailed how their input informed the changes.

Misdirection Story:

Rebecca, a high school student, shared that their school primarily offered two types of student voice practices: long surveys and one-on-one conversations with administrators. They found that these practices were very time intensive for very limited benefit. Rebecca felt like their administrators very rarely took action based on student input and, therefore, it was pointless to continue to engage in student voice practices offered by their school. Rebecca shared that administrators would need to directly reach out to them if they wanted further input into decisions. Because administrators did not share how student input was used to make decisions, Rebecca lost trust in their school's student voice practices.

	1	3	5		
Criteria	Doesn't Exist	Emerging	Embedded	Score	Notes
Availability	Opportunities for students to provide feedback on school improvement efforts do not exist. ¹	Students are given the opportunity to provide feedback but are limited to 1 to 2 avenues (e.g., surveys, listening sessions, office hours, suggestion box).	Students are given the opportunity to provide feedback through 3 or more avenues.		
Access	Opportunities to provide feedback on school improvement are not accessible for all students.	Opportunities to provide feedback on school improvement are marketed to all students, without active efforts to address barriers faced by historically marginalized groups of students.	Opportunities to provide feedback on school improvement are marketed to all students. Students who have been historically marginalized are prioritized in accessing these opportunities.		
Intent	Opportunities are not intended to lead to school improvement changes.	Opportunities tend to focus on short-term or time bound school improvement changes (e.g., facilities updates, budgeting, clubs, events).	Opportunities tend to focus on long-term, equity-focused school improvement changes (e.g., discipline policies, dress code, hiring policies).		
Responsiveness	The broader school community is not informed about changes that were made to support school improvement based on student feedback.	The broader school community is rarely informed about changes that were made to support school improvement based on student feedback.	The broader school community is regularly informed about changes that were made to support school improvement based on student feedback.		
Speak SVPs Total					

¹ If Speak SVP opportunities are not available in a school, then the school would score a 1 on access, intent, and responsiveness.



Lead

SVPs where students are given the authority by educators to make decisions on school improvement efforts. Prior to assessing your Lead SVPs, review success and misdirection stories of how middle and high schools have designed and implemented Lead SVPs. The total score for this structure can range from 4 (Doesn't Exist) to 20 (Embedded).

Success Story:

John, a high school teacher, served as a schoolwide trainer to foster opportunities for students to grow their leadership skills. He believes student leadership is essential to improving educational equity and building inclusive environments. Since he has started, John has noted that there has been a large uptick in students involved in leadership roles and students creating their own groups within the school, particularly amongst students who do not historically serve in leadership roles within the school. In his role, John meets with representatives from the student groups, provides training to the student leaders, runs a newsletter to highlight student accomplishments, and supports the students in navigating making changes to improve the school.

On one occasion, John supported a coalition of student groups in reviewing the school's discipline policies to identify inequitable practices. The student groups identified several areas for revision and asked the study body for suggestions on how they would improve these areas of the school's policy. After getting feedback from students, the student groups presented their suggested revisions to the school's administration to make changes. School administrators then worked with the students to implement the changes.

Misdirection Story:

Kristine, a middle school student, is involved with the student voice group at her school. The group is tasked with reviewing school policies and practices, collecting feedback from fellow students about the policies and practices, and recommending revisions to school administrators. However, after serving as a student leader within the group for a year, Kristine left the group. She felt that administrators did not care about their recommendations.

For example, the student voice group made many recommendations for how to make transition time between classes longer to allow students sufficient time to get to class. However, the recommendations were consistently vetoed by administrators and many students faced several disciplinary consequences for being late to class. When vetoing student recommendations, administrators did not provide ideas for how recommendations could be improved.

While there was a student voice group, Kristine was discouraged by administrators' unwillingness to engage with the students' recommendations and make changes to improve the school.

	1	3	5		
Criteria	Doesn't Exist	Emerging	Embedded	Score	Notes
Availability	Opportunities for students to take on leadership roles and responsibilities (e.g., student government, student-led clubs, student advisory boards) within school improvement efforts do not exist. ²	Students are given opportunities to lead, but are limited to 1 to 2 opportunities per year.	Students are given 3 or more opportunities to lead.		
Access	Opportunities for students to take on leadership roles and responsibilities are not accessible for students.	Opportunities for students to take on leadership roles and responsibilities are somewhat accessible. Students who haven't served in student leadership positions before or youth who have been historically marginalized may have difficulty accessing opportunities.	Opportunities for students to take on leadership roles and responsibilities are accessible to all students. Students who have been historically marginalized are prioritized in accessing these opportunities.		
Intent	Opportunities are not intended to lead to school improvement changes.	Opportunities tend to focus on short-term or time bound school improvement changes (e.g., facilities updates, budgeting, clubs, events).	Opportunities tend to focus on long-term, equity-focused school improvement changes (e.g., discipline policies, dress code, hiring policies).		

² If Lead SVP opportunities are not available in a school, then the school would score a 1 on access, intent, and responsiveness.

	1	3	5		
Criteria	Doesn't Exist	Emerging	Embedded	Score	Notes
Responsiveness	The broader school community is not informed about changes that were made to support school improvement based on student leadership.	The broader school community is rarely informed about changes that were made to support school improvement based on student leadership.	The broader school community is regularly informed about changes that were made to support school improvement based on student leadership.		
Lead SVPs Total					



Collaborate

SVPs where students and educators partner to make decisions on school improvement efforts. Prior to assessing your Collaborate SVPs, review success and misdirection stories of how middle and high schools have designed and implemented Collaborate SVPs. The total score for this structure can range from 4 (Doesn't Exist) to 20 (Embedded).

Success Story:

Ben, a high school student, shared how a group of students in his school advocated for a decision-making role for students on their school site council, which was similar to an advisory board for the school. The council met monthly to make recommendations for school programs and initiatives (e.g., curriculum changes, teacher training). The council was made up of two school administrators, two teachers, two school staff, and two parents, but lacked student representation. Parents often protested students being involved on the council. Parents felt that they were representing the needs of their students.

After several years of advocating for student representation, administrators agreed to allow students to join the council. Students collaborated with administrators to rewrite the bylaws so it was mandatory to have at least two student representatives elected by the student body and rotated yearly. They also made it mandatory for the council to share their work in a monthly newsletter to the school community.

As part of the council, Ben highlighted how students have supported revisions to school dress code policies and informed changes to school transportation policies based on student challenges. While students struggled to hold equal power in the space, they strove to collaborate with adults to improve the school.

Misdirection Story:

Lorena, a high school teacher, served on her school committee to revise their social studies curriculum over the summer. The committee was made up of four students, four teachers, two school administrators, and two district administrators. Lorena shared that there were a lot of challenges with the power dynamics between youth and adults within the committee. Students would often recommend changes to the curriculum (e.g., different books, new lessons), but adults would ignore their ideas. Over time, Lorena noticed that the students stopped sharing their ideas. Lorena felt that the students were frustrated with the committee. As a newer teacher, she didn't feel like she had the power to intervene when adults were ignoring students' ideas.

When collaborating with students in decision making, it is important to address the power dynamic between adults and students. Students need to be collaborators and a key part of decision-making processes. Otherwise, they may feel like their voice does not matter. In collaborative spaces, students and adults should be on the same page about what co-leading decisions looks like.

	1	3	5		
Criteria	Doesn't Exist	Emerging	Embedded	Score	Notes
Availability	Opportunities for students to collaborate with adults in school improvement do not exist. ³	Students are given opportunities to collaborate, but are limited to 1 to 2 opportunities per year.	Students are given 3 or more opportunities to collaborate.		
Access	Opportunities for students to collaborate with adults in school improvement are not accessible for all students.	Opportunities for students to collaborate with adults in school improvement are somewhat accessible. Students who haven't served in student leadership positions before or youth who have been historically marginalized may have difficulty accessing opportunities.	Opportunities for students to collaborate with adults in school improvement are accessible to all students. Students who have been historically marginalized are prioritized in accessing these opportunities.		
Intent	Opportunities are not intended to lead to school improvement changes.	Opportunities tend to focus on short-term or time bound school improvement changes (e.g., facilities updates, budgeting, clubs, events).	Opportunities tend to focus on long-term, equity-focused school improvement changes (e.g., discipline policies, dress code, hiring policies).		

³ If Collaborate SVP opportunities are not available in a school, then the school would score a 1 on access, intent, and responsiveness.

	1	3	5		
Criteria	Doesn't Exist	Emerging	Embedded	Score	Notes
Responsiveness	The broader school community is not informed about changes that were made (or not made) to support school improvement based on student collaboration.	The broader school community is rarely informed about changes that were made (or not made) to support school improvement based on student collaboration.	The broader school community is regularly informed about changes that were made (or not made) to support school improvement based on student collaboration.		
Collaborate SVPs Total					



Overall Schoolwide Student Voice Practices

To ensure that all students within a school have multiple opportunities to share their voice, schools should have three different structures of SVPs present in their school setting. The total score across all the structures can range from 12 (Doesn't Exist) to 60 (Embedded).

SVP Structure	Score
Speak SVPs Total	
Lead SVPs Total	
Collaborate SVPs Total	
Overall SVPs Total	

Reflection

The following questions are meant to help identify strengths and areas for improvement for your schoolwide SVPs. As a reminder, the total score across all the structures can range from 12 (Doesn't Exist) to 60 (Embedded).

- What is your overall score? ____
- Based on your score, list three SVPs within your school that highlight why you gave that score. For each SVP, write the strengths and how it can be expanded or improved to encourage more student voice. If you're close to a 60, have you still listed any areas of improvement?
- What steps can you take to sustain SVPs in your school?
- How does your speaking, leading and collaborating scores relate to one another?



Diving Deeper into Each SVP Structure

The following questions are meant to help you dive deeper into specific SVP structures where you may want to help identify strengths and areas for improvement for your schoolwide SVPs. As a reminder, the total score within each structure can range from 4 (Doesn't Exist) to 20 (Embedded).



Speak SVPs

What is your speaking score? ____

- Based on your score, list three SVPs within your school that highlight why you gave that score for speaking. For each SVP, write the strengths and how it can be expanded or improved to encourage more student voice. If you're close to a 20, have you still listed any areas of improvement?
- What steps can you take to sustain speaking SVPs in your school?
- How does your speaking score relate to your leading and collaborating scores?



Lead SVPs

What is your leading score? ____

- Based on your score, list three SVPs within your school that highlight why you gave that score for leading. For each SVP, write the strengths and how it can be expanded or improved to encourage more student voice. If you're close to a 20, have you still listed any areas of improvement?
- What steps can you take to sustain leading SVPs in your school?
- How does your leading score relate to your speaking and collaborating scores?



Collaborate SVPs

What is your collaborating score? ____

- Based on your score, list three SVPs within your school that highlight why you gave that score for collaborating. For each SVP, write the strengths and how it can be expanded or improved to encourage more student voice. If you're close to a 20, have you still listed any areas of improvement?
- What steps can you take to sustain collaborating SVPs in your school?
- How does your collaborating score relate to your leading and speaking scores?