

# WE THE STUDENTS

*Education Should be Accountable to Students*

STUDENT  VOICE

The first step to creating a space for student voice:  
How to host your own Student Voice Session

# STUDENT VOICE

Dear Student Voice Organizers and Ambassadors,

Thank you for agreeing to help unleash the power of student voice in your community. The importance of your leadership on this issue cannot be understated. Our education system is not responsive to its most populous stakeholder, the students. We are in the classroom 35 hours a week and see things that we know our teachers and our administrators do not. It's time that students across the country become more than just passive consumers of the education system but instead active agents in improving them.

Arranging, conducting, recording, and transcribing conversations with student groups about their experience in and opinions of the education system is an important part of the Student Voice National Tour. By doing this you will help us ensure student perspectives inform education policy discussions. This packet contains directions on how to host your own Student Voice Session.

The goals of the Student Voice National Tour are to:

1. Challenge the status quo by engaging, amplifying, and elevating a diverse set of student experiences and perspectives, and
2. Support students in self-initiated school improvement.

To that end, these Student Voice Sessions are an essential tool. They are designed to help us collect a range of stories that represent what it means to be an American student today and prompt participants to think more critically about how they can make their schools better.

We are excited to get going and hope you will read through this packet carefully. We want to reach as many students as possible through this movement and it's an understatement to say that we couldn't do it without you.

**Andrew Brennen**  
National Field Director  
Student Voice  
(770) 595-7894  
[andrew@stuvoice.org](mailto:andrew@stuvoice.org)

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# Before You Proceed

Before you go any further, we want to make sure you know why the Student Voice Sessions you've agreed to host are so important. You are truly helping lead a movement to rethink the role of students in education.

## What does Student Voice mean?

“Student voice is any expression of any learner anywhere, anytime focused on learning, schools, or education. This can include, but isn't limited to, active or passive participation, knowledge, voting, wisdom, activism, beliefs, service, opinions, leadership, and ideas. Student voice reflects identity and comes from a person's experiences, ideals, and knowledge. Student voice is the individual and collective perspective and actions of young people within the context of learning and education.”

Adam Fletcher, Executive Director, Sound Out

## Why is Student Voice important?

“Now is the time to allow students a platform to share their perspectives. Doing so will increase student buy-in, which will ultimately lead to increased student achievement. We know from personal experience that when students feel their time spent in school is productive and that they can make real, visible changes within their schools, they put more effort into their learning. But this isn't just supposition. If you ask any student when they felt most interested in their school, we bet we can predict their response. It's when they were involved, as a partner, in both the design and implementation of lessons that appealed to real world problems.

Psychologists Alfred Bandura and Mary Gist call this belief in one's ability to do something 'self-efficacy'. According to them, an increase in self-efficacy is associated with an increase in buy-in and performance. In the context of the education system, students must feel that they are important to the school and that the school is important to them. Self-efficacy correlates with high expectations and internal locus of control. If adults respect and seriously consider the feedback of students and allow students a greater degree of control over what happens at school, student self-efficacy will increase, as will their motivation and academic achievement.”

Andrew Brennen, National Field Director, Student Voice

## What is the Student Bill of Rights?

“The Student Bill of Rights is a list of twelve rights that we, at Student Voice, feel all students should have in their schools and serves as a new and student-driven set of qualitative standards. In doing so, it will certify that all students are a part of implementing improved opportunities to achieve their desired educational outcomes.

The Student Bill of Rights program’s purpose is to provide a framework for the development and advancement of student voice as a systemic part of the education system. The implementation of this program will serve to cultivate deeper learning core competencies among students from learning to think critically to solve complex problems to communicating effectively.”

Max Richter, Director of School Partnerships, Student Voice

## Why are Student Voice Sessions so important?

“Students in school are rarely given the opportunity to think critically about policies that so directly affect them both now and in the future. In high school, I knew so many things about my school that I was sure my teachers and the administration did not know. I knew how kids could cheat without getting caught, where people would fight without risking suspension, and why people kept drawing things on the bathroom stall door.

Student Voice’s mission is to tap into and otherwise untapped resource in students and to engage them as more than just passive consumers of their schools but active agents in designing their learning environments. These Student Voice Sessions are the first step in making that mission a reality.”

Andrew Brennen

# How to Prepare

Student Voice Sessions are at the heart of what we do at Student Voice. The stories we collect propel the majority of our advocacy, storytelling, presentations, and publications throughout the year. Here are some things to prepare before you host your own session.

1. Arrange for a group of 3-6 students of the same age group (from elementary school through college) to sit down with you for one hour of recorded conversation. These students can be from a school, youth development organization, church, sports teams, or just your friends.
2. Before the session, ask each of the students to visit [StuRights.org](https://StuRights.org) and vote on the Student Bill of Rights. Ask students to remember which rights they select as most important to them and be prepared to discuss why.
3. Be sure you have a good recording app on your phone and test out your ability to record quality audio in advance by verbally labelling the roundtable with your name, the date of the conversation, and the setting.
4. Decide on a topic or theme for your session. You could choose a few of the rights in the Student Bill of Rights to focus on.
5. Prepare a set of questions to help guide your through the discussion. Feel free to sway from your prepared questions if the conversation leads that direction but have the questions as a back up.
6. Do some background research. Find out the general demographics of your school district and identify some areas where student voice has, or hasn't, affected change in your community. Find some statistics on various education issues that interest you.
7. Be sure to print out enough copies of the media release for your session and if possible, distribute them to participants ahead of time for parent signature.

# How to Facilitate

Here are some steps to follow in facilitating your Student Voice Session. Follow as many as these steps as you can; doing so will help ensure we can amplify the voices you collect as far and wide as possible.

1. Begin by collecting signed media release forms. Keep track of who has their media release forms and who doesn't. Follow up after the session to collect forms from students who don't have them.
2. Next, ask each student to introduce themselves and to self-identify by saying and spelling their name, grade, school, preferred pronouns, if they choose to, ethnic affiliation, and how they do in school academically in a one or two words.
3. Explain who you are and why you're there. Possible script: "My name is \_\_\_\_\_ and I'm here today to listen to what you have to say about education. What you say today will be amplified as part of a larger discussion and movement to let adult educators and policymakers know the American student experience from the perspective of students themselves"
4. Begin the conversation by asking students to participate in an activity. For example, you could ask them to evaluate the inclusion and valuing of student voice in their school and community on a 1 to 10 scale and explain their answer.
5. Next, dive into your prepared questions.
6. Listen carefully to the responses and try to ask some follow-up questions to indicate that you are hearing what is being said and to prompt deeper thought and discussion.
7. When possible, call the name of the student who wishes to respond to indicate on the audio who is speaking.
8. Ask the group if you can take a candid shot of them talking to each other—or get someone else to do it for you—so that we can better document the discussion for later presentations.
9. Take an individual, clear, and candid photo of each student participating.
10. Thank everyone for their time and encourage students to join the weekly #StuVoice Twitter chats every Monday night at 8:30 EST and reach out to Student Voice directly if they are interested in getting further involved.

# What to do After

Now that you've completed your Student Voice Session you'll need to digest it, summarize the conversation, and find salient quotes and student stories. Then you'll need to send those quotes and stories to Student Voice so we can share them with our national audience. Follow these steps to elevate and amplify the voices you've collected.

1. Transcribe your audio as soon as you can. However, you don't need to write down everything. Only transcribe comments that summarize the sentiments of the students during the Session or are particularly impactful stories. Aim to collect three to five solid quotes from each student. Make sure to identify them by name, grade, and school.
2. Scan each of the signed media release forms.
3. Email individual student pictures labeled by name, transcripts saved in a word document, and media releases to [Student Voice](#).
4. Consider writing a reflection on your session and including quotes from the students. These reflections may be posted on the Student Voices blog or you could submit it to your local paper. For help in writing a follow-up reflection contact our Director of Public Relations [Tess Harkin](#).
5. Thank all participants via email and share any recap materials produced by yourself or provided by Student Voice.
6. File away the signed media releases in a safe place.
7. Conduct more Sessions as desired.



# Tips for Facilitating

Facilitating is a learned skill; getting the hang of how and when to ask the right questions isn't easy. It's important to create a conducive space for students to think critically about school. Follow some of these quick tips for better facilitation.

- Sessions are more effective if you have a list of general topics in mind to ask about instead of fully written questions. However, you should prepare a set of questions to break the ice.
- Your first question should be open enough to get the students going. A good example: "Tell me a story where you experienced something in school that you think your teachers or administrators weren't aware of."
- Allow silence to work for you. Don't feel as though you need to talk. Often, people are thinking.
- Be a good listener. Make eye contact, nod your head, and smile to show you're listening.
- Ask for students to define and explain terms that are unclear and could be misinterpreted. Don't just assume that everyone is on the same page.
- Be flexible. Watch for and pick up on promising topics introduced by the group, even if you weren't planning to discuss the topic. Use these leads to shape follow up questions that dig deeper.
- Remember that practice makes perfect. The interrogative and communication skills gained through roundtable facilitation and participation are essential for success in the 21st century economy.

# Sample Questions

Over the next few pages, we've included questions based on each of the twelve rights in the Student Bill of Rights. You can use these questions for a roundtable on a specific right or as a starting point for questions of your own. Even though we've divided these up based on rights, mix and match questions from different rights as you see fit.

**The recording of ordinary lives is  
an act that enlarges democracy.**

**Studs Terkel**

# Access and Affordability

There are an incredible amount of education tools and resources developed for classroom use—but not all students have access to these tools which are increasingly essential to success. Additionally, the cost of higher education is skyrocketing. According to the Department of Education, over the past three decades, tuition at four-year colleges has more than doubled, even after adjusting for inflation. Students aren't able to take advantage of tools that exist that would better their education, leading to achievement gaps and students unable to reach their full potential.

Below are some questions that should spark discussions exploring this topic:

- Do you think your school or school system is underfunded? What equipment, materials, or facilities do you seem to chronically lack, especially in comparison to other schools?
- How does the cost of higher education affect your future decisions and life plans?
- Are you aware of the different financial aid programs for higher education?
- What obstacles have you faced in the application and decision making process for college, especially if you're a first generation college student?



# Civic Participation

As a society, we value individuals who are highly engaged in current events and the political process, but we do a poor job of fostering these same values in schools. Schools should facilitate student involvement in the larger community and society. Not only does this promote growth of citizenship, but it shows this real-life usage of skills learned in school and of relevance to in-school education.

Below are some questions that should spark discussions exploring this topic:

- How often do you talk or learn about current events in your school? Do you think students should be informed about current events through school?
- What does good citizenship mean to you and how do we foster it from a young age?
- Do you feel involved and engaged with your local community? Would you like to be more involved? Do you know how to be?



# Diversity and Inclusivity

Classrooms should be a place where every student feels included, encouraged, and welcomed. As this generation faces rapid cultural and demographic change, schools need to support new and minority populations that are traditionally underserved. Students systematically face discrimination on the basis of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation. Creating inclusive environments not only ensures everyone has a good education experience but also instills positive values of equality and acceptance into students at a young age.

Below are some questions that should spark discussions exploring this topic:

- Have you faced or witness discrimination or harassment based on race, class, gender, or sexual orientation? Did you report this to school authorities or officials? Did they respond well?
- Do you feel that your school's curriculum is inclusive?
- What do you think a multicultural education is? Does your school have it?
- What can students, teachers, and administrators do to promote a more inclusive environment?





# Due Process

The right to due process is one of the most valued rights in the US Constitution, but students often don't receive this right in their school systems. Students should be informed of the consequences to their actions, have the ability to defend themselves, and have consequences suitable for their infringements. In some states that is often not happening: 64% of Massachusetts' over 85,000 in school suspensions were for "non-violent, non criminal, and nondrug offenses," like dress code violations or acts of disrespect. Additionally, student complaints of bullying or harassment should be investigated and taken seriously by school officials.

Below are some questions that should spark discussions exploring this topic:

- If a student is accused of an offense by a teacher or another student, does the administration have a formalized process for dealing with it?
- Are detentions and other punishments distributed in a way that seem arbitrary or unevenly?
- If a student's rights are infringed, is the administration responsive and proactive to complaints or concerns?



# Employability

The purpose of school seems to be to develop lifelong skills that will prepare students for employment, higher education, and living in a digital age. But that's not always happening. In 2013, 39% of employers participating in the Talent Shortage Survey reported difficulty filling jobs due to lack of available talent. Employers persistently claim it's hard to find workers who can make the most of new technologies. Similar surveys show that emerging populations of young working individuals lack the "21st century" skills needed to be productive in their fields.

Below are some questions that should spark discussions exploring this topic:

- What do you think is the ultimate purpose of high school?
- What do you think should be the ultimate purpose of high school?
- What do you envision yourself doing to support yourself a decade from now, and what are you preparing to do, if anything, to make that happen?
- In what ways is your school, if any, supporting you to realize the future you see for yourself?
- Are there other things you think your school should be doing now to help ensure that you are able to support yourself in the future? Please explain.
- Are there things your school should stop doing now to prepare you for your future?
- How might student voice in education help students become more ready for the workforce and more employable?



# Fair Assessment

Assessments should accurately measure a student's learning and achievement, ensuring we deliver on the promise of education. But current standardized testing environment often creates achievement disparities amongst different populations of students, for example, only half as many students with learning differences (such as dyslexia) score average or better on standard assessments than students without learning differences. And these types of assessments encourage students to trade off learning real world skills with learning to be just be good test taker. Assessments should evaluate students holistically, in ways similar to real-life evaluations, and in a way that respects and supports students as unique learners.

Below are some questions that should spark discussions exploring this topic:

- What is the purpose of school for a student your age?
- What should be the purpose of school for a student your age?
- What are some of the ways you are assessed as a student in your school? Describe some of the ways you are graded.
- Generally speaking, do you feel your assessments are an accurate measure of your abilities? Do they accurately reflect what you are being tested on?
- Do you think your school measures the right things when it comes to assessing you as a student? If so, please elaborate. If not, please describe some other aspects of your abilities you think should also be measured or measured instead.
- What do you think about the way your school values GPA and class ranking?
- If you were an administrator or faculty member with influence in your school, what, if anything, would you do differently when it comes to assessments?





# Free Expression

Free Expression is key to a high quality educational experience because it encourages individuals to communicate, learn from others, and critically think about a variety of issues. It also allows the opportunity for students to give insightful and detailed thoughts on school experiences and improvements. However, student expression is often discouraged and limited through bullying, censorship, dress codes, or adult condescension.

Below are some questions that should spark discussions exploring this topic:

- Why is it important to have free expression? What does free expression mean to you?
- Where is the line between offensive expression and free expression? How could teachers and administrators help regulate that line?
- How should teachers facilitate and support classroom discussion?
- If your school has a newspaper or magazine, have certain issues or viewpoints been censored by your school administration?
- What issues do you wish your school community would discuss more but often doesn't?
- How do social norms and pressure effect free expression?



# Information and Privacy

As technology and social media usage increasingly intersects with education, student information once viewed as private is being tracked and shared with school authorities and beyond. Increased monitoring is used to prove charges against a student under investigation, and help prevent or intervene in cyberbullying and suicides. Federal law allows “schools [to] share student data, without notifying parents, with companies to which they have outsourced core functions like scheduling or data management.” But often when schools investigate or share student’s information there is little transparency and control over these acts.

Below are some questions that should spark discussions exploring this topic:

- Do you think administrators should have access to a student’s in-school internet history and school email account?
- Should administrators look at student’s social media accounts, even if they are “private”?
- Under what circumstances should officials have access to this information? Should there be an official process for requesting access to this information?
- Do you know what your current school policy is on social media access? Is there a policy?
- What data does your school collect about you? Do you know if this information is outsourced or shared with outside companies?



# Institutional Agency

Students should be able to have active involvement in creating meaningful school policy and systems. After all, not only are students the primary beneficiaries of school, but students know what's working and not working in schools before anyone else does. Giving students increased agency has been linked to greater achievement levels, classroom engagement, self-reflection, and preparation. However, forty-five states do not provide students with full voting rights on their local and statewide boards of education. Student government bodies and councils are often perceived as ineffective, tokenistic, and only representative of certain groups in the school, if they even exist.

Below are some questions that should spark discussions exploring this topic:

- Do you feel like students have a voice in your school? What can students impact?
- Does you ever take surveys or are asked to give feedback?
- Is the amount of voice you have different in the classroom versus the school as a whole?
- Is there student representation on the county level?
- Is your current student council effective?
- Do you feel that current student representation is fair and diverse?
- Do you know how decisions are made in your school?
- Does the administration communicate effectively with the student population?
- How could you increase student voice in your own school?



# Personal Learning

Standardized education and an impersonal learning environment often lets students fall through the cracks. Students with learning differences often have difficulty with scantron tests. Students without strong mentors are neglected and never pushed to succeed more. And students are disengaged both from the material they are learning and their school community. Personal learning involves supporting students as individuals first, customizing education to the needs and interests of each student. This often involves different methods of teaching, such as project or problem-based learning.

Below are some questions that should spark discussions exploring this topic:

- Do you know if your school offers specific programs for students with learning differences? How is your school supporting these students?
- Do you feel like you have a mentor who can support you in academic endeavors?
- How could schools provide more personalized help for a student? Do school counselors effectively fill this role?
- Do you think certain students are encouraged and paid more attention than others?
- In what instances do you get to have choice or personalize the material you are learning or researching about? How did that affect your engagement?



# Safety and Well Being

Students must first be safe and healthy in school for learning to happen successfully, and the wellness problems communities face vary widely from place to place. Still, these issues are under-addressed, under-funded, and often ignored or dismissed across the board. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's most recent Youth Risk Behavior Survey, more students than ever before feel unsafe in school, and 19 percent report being bullied at school. Students also face issues of physical and sexual assault, violent victimization, mental health, and inadequate nutrition. Schools need to play a bigger role in ensuring students have security of person, good health, and social-emotional wellbeing.

Below are some questions that should spark discussions exploring this topic:

- Have you ever felt unsafe at school? If yes, when and what, if anything, was done to help remedy the situation?
- What are some common reasons you or those you know have felt unsafe at school?
- How does school impact your social and emotional well being positively? How does school impact your social and emotional well being negatively?
- What can schools and students do to help improve and protect the physical mental and emotional safety and wellbeing of its students?
- How does your school encourage physical wellness (i.e. exercise and a balanced diet)?





# Technology

Whether students want to run for office, run a business, or change how things are run where they live, work, or play, they must be savvy users of technology. Schools have to prepare students for a connected digital world. That can only be done effectively if they have access to these resources in their school environment and feel empowered to responsibly use technology and social media. Students should feel comfortable with using any software that they need to complete an assignment in order to prepare for the world outside of the classroom.

Below are some questions that should spark discussions exploring this topic:

- What technology do you think is important for students to know how to use to be prepared for life after high school?
- Do you feel like your school teaches you how to use technology?
- How could your school better teach you how to use technology?
- Do you have access to up-to-date technology both at home and in school? What technology does your school provide you with?



# STUDENT VOICE, INC. MEDIA CONSENT RELEASE FORM

I, \_\_\_\_\_, give my permission to use (CIRCLE EACH)  
Student Name

Photographs

Video

Audio

Quotes and Stories

for publicity or educational purposes by Student Voice, Inc. . I understand that all materials will remain the property of Student Voice, Inc. , and I am not entitled to any compensation or payment for their use.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Student Signature if student is over 18 years-old

\_\_\_\_\_  
Parent Signature if student is under 18 years-old

\_\_\_\_\_  
Student Email