



The Importance of Student Voice

Student board representatives contribute to meaningful school change

Dr. Michelle McGrath

A lot of you are reading this article are probably thinking that I could not possibly be writing about your district. Your districts have had student voice and representation on your boards for years. In fact, 155 school districts in Wisconsin do. What is alarming, however, is that only 155 districts out of the 421 in Wisconsin consider student voice a priority. And of those 155 school districts, only 20 of them invest resources for their students to get trained to be effective, engaged representatives.

I have the opportunity to speak with hundreds of school board members and superintendents across

Wisconsin. What I hear from them often is this: we need student representatives that are effective communicators, collaborative, and self-advocates — students who give true voice that reflects the student body, not a student who merely reports out a calendar of activities.

However, there is a missing link — the investment from districts to provide students the opportunity to get the necessary training needed to serve in an engaged, impactful way. Wisconsin schools have traditionally pioneered amazing educational reform. Now is the time to stop settling for mediocre and pioneer a new route for student representatives.

Why Student Voice?

The most current research provides measurable data that shows the positive impact student voice has on a multitude of educational outcomes. Research shows that student voice is more than making students feel important and giving them a seat at the school board table; it is an approach to school improvement that makes the learning environment engaging, relevant, meaningful and more productive.

A recent Harvard study suggests that student voice may be as critical to outcomes of school as basic academic skills (*Ferguson, et al., 2015*).

According to Russ Quaglia,

executive director of Quaglia Institute for School Voice & Aspirations, “Student Voice is an opportunity that you can’t afford to ignore. It is more than gathering students’ feedback on an annual survey, through token committee positions, at a special event, or in response to a crisis. It is embracing students’ opinions and ideas as the cornerstone of school improvement efforts. When students have a voice, they are seven times more likely to be motivated to learn and eight times more likely to experience engagement in learning.

■ Which States are Leading the Charge?

California is leading the charge with investing in their student representatives on school boards.

Sandi Kurland, executive director for the California Association of Student Leaders (CASL), said, “A recent study observed California schools of varied demographics and found differences in achievement gaps can often be mediated by addressing opportunity gaps on campus. Thus, the role of a student board representative becomes the connection between the campus and

the school board to expand the leadership base at the school, communicate with other leaders, represent all groups and connect the voice of the unheard.”

California quickly realized that student board representatives also needed opportunities to learn and grow in order to become an effective voice on the school board. Student board representatives now attend a leadership training strand facilitated by CASL at the California School Board Association’s annual education conference in which they are taught leadership skills and understand the governance process of school boards in order to become the most effective student voice. Since they started this movement six years ago, California has seen student board representatives go from giving a report on the events on their campus, to becoming the true voice of the student needs, challenges, and vision for their school.

■ How Does Wisconsin Rank?

There are only a handful of schools in Wisconsin that continue to make an investment in their student leaders and are seeing incredible change because of that investment. The Howard-Suamico School



Student councils, like the the Bay Port High School Student Council (pictured above), can help encourage students to make their voice heard.

WASC Training Opportunities for Students

Leadership Institute – October 14-15, Wisconsin Dells

This program is a must for elected student officers such as board representatives and other leaders in your schools, including your teachers. We’ve collaborated with key researchers like Russ Quaglia and the National Association of Secondary School Principals to launch with your students a student voice program. This program will teach students about how to effectively gather insight from students and create an action plan for success — Addressing the: Wows, Wonders, Whys, What’s Next for your school community. We also welcome, Andrew McPeak — the co-author of “Marching off the Map” — a collaborative book with Tim Elmore addressing the importance of connecting with Generation Z and how to create a positive school culture where students are engaged and empowered.

Extensive Training for Student Representatives

In the month of June, the WASC provides four extensive training programs for student leaders. Our three-day experience, Project Delta, and our five-day experiences. Students dive deeper into concepts like civility, listening, communication, and collaboration. They participate in activities that allow them to experience how to maneuver into environments with unwritten rules, participate in conversations with people of differing opinions, and prepare proposals for a panel of experts using collaboration, advocacy and communication skills. And these are just a few!

To learn more about programs at the WASC, please visit wasc.org.

District is one of them. Not only are they setting the bar for student voice, but also, utilizing the resources of the Wisconsin Association of School Councils (WASC) to make sure their student leaders are trained to meet the needs of their important roles as leaders.

According to Damian LaCroix, superintendent, “The student representative to the board of education has benefited the Howard-Suamico School District greatly for years. Students are the primary beneficiaries of board-related efforts and having them trained is the hinge piece of their leadership.”

The Adams-Friendship School District is another district that stands out in Wisconsin for best practice in training their student leaders. Scott Willis, Adams-Friendship advisor to the student board representatives said, “Our school board representative is an intricate part of change in our district. Investing in their training

is an essential piece. Having them attend WASC events has made all the difference.”

■ So, Will You Blaze a New Trail?

Blazing a new trail will certainly be a collaborative effort and one that will include organizations, like the WASC, to push the needle forward. The WASC has been fortunate enough to collaborate with some of the most distinguished, forward thinking researchers on student voice from across the country. Our programs reflect not only their work but best practice from educators around the world. We are dedicated to teaching students the necessary skills needed to effectively serve your districts and our communities in their adult life.

■ Invest in Students

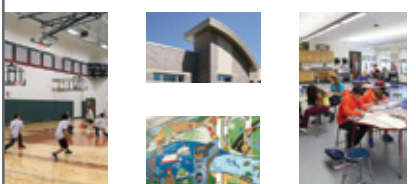
There is no denying that student voice is important. But equally as

important, is investing in the correct training for your young leaders.

Tim Elmore, CEO of Growing Leaders, has become an esteemed colleague of mine and his messages to educators echo what we have always believed at the WASC – it is our charge in this world to fill the tool boxes of our young people. By doing so, we are “preparing” for tomorrow, not “repairing” — a trend I see far too much in Wisconsin.

Tim Elmore shares this, “In today’s culture, I believe it’s imperative to include student voices on school boards. Generation Z is growing up feeling empowered and possessing an incredible intuition on where society is going. We owe it to our communities to both impart and to listen to our students — and let them experience leadership.” ■

Dr. Michelle McGrath is executive director of the WASC.



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