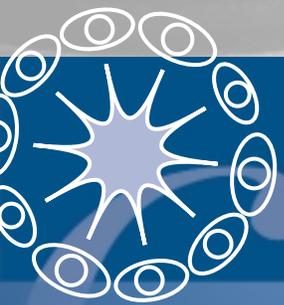


Adam Fletcher



Meaningful
Student Involvement

**Guide to
Students as Partners
in School Change**

meaning

"Meaningful student involvement is the process of engaging students as partners in every facet of school change for the purpose of strengthening their commitment to education, community and democracy."

Adam Fletcher

Meaningful Student Involvement

Guide to Students as Partners in School Change

Second Edition

Adam Fletcher

Created for

soundout.org
promoting meaningful student involvement

In partnership with

 **HumanLinks**
foundation

Meaningful Student Involvement Guide to Students as Partners in School Change

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About the Series

This guide is the first publication in a series that supports meaningful student involvement in school change. For more information, contact The Freechild Project, PO Box 6185, Olympia, WA 98507, call (360)753-2686, or email info@soundout.org. For more information on our work, see p 25.

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This work was written from my learning experiences in the education system and in my communities. Thank you to the people and places that nurtured, taught, supported, challenged, and sustained me through this journey.

I dedicate this work in celebration of my daughter, Hannah, whose being fills my life.

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Introduction

Students as Partners in School Change

Imagine a school where democracy is more than a buzzword, and involvement is more than attendance. It is a place where all adults and students interact as co-learners and leaders, and where students are encouraged to speak out about their schools. Picture all adults actively valuing student engagement and empowerment, and all students actively striving to become more engaged and empowered. Envision school classrooms where teachers place the experiences of students at the center of learning, and education boardrooms where everyone can learn from students as partners in school change.

To some, this vision may sound like a pipedream– but the examples within it are not. In Maryland a local school board has engaged students as full voting members of the school board for more than 25 years¹. In California a group of students recently led a district-wide evaluation of their teachers, curriculum, facilities, and students². In Washington schools rely on students to teach younger students, their peers, and adults in most grades across the state.³ The beliefs that inform these activities form the basis of meaningful student involvement.

Meaningful student involvement evolves from a growing awareness among students and educators that young people can and should play a crucial role in the success of school improvement. A number of recent accounts have featured educators refuting the misconception that engaging students as partners in school change is about “making students happy,” pacifying unruly children, or “letting kids run the school.”

Research shows that when educators work with students in schools – as opposed to working for them – school improvement is positive and meaningful for everyone involved.⁴ At the heart of meaningful student involvement are students, whose voices have long been silenced.

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In spite of the evidence, researchers and advocates still find that students are continuously neglected, and sometimes actively denied, any sort of role in their school’s improvement programs. Paulo Freire argued that learning must be rooted in the experiences that students come from.⁵ School is an example of an experience that students have in common; and yet, despite experts’ calls for meaningful student involvement, there is no widespread effort to engage students in school improvement. As Michael Fullan writes, “When adults think of students, they think of them as potential beneficiaries of change... they rarely think of students as participants in a process of school change and organizational life.”⁶ Meaningful student involvement authorizes students and adults to form powerful partnerships to improve schools.

This *Guide to Students as Partners in School Change* is written for students, educators, and community allies as a concise introduction to a burgeoning movement. The Guide is meant to encourage students and adults to take action – together. In a time when “student empowerment” and “democratic schools” are regarded as passé, it is becoming increasingly difficult to find the substantive theory, models, research, and resources needed to advocate for student voice. This *Guide* does just that, and more, by providing a comprehensive vision for students as partners in school change.

Chapter 1

Elements of Meaningful Student Involvement

Meaningful student involvement is the process of engaging students as partners in every facet of school change for the purpose of strengthening their commitment to education, community and democracy. Instead of allowing adults to tokenize a contrived “student voice” by inviting one student to a meeting, meaningful student involvement continuously acknowledges the diversity of students by validating and authorizing them to represent their own ideas, opinions, knowledge, and experiences throughout education in order to improve our schools.⁷

Meaningful student involvement is the process of engaging students as partners in every facet of school change for the purpose of strengthening their commitment to education, community and democracy.

Simply involving students is not inherently meaningful. The following points explore when student involvement is meaningful in contrast to when it is not meaningful.

When is student involvement meaningful?

- When students are allies and partners with adults in improving schools.
- When students have the training and authority to create real solutions to the challenges that schools face in learning, teaching, and leadership.
- When schools, including educators and administrators, are accountable to the direct consumers of schools – students themselves.
- When student-adult partnerships are a major component of every sustainable, responsive, and systemic approach to transforming schools.

When is student involvement not meaningful?

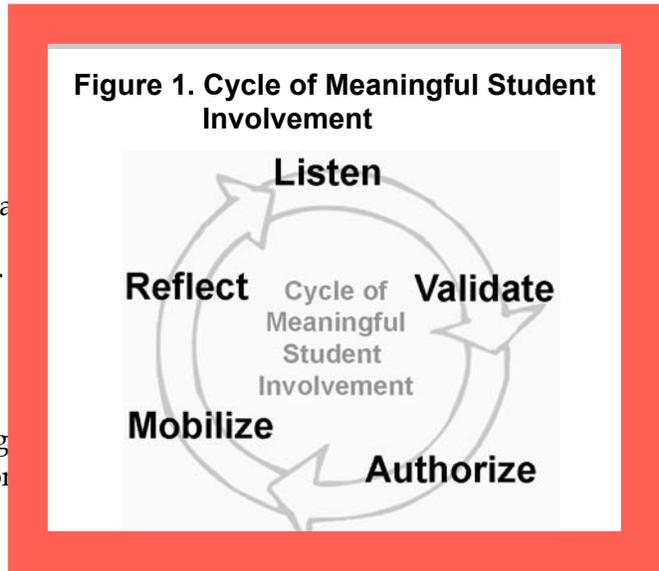
- ✗ When students are regarded as passive recipients in schools, or as empty vessels to be filled with teachers’ knowledge.
- ✗ When the contributions of students are minimized or tokenized by adults by asking students to “rubber stamp” ideas developed by adults, or by inviting students to sit on committees without real power or responsibility.
- ✗ When student perspectives, experiences or knowledge are filtered with adult interpretations.
- ✗ When students are given problems to solve without adult support or adequate training; or students are trained in leadership skills without opportunities to take on real leadership roles in their school.

Cycle of Meaningful Student Involvement

Meaningful student involvement is not a magical formula or mysterious bargain with students – but, it doesn’t just simply happen, either. By following the *Cycle of Meaningful Student Involvement*, student participation is transformed from passive, disconnected activities into a process promoting student achievement and school improvement.

The *Cycle of Meaningful Student Involvement* is a continuous five-step process. It can be used to assess current activities, or to plan future programs. The following explanations provide more information about each step.

1. **Listen** – The first step for the ideas, knowledge, experience, and opinions of students to be shared with adults.
2. **Validate** – Students are acknowledged as purposeful and significant partners who can and should hold themselves and their schools accountable.
3. **Authorize** – Students develop their abilities to meaningfully contribute to school improvement through skill-sharing, action planning, and strategic participation.
4. **Mobilize** – Students and adults take action together as partners in school improvement through a variety of methods (see Chapters 3 and 4).
5. **Reflect** – Together, adults and students examine what they have learned through creating, implementing, and supporting meaningful student involvement, including benefits and challenges. Reflections are then used to inform Step 1, Listen.



Individually, these steps may currently happen in schools. When they do happen, it is rare that they are connected with school improvement, and even less likely, connected with one another. The connection of all the steps in a cycle is what makes partnerships between students and adults meaningful, effective, and sustainable.

Key Characteristics

The following elements are consistently identified in schools where students and adults commonly agree that there are high levels of meaningful student involvement.

School-wide approaches	All students in all grades are engaged in education system-wide planning, research, teaching, evaluation, decision-making, and advocacy.
High levels of student authority	Students' ideas, knowledge, opinions and experience are validated and authorized through adult acknowledgement of students' ability to improve schools.
Interrelated strategies	Students are incorporated into ongoing, sustainable school improvement activities in the form of learning, teaching, and leadership in schools.
Sustainable structures of support	Policies and procedures are created and amended to promote meaningful student involvement throughout schools.
Personal commitment	Students and adults acknowledge their mutual investment, dedication, and benefit, visible in learning, relationships, practices, policies, and school culture.
Strong learning connections	Classroom learning and student involvement are connected by classroom credit, ensuring relevancy for educators and significance to students.

Climbing Towards Partnerships

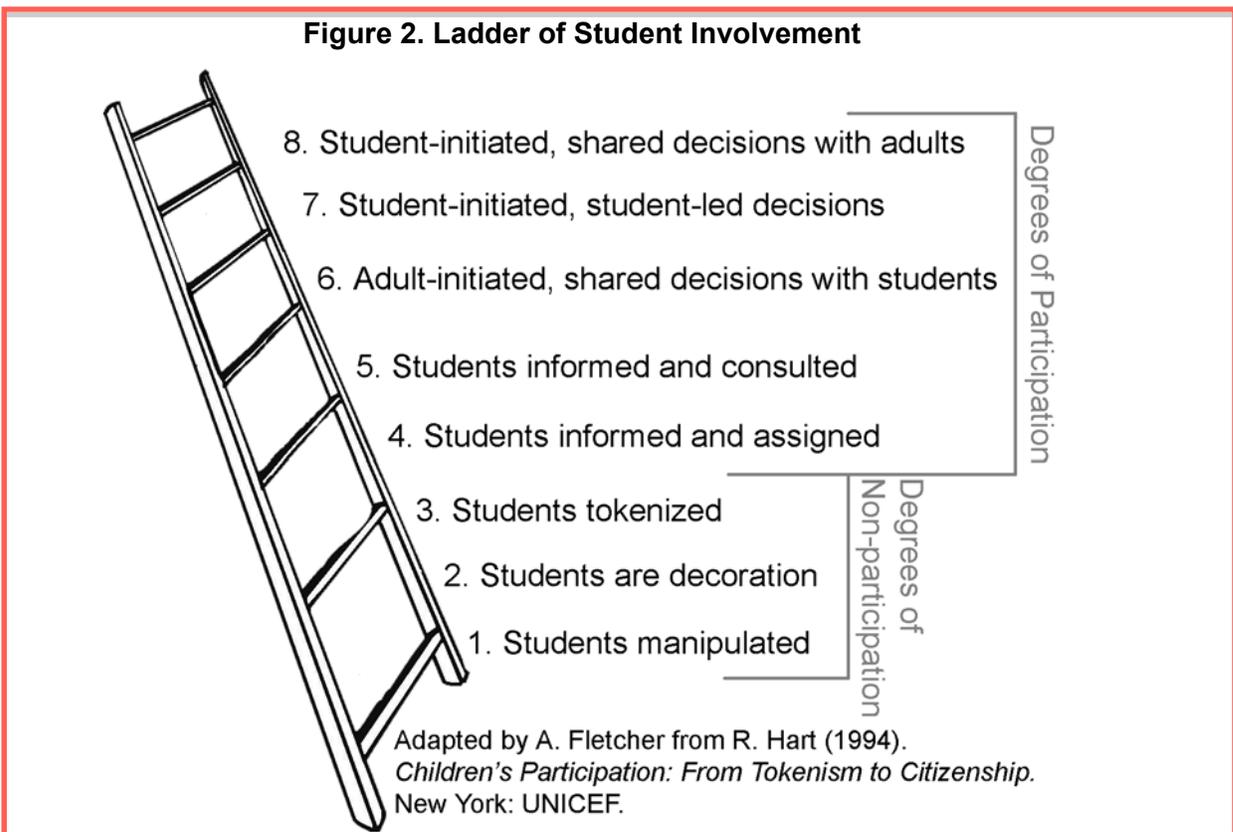
As this guide describes, simply calling something “meaningful” doesn’t make it so. Saying that young people are complex is an understatement; saying that schools need to be responsive to their complexity seems overtly simplistic. However, according to the following measurements, many schools may currently be treating students in a disingenuous, non-empowering way. Schools should aspire to the challenge William Butler Yates is said to have written, “Education should not be the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire.”

Simply calling something “meaningful” doesn’t make it so.

Measuring Student Involvement

The Ladder of Student Involvement in School is designed to allow students and educators a way to measure situations and activities that involve students throughout schools⁸. The higher the rung on the *Ladder*, the more likely that activity is going to be meaningful to students. This guide seeks to help schools reach higher rungs by increasing the amount and improving the quality of student involvement in schools.

Figure 2. Ladder of Student Involvement



Each rung on the *Ladder* can be applied to a variety of situations in schools. There are important differences for each type of student involvement that acknowledge a particular activity’s current position on the *Ladder*. There are three important points to consider about the *Ladder*:

1. The *Ladder* is not designed to be applied to a whole school at once; instead, use it to assess *individual* activities.

2. There is an active debate among young people, educators, and others about the placement of rungs 7 and 8. Which is more meaningful? Meaningful student involvement should build community in schools while empowering students, which makes activities that students initiate and share decisions with adults most important.
3. The rungs are not a process that happens in order. Activities can go from the second rung directly to the sixth; sometimes, they'll be on two rungs at different ends of the *Ladder* at once, depending on who is looking.

These considerations are crucial to understanding the potential of this *Ladder* as a planning and assessment tool. Students and educators can reflect on the *Ladder* as they understand it, and should consider the possibilities of how other people might view their circumstances, also.

Descriptions of Student Involvement

The following descriptions of Student Involvement describe the *Ladder* further, calling on readers to examine student involvement in their own setting.

8) Student-Adult Partnerships. Students initiate action and share decision-making with adults. Meaningful student involvement is integrated into school improvement at every level. Students are authorizing with the authority to create change, and incorporated throughout school improvement activities.

7) Student-Initiated, Student-Led. Meaningful student involvement is propelled by students and creates opportunities for students to initiate and direct projects, classes, or activities. Adults are involved only in supportive roles.

6) Adults Initiate Action and Share Decisions with Students. Students are involved in designing projects, classes, or activities that are initiated by adults. Many activities, including decision-making, teaching, and evaluation, are shared with students.

5) Students Consulted by Adults. Students give advice on projects, classes, or activities designed and run by adults. The students are informed about how their input will be used and the outcomes of the decisions made by adults.

4) Students Assigned to be Involved. Student involvement is assigned by teachers, who assign specific roles, determine how, and teach students why they are being involved.

3) Tokenism – Students appear to be given a voice, but in fact have little or no choice about what they do or how they participate.

2) Decoration – Students are used to help or bolster a cause in a relatively indirect way; adults do not pretend that the cause is inspired by students. Causes are determined by adults, and adults make all decisions.

1) Manipulation – Adults use students to support causes by pretending that those causes are inspired by students.

Considerations

The *Ladder* is meant to inspire action that validates students by authorizing them to improve schools. When students initiate action and share decisions with adults, partnerships flourish. Further in this Guide there are examples of specific ways that students and adults can work together to realize that vision.

Chapter 2

Benefits of Meaningful Student Involvement

Many educators intuitively understand **meaningful student involvement** and believe that valuing, validating, and empowering students in democratic learning environments is important. While intuition is important, the modern climate of education calls for scientific research to support new approaches to student learning. As a student in Colorado recently remarked, “We can give you respect. We are able to understand the issues. We can think for ourselves. It’s our education. If we have a say, it will make a difference.”⁹

Research-Based Outcomes

A growing body of substantial evidence shows that there are numerous benefits to meaningful student involvement¹⁰. As the following Table 1 shows, the recipients of those benefits range from individual students to the school system as a whole.

Table 1. Research-Based Outcomes*

Who Does Meaningful Student Involvement Affect?	What Is Affected?	What Are The Outcomes?
Students	Learning: Academic achievement, ethnic/racial/socio-economic/gender gaps, attendance rates, lifelong learning, graduation rates.	Greater interest in academic achievement, gains in test scores, higher graduation rates, increased student engagement.
Students and Adults	Relationships: Purpose, ownership, community, engagement.	Higher levels of ownership, increased belonging and motivation, identification with educational goals.
	Practices and procedures: Education planning, classroom teaching, learning evaluating, school research, and education decision-making.	Adults hear new perspectives about schools; allyship and partnership become norms; greater acceptance of programs and decisions.
Students, Adults, and School Systems	Policies and laws: Regulations that govern participation, funding, etc.	Regular, fully authoritative positions on committees and boards; ongoing funding, development, and support for student involvement.
	Culture: Student and educator attitudes, learning environments, social interactions.	Positive and productive climates; new human resources emerge as students share responsibility; stronger relationships between students and adults.

*See “Research Sources” on pg 27.

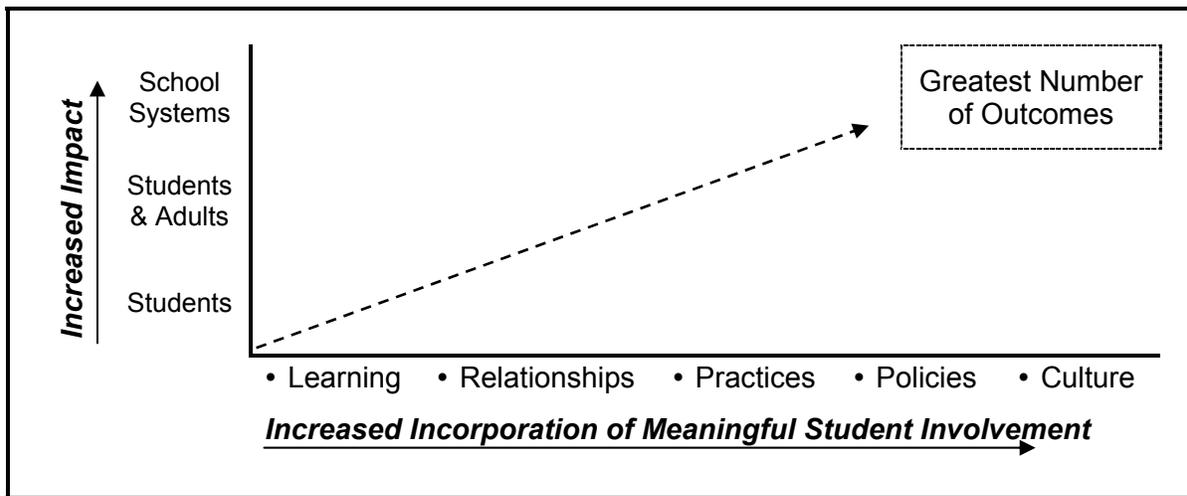
Table 1 is not so much a measure of importance as it is potential. It is meant to help students and educators to see that the effects of meaningful student involvement reach beyond simply impacting one student; more so, meaningful student involvement can actually impact entire schools. When students experience sustainable, meaningful involvement, school improvement will have greater outcomes throughout the education system.

The actual impact depends on the numbers, the type, and the sustainability of the project beyond the involvement of a particular student or students.

Impact and Incorporation

When more people are impacted by meaningful student involvement, there are a high number of outcomes. Similarly, when meaningful student involvement becomes infused throughout the life of a school, there are a high number of outcomes. Table 2 illustrates that when these two aspects “meet,” the outcomes of meaningful student involvement will be the broadest and affect the greatest number of people.

Table 2. Outcome Connections



By matching *who* meaningful student involvement affects with the outcomes of meaningful student involvement, educators and students can begin to identify what the purpose of meaningful student involvement at their school actually is. It is important to note that the actual impact of any form of student involvement depends on the number of students directly involved in the activity, the type of activity being undertaken, and the long-range sustainability of the project beyond the involvement of a particular student or students.

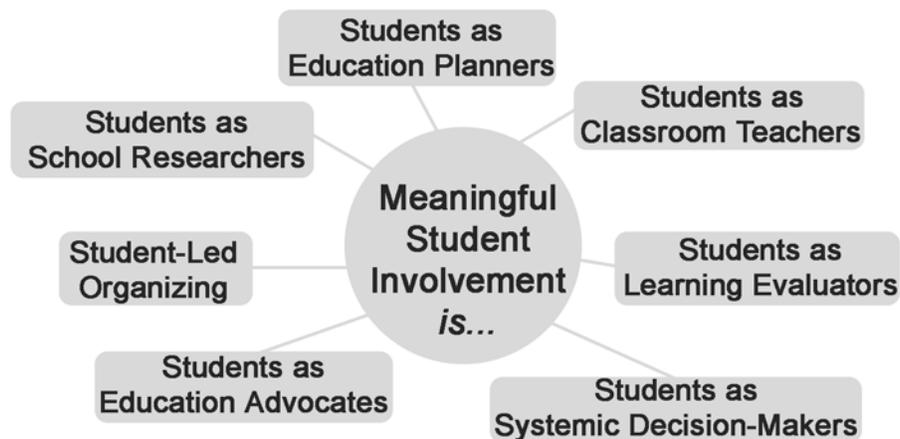
Many students, educators, parents, and other advocates have argued that any form of student participation is inherently meaningful for students, as if the activity itself holds value beyond not being involved. However, as Tables 1 and 2 illustrate, the benefits of moving towards the specific kind of democratic student empowerment advocated for in this publication are innumerable, and extend far beyond students themselves.

Chapter 3

Meaningful Student Involvement in Action

A particular kind of tension emerges when students begin to realize that the *way* they learn is keeping them from *what* they are actually supposed to be learning. Across the nation schools are promoting transparent, engaging relationships between adults and students in schools by engaging young people in designing, implementing, assessing, advocating, and making decisions about education. When this is done, students become partners, allies, and companions in school improvement.

Figure 3. Students as Partners in School Change



The following examples illustrate Figure 3 in action, and show how meaningful student involvement promotes academic achievement, supportive learning environments, and lifelong civic engagement, as well as many other benefits. These stories from across the nation illustrate the broad practice of meaningful student involvement throughout education today, and hint at wider possibilities in the future.

Students as School Researchers

Meaningful student involvement engages *students as researchers* of the educational settings, practices, beliefs, and outcomes that they are subject to. When students research their schools, they can become critical consumers of the institutions that affect them most. In participatory action research, or PAR, students participate in research design, execution, analysis, and writing about schools, environments, the teaching and learning process, and more.

- ∞ **Students searching for success.** A high school principal in Bear Valley, California, wanted to find out students' views of learning, so she engaged students as researchers. As part of the yearlong study student researchers participated in a course that focused on their work. Consequently, the students became the driving force in the data collection and analyses.¹¹
- ∞ **Financial futures.** In Poughkeepsie, New York, high school students conducted research on their district's budget crisis as part of a government class. After designing a survey for students on what should be included in next year's school district budget, student researchers hand-tabulated and analyzed data from 596 completed surveys - over half the student body. District board members then had

student-created data from that survey to highlight exactly what students thought should be included in next year's school district budget. When the Board of Education passed its budget for the coming school year, they introduced an unprecedented line item: \$25,000 for "student-led initiatives."¹²

- 80 **700 students sound out.** Students at a high school in Denver, Colorado, explored why many of their peers didn't graduate. Their goal was, "...to change statistics, and to make [our]... school of excellence where all students learn, graduate, and have the opportunity to go on to college." Their report outlines findings from more than 700 student surveys, national education research findings, and a proposal for school reform.¹³

For more information, links, research, and publications about these and other examples, visit www.soundout.org/research.html

Students as Educational Planners

Meaningful student involvement engages *students as education planners* by ensuring that they know what, how, how well, why, where, and when they are learning. This includes students designing curriculum, planning the school day, co-creating new school designs, or other activities that build upon their experience, education, ideas and opinions.

- 80 **Working with Teachers.** A small middle school in Orange, California, was brought to life with an exciting project that engaged students as researchers. In addition, the school decided to take the research to the next step, and invited the student researchers to start participating in curricular planning meetings. Students planned and constructed learning units with several teachers, and met with their principal to press for changes in school rules and militaristic physical education practices.¹⁴
- 80 **Moving out of the box.** A public alternative high school in Bothell, Washington recently engaged more than 100 students in a new school planning process. A team of student facilitators led a school-wide forum, developed a report from their findings, and shared the report with the whole student body, with teachers, and with the local school district. In response to their findings, students are invited to join the formal school planning team, with their findings incorporated in the new school plans, including school facilities, teaching practices, and decision-making processes.¹⁵
- 80 **First grade planners.** This program in Cheney, Washington, engaged first-grade students in developing a curriculum. Their teachers believed that if students helped to create the curriculum, the class dialogue about this process would shed light on how to make learning experiences more cohesive and purposeful. The teachers began by teaching students a unit, and then had students recreate the lesson plan.¹⁶

For more information, links, research, and publications about these and other examples, visit www.soundout.org/planning.html

Students as Classroom Teachers

Meaningful student involvement engages *students as teachers* as a way to strengthen students' learning and teachers' efficacy. Students can experience a variety of significant classroom teaching experiences, such as partnering with teachers or peers to deliver curriculum,

teaching fellow students in lower grade levels, or teaching adults. They also participate in choosing the activities and content of their lesson plans.

- ∞ **Student-Teachers Teaching Students Teaching.** 12th grade students at Mt. Pleasant High School Teacher Academy in Rhode Island teamed up with students in a local teacher education program to give presentations on educational philosophy to high school students. The high school students researched important educational philosophers and wrote personal statements of educational philosophy. The two groups revised papers together, and were able to effectively critique each others' research based on what they knew about the classroom. The cooperating college professor reported that this experience helped dispel stereotypes his teacher education students had held about urban high school students.¹⁷
- ∞ **Technology in the trenches.** Many schools are increasingly relying on students to provide training to teachers in a variety of areas, including technology and service learning. In a program called Generation YES located in Olympia, Washington, students across the United States are receiving credit for helping teachers learn how to use complicated hardware and software in their classrooms. An alternative school in Washington State recently had students conduct an in-service for teachers across their district on service learning.¹⁸

For more information, links, research, and publications about these and other examples, visit www.soundout.org/teaching.html

Students as Learning Evaluators

Meaningful student involvement engages *students as evaluators* delivering purposeful assessments of their classes, teachers, and whole school. Students can also evaluate themselves or facilitate student-led parent-teacher conferences, where students present their learning as partners with teachers and parents, instead of as passive recipients of teaching done "to" them.

- ∞ **Evaluating my effectiveness.** Middle and high school students in New York City participated in a student evaluator program for the Teens as School Volunteer Tutors Project. Together with an adult evaluation facilitator, they decided to interview two groups of subjects: an adult group made up of school professionals and the tutors' own parents and a student group made up of both tutors and their tutees. The student evaluators devised interview forms, agreed on interview assignments, and drew up a time line for completion.¹⁹
- ∞ **Listening in real time.** In 2003, high school students in Oakland, California, designed and collected 1,000 report card surveys evaluating teaching, counseling, school safety and facilities at three local high schools. They compiled their findings, analyzed the results, and made concrete recommendations in an exciting, comprehensive report. The introduction to the report states, "There are 48,000 youth in Oakland's schools that are experts - who are in class every day and who have a lot to say about how the schools are run and how to improve our education... [E]veryone wants to hear from the teachers and parents - but what about the students? Who asks our opinion? Why do we feel shut out, like no one cares what we think?"²⁰

For more information, links, research, and publications about these and other examples, visit www.soundout.org/evaluating.html

Students as Systemic Decision-Makers

Meaningful student involvement engages *students as systemic decision-makers*, partnering with educators to make decisions throughout the school system, from curricula, calendar year planning, building design, to budgeting, hiring, and more. They join committees, boards of education, and advisory boards at the local, district, state, and national level. They also work in their schools with teachers and principals to make important decisions.

- ∞ **Old school practice/new school thinking.** For the past 25 years a high school senior has participated as a voting member of the district level board of education in Anne Arundel County, Maryland. These members vote on all issues, including the district budget. Also in this district, every advisory, curriculum, study committee, and special task force includes students, working on everything from grading policies to alternative learning. Students are members of every local School Improvement Team in the district, with as many as 5 students on a 10 member team.²¹
- ∞ **NOVA means NEW.** Nova opened as a public alternative school in Seattle, Washington, in 1970. Their unique curriculum offers students the opportunity to learn through democratic school governance. Committees govern the school through consensus-based decision-making. Membership is voluntary and includes both staff and students, each of whom have an equal vote. Teachers serve on one or more committees, and model leadership skills. Student participation in committees gives them a stake in their education, and encourages responsibility in their personal lives.²²
- ∞ **Developing democracy.** A public high school in rural Stuart, Ohio, gives students an equal place at the table when faculty hiring decisions are made, when curriculum is chosen, and when class offerings are determined. A former principal recently commented that, "Students often find themselves preached to about values instead of practicing them. That's why our efforts have been to focus on practice rather than exhortation. Everything we do, including classroom teaching practices, school governance, students' experience... out of school, assessment, even the organization of the school day, is done with an eye toward developing democratic community."²³

For more information, links, research, and publications about these and other examples, visit www.soundout.org/decision-making.html

Students as Education Advocates

Meaningful student involvement engages *students as education advocates* to work within the education system and throughout the community to change schools. Many students participate in committees, on special panels, and in functions that help raise awareness or interest in education issues.

- ∞ **Project 540.** This nationwide program worked with 100,000 students in 14 states to engage students in advocating for school improvement. The number, 540, refers to a 540-degree turn, or a revolution and a half, which represents the program's problem solving goals. Students come full circle by identifying issues that matter to them and mapping out resources they can use to improve their schools. Next, they take their schools another half-turn by developing recommendations for change, which they present to school officials as action plans.²⁴

∞ **No Age Limits.** A fifth-grade teacher in Salt Lake City, Utah, tells the story of her students in her elementary classroom. These young advocates have helped their elementary school reconstruct its library by researching, brainstorming, fundraising, giving speeches, lobbying, writing proposals and receiving local, state and federal support. Their efforts led to brand-new facilities and classes, flexible scheduling for increased library use, and a comprehensive technology system including a computer center and computers in every classroom.²⁵

For more information, links, research, and publications about these and other examples, visit www.soundout.org/advocacy.html

Student-led Organizing for School Change

Across the country there is a growing movement being led by students who are working with adults from their communities and schools to contribute to school improvement by calling for social, economic, racial, and environmental justice in schools. These student-led activist organizations use sophisticated analysis, appropriate action, and creative partnerships to challenge the education systems to become responsive to student voice.

∞ **Youth organizing for hope.** In Wichita, Kansas, a group of middle and high school students are working through a local youth service agency to create safer, more effective schools for students in their community. Through a variety of campaigns, students with the Hope Street Youth Organizing program have worked to find alternatives to suspensions, end zero-tolerance policies, and implement Black history education. They have also worked with their local district to create a new teacher-training model and student satisfaction survey.²⁶

∞ **South Central youth empowered through action.** This organization is located in Los Angeles, California. By hosting chapters on high school campuses across South LA, SC-YEA aims to amplify the voices of students in education decision-making. They recently pressured the local school district to repair and build new schools with a \$2.4 billion school bond, and to add \$153 million dollars for additional school repairs previously overlooked in their community.²⁷

∞ **The schools we need.** A group of students in the Bronx, New York, have decided to start a school focusing on social justice and community leadership. Sistas and Brothas United worked to improve their own schools for several years. They rallied and researched, and as one student said, “[We] got a lot of stuff fixed.” The students are flexing their power in another direction now as they have begun working with the local school district and a coalition of organizations to start a new high school, called the Leadership Institute for Social Justice.²⁸

For more information, links, research, and publications about these and other examples, visit www.soundout.org/activism/index.html

Considerations

These aren’t the only types of activities happening in schools today that are meaningful. Given the earlier tools in this guide, the possibilities are unlimited. One of the most important considerations in meaningful student involvement can be the actual implementation of the process. The following chapter outlines some of the activities, skills, and learning connections engrained within meaningful student involvement.

Chapter 4

PUT IN
PAPER!

Learning through Meaningful Student Involvement

Students do not inherently know *how to be* meaningfully involved in their schools. Likewise, most educators struggle to figure out *how to* meaningfully involve students. **Meaningful student involvement** requires focused action that allows all participants to learn the potential of their individual and collective roles. For students, developmentally appropriate learning is needed to increase their capacity for empowered participation. For teachers, administrators and school staff, learning is focused on developing the school system's ability to involve students as well as individual teachers' ability to meaningfully involve students in different kinds of classroom learning opportunities.

The following Tables connect a variety of examples of meaningful student involvement with the skills needed, and the possible learning connections. This allows students and educators to identify their common purposes, and to create the space that both students and educators need to share knowledge, experiences and perspectives as both learners and teachers. In order to illustrate how meaningful involvement can happen throughout schools, each table presents a different grade level. There is also a table specifically for adults, illustrating how integral allies are to meaningful student involvement. The suggested activities and topics described for all participant groups offer opportunities for reciprocal learning through leadership: that is, adults role-modeling for students, students role-modeling for other students, and students and adults learning from each other.

Meaningful student involvement demands more than time from educators, more than money from administrators, and more than instantaneous results from students.

These opportunities also offer the potential to create and sustain collaborative learning communities where students, teachers, administrators, school staff and community advocates can continuously learn from each other. Acknowledging that this doesn't necessarily happen naturally in many classrooms, several "Skill Building Topics" are proposed. These topics are meant to serve as complementary building blocks that will enhance students' and educators' ability to experience meaningful student involvement in a variety of settings.

Meaningful student involvement demands more than time from educators, more than money from administrators, and more than instantaneous results from students. Instead, meaningful student involvement calls for efforts to improve the organization of schooling and the effectiveness of instruction to actively engage and authorize students to transform their learning communities. The attitudes of students, educators, parents and community members must also improve. All members of the learning community must see students as valid contributors to school improvement. The following chapter provides an introduction to that change, and encourages the reader to envision meaningful student involvement in their school.

Exploring Grades K-5

Meaningful student involvement in elementary schools is experiential, tangible, and focused. Action is based in the classroom, where students work in small groups and gradually build their skills. Meaningful student involvement requires specific skill building that can lead to important learning connections for young people. Table 3 illustrates a few examples of activities where students have been meaningfully involved in elementary schools.

Table 3. Meaningful Student Involvement in Elementary Schools

Examples	Skill Building Areas	Learning Connections
Planning: Membership on school improvement committee	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cooperative Leadership Skills • Project Planning • Identifying Issues in Education 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communications • Writing
Teaching: Co-designed, delivered, and evaluated lesson plans	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning Styles • Teaching Skills • Evaluation Methods 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Writing • Communication • Specific Subject Area
Evaluation: Student evaluation of self and teachers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-Awareness • Critical Thinking 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communications • Writing
Evaluation: Student-led parent teacher conferences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developing Presentations • Small Group Facilitation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communications • Writing • Reading
Decision-making: Student-led classroom governance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creating Consensus • Teambuilding 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communications • Citizenship • Relational Skills
Advocacy: Supporting the school library	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Active Listening • Problem Solving 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communications
Organizing: Student-led signature-collecting campaigns promoting their interests	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creating Petitions • Understanding Schools • Democratic Process 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Writing • Communications • Relational Skills • Social Studies

Exploring Grades 6-8

Meaningful student involvement in middle schools is experiential and project-based, emphasizing teamwork and results for all students. These actions encourage students to take increasing levels of responsibility for improving their schools. Table 4 details activities where students have been meaningfully involved in middle schools, including specific skill building and learning connections. Additionally, activities in middle schools span a variety of activities, transforming adults' perceptions of student roles in schools. Middle school students are often engaged in the activities in Table 3, also.

Table 4. Meaningful Student Involvement in Middle Schools

Examples	Skill Building Areas	Learning Connections
Planning: Full membership on school committees	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School Leadership • Identifying Issues in Education 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communications • Citizenship
Research: Student-designed Action Research	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research Methods • Identifying Issues in Education • Assessing Research Results • Designing Action Projects 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Writing • Math • Communications • Specific Issue Areas
Teaching: Student/Adult Co-Teaching	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Classroom Planning • Facilitation • Evaluation Skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Writing • Communication • Specific Subject Area
Evaluation: Student-created school assessments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Group Decision-Making • Evaluation Skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communications • Writing • Specific Subject Areas
Decision-Making: Whole School Student Forums	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilitation • Event Planning • Identifying Issues in Education 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communications • Writing
Advocacy: School-focused Service Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Project Planning • Identifying Issues in Education • Critical Reflection 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Writing • Specific Issue Areas • Communications
Organizing: Student-designed school improvement agenda	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Issues in Education • Group processes • Collaboration 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Writing • Communications • Citizenship

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Exploring Grades 9-12

Meaningful student involvement in high schools is experiential, intensive and offers direct connections between the school and the larger community. Action may happen in longer duration than in elementary or middle school years. Students lead action and have full responsibility and authority in many activities with adults acting as coaches that guide students in a mostly self-directed process of inquiry and discovery. Table 5 shares activities where students have been meaningfully involved in high schools, including specific skill building and important learning connections. High school students are often engaged in the activities from Tables 3 and 4, also.

Table 5. Meaningful Student Involvement in High Schools

Examples	Skill Building Areas	Learning Connections
Advocacy: Student-created district budget	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Issues in Education • Group Decision-Making • Diversity Awareness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Writing • Math • Communications • Citizenship
Teaching: Teaching classroom courses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Classroom Planning • Topic Awareness • Facilitation and Presentation Skills • Evaluation Skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communications • Writing • Specific Subject Areas
Decision-Making: Full membership on school improvement committees	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community Building • Issues in Education • Conflict Resolution 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Writing • Math • Communications • Specific Issue Areas
Teaching: Training for Teachers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Issue Awareness (Diversity, Youth Issues, Community Needs) • Facilitation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communications • Writing • Citizenship • Specific Subject Areas
Decision-Making: Positions on teacher and principal hiring teams	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Group Dynamics • Issues in Education • Collaboration Skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communication
Advocacy: Student-led Forums and Action Planning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Issues in Education • Facilitation • Event Planning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communications • Citizenship
Organizing: Student-Led Education Conference	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Issues in Education • Event Planning • Issues in Governance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communications • Citizenship • Social Studies

Exploring Roles for Adults

Meaningful student involvement requires educators, administrators, and other school staff to be introduced and sustained in their effort to engage students as partners in school change. Active engagement for all learners is a goal of many educators; however, the ability to incorporate meaningful student involvement is a learned disposition and skill. Meaningful Student Involvement also supports adults as they learn to engage the knowledge, perspectives, and experience of students in diverse education settings.

Table 6. Meaningful Student Involvement for Adults

Examples	Skill Building Areas
Planning: Infuse students into classroom, club, and school planning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student/Adult Partnerships • Listening to Student Feedback
Research: Facilitate participatory action research focusing on classroom and school improvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participatory Action Research • Student-Led Assessment
Teaching: Build students' ability to self-teach and facilitate peer education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Peer Education Techniques
Evaluation: Facilitate an authentic student-designed evaluation process for themselves, peers, and adults in school	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evaluation Methods • Listening to Student Feedback
Decision-Making: Partner up with student groups to ensure consistent student positions on school improvement committees.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Large Group Facilitation • Event Planning
Advocacy: Call for meaningful student involvement in education planning, research, teaching, evaluation, and decision-making	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advocacy Skills • Coalition Building • Student/Adult Partnerships

Considerations

Meaningful student involvement requires a great deal of investment from the students and adults involved. This is especially true when working with traditionally non-involved students. The extra consideration given to practically, purposefully, and meaningfully involving these students can offer particularly strong outcomes, as illustrated in Table 1. The activities outlined so far offer a variety of exciting lessons and connections to important learning standards. However, there are very tangible barriers that both students and educators face in schools. The following chapter considers what those barriers are, and possible ways to overcome them.

Chapter 5

Barriers and Solutions

Barriers = hindrances and reduce motivation

Many people who work for **meaningful student involvement** in their schools find that there are significant barriers to validating the opinions, ideas, knowledge, and experiences of students in order to improve schools. While these barriers can often seem like insurmountable hurdles, it is important to see them as challenges that encourage students, adults, and schools to grow and flourish in new and exciting ways. Alfie Kohn has identified three types of barriers to student participation in decision-making in schools²⁹. The following table adopts these types to meaningful student involvement in general, offering specific examples, and potential ways to overcome those barriers.

Structure

Teachers have no autonomy to make their rooms democratic

The structure of a school includes the policies, rules, laws, and beliefs that inform the way people interact within that school. Alfie Kohn notes that school culture “may create a climate in which teachers do to children what is done to them.” He goes on, “Classroom teachers frequently protest that they would love to open up the decision-making process but for the fact that a significant number of decisions are not theirs to give away or even to make themselves.” The structure of schools also affects students, aside from the actions of adults in schools. Traditionally, student involvement is an extra-curricular activity that happens before or after school. Activities have focused on athletics or interest-based clubs or have been token opportunities for student decision-making, such as planning dances. Another structural issue has to do with awarding credit and other forms of recognition: Adults generally are not paid to support student involvement, and students are reluctant to spend a lot of time on activities for which they receive little or no credit or money.

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Table 7. Structural Barriers and Solutions

Structural Barrier	Possible Solution
Despite an individual teachers' enthusiasm for meaningful student involvement, their principal denies their request to do an activity in their school.	Discuss meaningful student involvement with other educators online and identify who is successful at it. Seek information and materials that will encourage meaningful student involvement in your school. Develop networks among peers to develop interest and support with other adults.
Little encouragement, incentives, or recognition of meaningful student involvement in school currently exist.	Develop lesson plans to integrate meaningful student involvement into classes, allowing students to earn credit.

Adults

People themselves can act as barriers to meaningful student involvement. Personal attitudes, past experiences, and negative perceptions can all serve as roadblocks. Adults do things *for* – not *with*– students. Kohn offers that perceptions of control and a “lack of gumption” may hold many educators back. “Parting with power is not easy, if only because the results are less predictable than in a situation where we have control,” Kohn explains. Students also

recognize that some educators, in an attempt to appear to be “empowering” actually offer too little structure in classrooms. Students have also said that adults in schools simply don’t want to hear them and actively work to suppress their voices.

Table 8. Adult Barriers and Solutions

Adult Barrier	Possible Solution
Adults are threatened when they learn from students that they aren’t doing what should be done. They might also feel threatened dealing with the ideas, opinions, knowledge, and experiences of students.	Adults should learn new roles, language & behaviors in order to “walk the talk.” Reading about meaningful student involvement and being trained in Student/Adult Partnerships can help.
Adults assume that they easily understand the attitudes and challenges of students today.	Students could offer workshops for adults on their cultures, heritages, and backgrounds. Students can also create “tip sheets” and other tools for teachers.

Students

After years of being told, “It’s better to be seen and not heard,” it’s no wonder why students may be reluctant to be meaningfully involved in schools. Alfie Kohn notes that there are three primary types of student resistance. The first is simply *refusing*: “That’s your job to decide,” students may protest. The second is *testing*: offering outrageous suggestions or responses to see if the teacher is really serious about the invitation to participate. The third is *parroting*: repeating what adults have said or guessing what this adult probably wants to hear. A fifth-grader asked to suggest a guideline for class conduct may recite, “We should keep our hands and feet to ourselves.”

Why students test teachers

Table 9. Student Barriers and Solutions

Student Barrier	Possible Solution
Students feel that they are being pushed to be involved and do not like it.	Adults can integrate meaningful student involvement into classroom activities, offering students an opportunity to experience learning without additional commitment.
Students are inhibited when adults are involved in discussions.	Create a “safe space” for an open discussion about stereotypes that adults and youth have of each other. Continue to have check-ins that allow students and adults to share their honest thoughts with one another.

Considerations

There are dozens of very real challenges that face advocates for meaningful student involvement from both adults and students. Most of those barriers fit accordingly into the above sections; some do not. A student named Danesia Robinson of Oakland, California recently reflected on how students in her high school are working to change the low expectations of adults, saying,

Go to the district and make a change, you say, but you gotta be prepared to take the responsibility of making that change. It's not easy to make a change. You gotta stick to it. And oftentimes, as youth, we feel that we can't do it, so we just give up.

...Facts, you need facts. You need to be educated on what [the administration is] doing, because you can't just go up to somebody and not know what you're talking about. You gotta keep going to meetings and not let anybody run over you. You gotta be willing to study the information, you gotta be willing to survey, you gotta be willing to ask people about it. You gotta understand.³⁰

Adult allies have an important role in assisting students to become engaged as partners in school change. Meaningful student involvement demands their participation. But students are equally charged with being *willing* to change schools. And both students and adults have to work together to overcome the systemic barriers that keep everyone from moving forward with inclusive school improvement.

It is easy to assume that barriers will stop activities, especially when everyone at the table lacks commitment to meaningful student involvement. However, the above illustrations of possible solutions show that through intentional facilitation and guidance, students, adults, and the structure of schools can change. The significance of meaningful student involvement is greatly increased when barriers are overcome. This Guide explores that significance.

Conclusion

Growing Momentum

Every school in the country is focused on the question of how to improve student achievement in every content area and in every grade level. Each day, in schools with all types of individual challenges, educators use the diverse tools of school improvement to help make progress for students. While these tools often cite involvement as a key component of school improvement, that idea has rarely included students. For the sake of the future of education, it is time for students to be more than heard, and it is time for schools to take action. It is time for students to be partners in school change. It is time for **meaningful student involvement**.

The work of meaningful student involvement is not easy or instantaneously rewarding. However, in a time when the success of individual students is being leveraged against funding for schools, it is essential to go beyond students planning school dances and leading mock elections. Those activities may actually have negative effects on students. However, there are real and substantial challenges. Despite the various types of meaningful student involvement outlined here, there is no finite model for engaging every student that can be adopted by all schools. What will be appropriate for one school might not succeed in another. Meaningful student involvement is part of a transformative cycle that should be continually re-examined, redeveloped and reconceived within each learning community as it evolves over time with new participants. The potential outcomes are too great to ignore the possibilities.

The intentional participation of diverse students in relevant, purposeful relationships with adults is essential to facing the disparities in our schools.

HUGE!
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This guide characterizes meaningful student involvement and its usefulness as a strategic process for improving the quality and quantity of student engagement. By making knowledge relevant to students' lives and providing supportive learning environments in which all participants can grow, meaningful student involvement provides innumerable positive outcomes for all members of the education community. Most importantly, meaningful student involvement shows that schooling can be a powerful, positive and motivating force when it respects and values the contributions of each and every student.

Ultimately, meaningful student involvement transcends schools. In a time when the health of our nation's democracy is at stake, everyone must reconsider their individual role in society. Research and experience illustrates that people who have been meaningfully involved when they are young are most likely to be informed citizens who are engaged throughout their communities. As partners in school change, students are virtually ensured this positive, powerful, and productive future. The complex leadership skills and applied learning that all students can experience through meaningful student involvement serve as vital components in any education system and society that calls for a more engaging, sustainable and just democracy.

Resources



SoundOut.org. An online resource center promoting meaningful student involvement in school change. There are exciting examples, powerful research studies, effective classroom tools, and dozens of other resources from around the world. You can find extensive reading lists, including every source document included in this guide, as well as an online discussion forum with students and educators from around the world and a monthly newsletter. SoundOut.org c/o The Freechild Project, PO Box 6185, Olympia, WA 98507. Email: info@soundout.org Web: www.soundout.org

The booklet in your hands is the first of a series that is intended for broad audiences to understand **meaningful student involvement**. All booklets in this series are available free on our website, along with other resources. The series includes:



Meaningful Student Involvement: The Guide to Students as Partners in School Change - A broad introduction to meaningful student involvement, including a brief introduction, a description of the benefits to schools, several short stories of action, and useful assessment tools for your classroom or school, including the popular *Ladder of Student Involvement* and the *Cycle of Meaningful Student Involvement*.



Stories of Meaningful Student Involvement - This is an inspiring collection of anecdotes based on dozens of reports. This booklet features short reports of Meaningful Student Involvement happening in classrooms and schools around the world. The stories include students as education planners, researchers, teachers, evaluators, decision-makers and advocates.



Meaningful Student Involvement Research Guide - The extensive reviews in this booklet can help advocates get a "leg up" in the research race in schools. This booklet provides the details of fifteen of the foremost research studies that examine various facets of Meaningful Student Involvement.



Meaningful Student Involvement Resource Guide - This booklet provides a range of support for Meaningful Student Involvement advocates and practitioners. There is a short literature review that introduces readers to the wide array of tools available, as well as a comprehensive listing of organizations and websites that support various aspects of Meaningful Student Involvement.

Additional Resources

At The Table Initiative. The At the Table initiative aims to promote youth governance in schools and communities across the United States. Their website features a resource catalogue, success stories, a calendar of events, and “What’s At The Table,” a resource collection. They also feature organizations committed to youth involvement and youth voices. Innovation Center for Community and Youth Development, 6930 Carroll Avenue, Suite 502, Takoma Park, MD 20912. www.atthetable.org

Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform. A national network of school reformers who support efforts to create high-quality schools that ensure educational success for all urban young people. They have a special focus on student action that is taking root through several local programs and partnerships, supporting advocates who want to work directly with youth on issues of school reform. 407 South Dearborn Street, Suite 1500, Chicago, IL 60605. www.crosscity.org

ESRC Network Project: Consulting Pupils About Teaching and Learning. This program, based at Cambridge University in the UK, has a variety of aims, among which is seeking to integrate a theory of teaching, learning and attainment with a theory of student voice and participation in school change. Their information includes useful publications that document research findings and conference proceedings, among other details. www.consultingpupils.co.uk

Forum for Youth Investment. This organization has gathered several years' experience in youth development and education reform to design a youth-centered vision of schooling. They identified five areas, including Climate, Instruction & Curriculum, Connections, Outcomes, and Engagement. Their material explores this vision and offers new insights for school improvement. 7064 Eastern Avenue NW, Washington, DC 20012. www.forumforyouthinvestment.org

Funders Collaborative on Youth Organizing. This group of charitable foundations supports youth organizing for community change, including education. They have funded dozens of projects and publications that highlight the backgrounds, activities, and outcomes of youth organizing. 330 Seventh Avenue, 14th Floor, New York, NY 10001. www.fcyo.org

What Kids Can Do. This organization documents the value of young people working with teachers and other adults on projects that combine powerful learning with public purpose. They have several projects promoting student voice and action, including "Students as Allies," “Students Push for Equity in School Funding,” and more. Their materials include webpages and publications created by students and adults dedicated to student voice. P.O. Box 603252, Providence, RI 02906. www.whatkidscando.org

Youth On Board. This program prepares youth to be leaders and decision makers in their schools and strengthens relationships between youth and adults through publications, customized workshops, and technical assistance. 58 Day Street Somerville, MA 02144. www.youthonboard.org

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About the Author

Adam Fletcher is the founder and director of The Freechild Project, a youth-driven think tank that offers training, research and consultation to schools and community-based organizations across the United States and Canada. Mr. Fletcher's work has included several years in community-based youth organizing and development, as well as working for the Washington State Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction to promote meaningful student involvement throughout the education system.

Supporting Organizations

The Freechild Project partnered with the HumanLinks Foundation to create this publication and its accompanying website, www.SoundOut.org - promoting meaningful student involvement in school change.

The Freechild Project

PO Box 6185
Olympia, WA 98507
Phone: 360.753.2686
Web: www.freechild.org

Freechild was founded in 2000 as a youth-driven training ground, think tank, resource agency, and advocacy group for young people seeking to play a larger role in their schools and communities. Freechild offers training and consultation in many areas, including school improvement, program development, and community building. Our website is a worldwide resource center for social change by and with young people that includes a diverse listing of information around youth empowerment, including everything from activist learning to youth suffrage, and several free publications on youth leadership, cooperative games and more.

HumanLinks Foundation

PMB 160
6830 NE Bothell Way Suite C
Kenmore, Washington 98028

The HumanLinks Foundation was established in 1999 to help communities in Washington State make systemic improvements in Education, Health Care and Sustainable Agriculture. HumanLinks strives to strengthen voices and connections to make these essential systems more effective and responsible. HumanLinks develops partnerships that leverage resources in new ways to blend values, ideas, information and best practices.

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www.SoundOut.org
promoting meaningful student involvement in school change

SoundOut.org is a resource center
designed support meaningful student
involvement in school change.

The website includes exciting examples
from schools across the nation, as well as
powerful research, free publications,
important links, and vibrant online
discussion forums where students and
educators share stories and strategies
with others across the United States.