

*Adam Fletcher*



*Meaningful*  
**Student Involvement**

**The  
Guide**



# **The Guide to Meaningful Student Involvement**

**Adam Fletcher**

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# Introduction

Educators and students hear student voice every day. As *any expression of any student anytime related to education*, student voice is constantly present. Student voice happens when groups of students collect in the hallway after class to talk about teachers; when impassioned students go to the school board meeting to demand funding for new textbooks; and when students regularly throw away their school lunch. However, most students and adults would agree that those are not the most meaningful experiences for all students.

Student involvement activities have been popular since John Dewey first popularized student leadership at the beginning of the 20th century. Today, they comprise of planning social dances, leading after school clubs, and choosing which extracurricular classes. When shown options, students rarely say these activities are meaningful, and after learning about alternatives, teachers often agree.

After working in a state education agency to promote student engagement in the early 2000s, I sought to build on the good intentions of the student voice movement and well-meaning efforts throughout the education system. After an exhaustive research review and as the basis of my work in 300 K-12 schools over the last decade, I developed a pathway to imbue student voice with purpose and possibilities. I call this approach Meaningful Student Involvement, and it is the process of engaging students in every facet of the educational process in order to strengthen their commitment to education, community and democracy.

Meaningful Student Involvement holds student voice carefully and respects its sentiment while honoring its sensibilities and enriching its possibilities. Student Voice does not require schools to change; ask students to change; necessitate adults to change; or necessarily result in educational transformation. Meaningful Student Involvement, however, is a process for engaging students as partners in every facet of school change for the purpose of strengthening their commitment to education, community, and democracy. It focuses on system-wide action for school improvement; deep student/adult commitment; whole school transformation; deep learning for students *and* adults, and; expanded opportunities for students *and* adults throughout education. Meaningful Student Involvement inherently grows the education, while student voice does not.

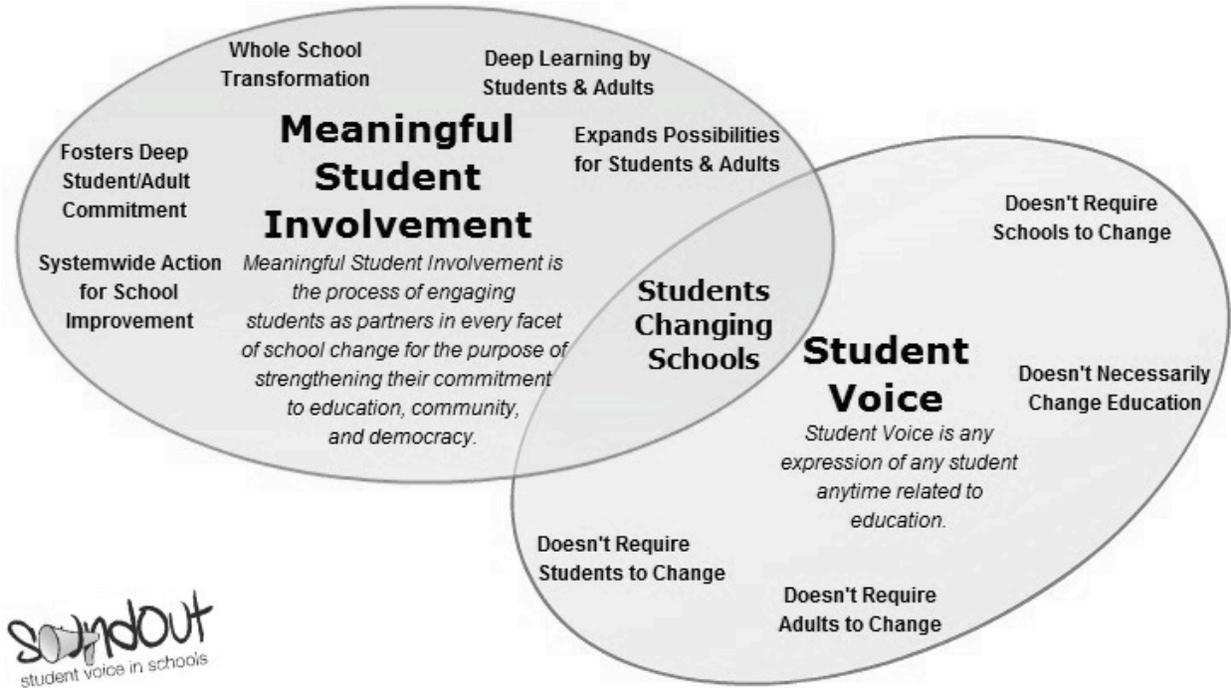
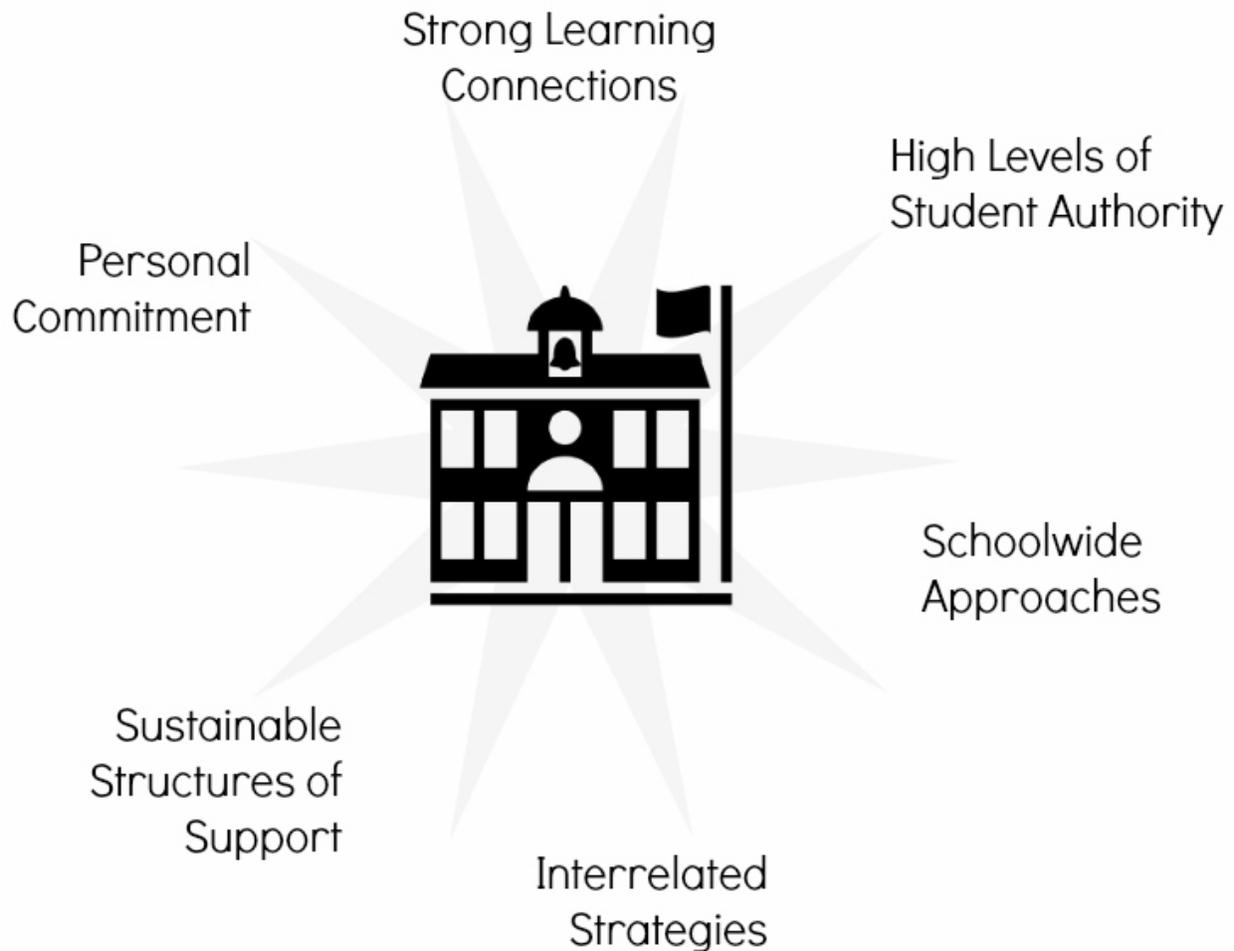


Figure 1: Comparing Meaningful Student Involvement and Student Voice

Based on research and the work I've done, I wrote *The Guide to Meaningful Student Involvement* to capture this difference. In this work, you'll find a detailed exploration of the defining characteristics of Meaningful Student Involvement. There is a clear illustration of the different layers of action in a Sphere that lays out different types of Meaningful Student Involvement. A cycle demonstrates how any adult throughout the education system can meaningfully involve students, while a measure shows how that involvement behaves. A thorough examination of barriers then leads to critical questions, and the guide wraps up with a resource list.

# Part 1. Characteristics of Meaningful Student Involvement

There are six distinct features that ensure whether an activity is actually Meaningful Student Involvement. If these six characteristics are not actively present or emerging in activities, the activity does not constitute Meaningful Student Involvement.



*Figure 2: Characteristics of Meaningful Student Involvement*

An explanation of each of characteristic follows. Describing each one, there is also a detailing of the features of each characteristic.

## **Characteristic 1: School-Wide Approaches**

All school reform measures include opportunities for all students in all grades to become engaged in education through system-wide planning, research, teaching, evaluation, decision-making, and advocacy, starting in kindergarten and extending through graduation. This includes a variety of opportunities throughout each students' individual learning experience as well as those of their peers; within their school building; throughout their districts, and; across their states.

### ***Features of Characteristic 1 include...***

- **Student/Adult Partnerships.** Activities focus on engaging students as partners throughout the educational environment for the purpose of improving schools.
  
- **Diversity.** Activities infuse diverse students from multiple perspectives including:
  - Races, ethnicities, and languages
  - Genders and sexual identities
  - Grade levels and academic achievement
  - Learning experiences
  - Behavior and attitudes
  
- **Whole School Approaches.** Every person within the education system has the opportunity to be affected by Meaningful Student Involvement by actively partnering with students. This includes students themselves, along with teachers, parents, building leaders district administrators, district leaders, school board members state/provincial administrators, state/provincial leaders federal administrators researchers, advocates/activists, independent consultants, trainers education-focused nonprofit staff, other nonprofit staff, and others.
  
- **Variety of Roles.** Activities engage students as partners throughout education including:
  - In-class and out-of-school learning
  - School planning
  - Educational research
  - Classroom teaching

- Learning evaluations
- Systemic decision-making
- Education advocacy
  
- **System-Wide Activities.** Activities can occur or be focused on any place within the education system including:
  - Local schools: Classrooms, hallways, extracurricular spaces, building leadership
  - Districts: Administration, boards of education, elected or appointed leadership
  - Provincial/State: Administration, boards of education, elected or appointed leadership
  - Federal: Administration, elected or appointed leadership, Secretary or Minister of Education, National leadership
  - Other: Local/national/international education-related nonprofits, foundations, colleges of education, professional education associations, the United Nations

## **Characteristic 2: Equitable Student Authority**

Students' ideas, knowledge, opinions and experiences in schools and regarding education are actively sought and substantiated by educators, administrators, and other adults within the educational system. Adults' acknowledgment of students' ability to improve schools is validated and authorized through deliberate teaching focused on learning about learning, learning about the education system, learning about student voice and Meaningful Student Involvement, and learning about school improvement.

### ***Features of Characteristic 2 include...***

- **Equitable Relationships.** Activities work towards student/adult equity, not equality, throughout education.
- **Increasing Ability.** Activities acknowledge the evolving capacity of students through ongoing knowledge-sharing and skill-building activities.
- **Acknowledged Action.** Validating student voice through active adult acknowledgement of the necessity of activating students' ability to improve schools.

- **Full Membership.** Appropriately aligning the roles of student members to ensure full membership in education activities.
- **Strategic Growth.** Measuring shared and individual perceptions and outcomes of Meaningful Student Involvement through comprehensive planning and strategic assessments.

### **Characteristic 3: Interrelated Strategies**

Students are incorporated into ongoing, sustainable school reform activities through deliberate opportunities for learning, teaching, and leadership throughout the educational system. In individual classrooms this can mean integrating student voice into classroom management practices; giving students opportunities to design, facilitate, and evaluate curriculum; or facilitating student learning about school systems. In the Principal's office it can mean students' having equitable opportunities to participate with adults in formal school improvement activities. On the state school board of education it can mean students having full voting rights, and equal representation to adults. Whatever the opportunities are, ultimately it means they are all tied together with the intention of improving schools for all learners all the time.

#### ***Features of Characteristic 3 include...***

- **Systems Thinking.** Students are partners throughout the strategies used within classrooms, throughout schools, and across the education system.
- **Co-Learning.** Training and professional development is provided focused on the knowledge and skills related to engaging students as partners for all members of the school community.
- **Ongoing Mapping.** Mapping of continuous improvement goals actively reflects the substance, ability, and roles of students throughout the educational environment.
- **Formal Planning.** Planning for school improvement through formal and informal means reflects sustained commitments to Meaningful Student Involvement.

### **Characteristic 4: Sustainable Structures of Support**

Policies and procedures are created and amended to promote Meaningful Student Involvement throughout schools. This includes creating specific funding opportunities that support student voice

and student engagement; facilitating ongoing professional development for educators focused on Meaningful Student Involvement; and integrating this new vision for students into classroom practice, building procedures, district/state/federal policy, and ultimately engendering new cultures throughout education that constantly focus on students by constantly having students on board.

***Features of this Characteristic 4 include...***

- **Daytime Infusion.** Activities should preferably not be an "add-on thing" for adults to do. Instead, it should be integrated throughout their daily activities.
- **Policy Creation.** Policies and procedures are created and amended to sustain Meaningful Student Involvement.
- **Valuing Sustainability.** Valuing the depth of Meaningful Student Involvement, sustainability is ensured through addressing both the culture and structure of the education system.
- **Ongoing Action.** Structures of support include school-wide approaches, high-levels of student authority, and interrelated strategies. This may include:
  - Actively engaging students as partners to create systems for infusing student voice throughout school improvement activities.
  - Creating student action centers to train the school community and provide information to student/adult partners;
  - Providing fully-funded, ongoing programs that support Meaningful Student Involvement;
  - Developing school-wide student evaluations of building culture; classroom climate; student/teacher relationships; educational effectiveness.
  - Establishing fully accountable roles for students on district boards of education and/or state leadership groups;
  - Implementing student-adult partnerships to teach regular classes and increase student ownership in behavior management, extracurricular activities, etc.
  - Infusing students as full members of school committees focused on curricular areas, school improvement, etc.
- **New Attitudes.** Cultures of support include personal commitment and strong learning connections. This may include:

- Facilitating whole-building or district-wide training for teachers, students, administrators, and other school community members on Meaningful Student Involvement;
- Creating issue awareness-raising campaigns on the building, district, state, or national level to elevate student voice;
- Establishing adult ally groups established to support adults in education who commit to Meaningful Student Involvement;
- Supporting classroom curriculum specifically designed to teach students about school improvement and student action;
- Developing regular, sustained, and unfettered opportunities for frank conversations between students and adults about school improvement.

## **Characteristic 5: High Personal Commitment**

Students and adults acknowledge their mutual investment, dedication, and benefit, visible in learning, relationships, practices, policies, school culture, and many other ways. Meaningful Student Involvement is not just about students themselves; rather, it insists that from the time of their pre-service education, teachers, administrators, paraprofessionals, counselors, and others see students as substantive, powerful, and significant partners in all the different machinations of schools. When they have this commitment every person will actively seek nothing other than to fully integrate students at every turn.

### ***Features of Characteristic 5 include...***

- **Scientific Evaluation.** The personal attitudes of participating and nonparticipating students and adults are determined through used to determine the effects of behaviors, time, social pressure change, and more on the school.
- **Mutual Acknowledgment.** Acknowledging their mutual investment, dedication, and benefit from Meaningful Student Involvement, students and adults make student voice visible in learning, relationships, practices, policies, and school culture.
- **Efficacy.** Developing students' and adults' understanding that that are able to make changes in their schools and the education system they occupy is a goal of activities.

- **Evolving Capacities.** Aligning activities with the evolving capacities of individual student participants is central, rather than broad assumptions made about child development or students development. Practicality and feasibility according to circumstance should also be important considerations.

## **Characteristic 6: Strong Learning Connections**

Classroom learning and student involvement are connected by classroom learning and credit, ensuring relevancy for educators and significance to students. This deliberate connection ties together the roles for students with the purpose of education, thoroughly substantiating student/adult partnerships and signifying the intention of adults to continue transforming learning as learners themselves evolve.

### ***Features of Characteristic 6 include...***

- **Learning Made Obvious.** Explicit connections are made between the learning involved in engaging students as partners throughout education. This can include:
  - Specific activities offered throughout the course of activities that establish and grow students' abilities to contribute fully.
  - All participating students and adults having learning opportunities to increase their relevant knowledge base and grow their skill sets.
- **Acknowledged Learning.** Students are awarded regular classroom credit for their involvement. This can happen by:
  - Incentivizing Meaningful Student Involvement initially through granting regular classroom credit for activities.
  - Substantiating involvement through credit awarded for both "hard skills" and "soft skills" grown through involvement.

## Part 2. The Sphere of Meaningful Student Involvement

When considering all of the ways the Characteristics of Meaningful Student Involvement could emerge in education today, it is important to think about how they specifically happen right now. I created the Sphere of Meaningful Student Involvement to show the main ways for activities to happen.



Figure 3: The Sphere of Meaningful Student Involvement

There are three distinct layers in the Sphere of Meaningful Student Involvement, including a core layer in the center; a nesting layer in the middle; and a surrounding layer on the outside.

## **Three Layers of the Sphere**

### ***Core Layer: Locations***

The first layer of Meaningful Student Involvement are the **locations** for Meaningful Student Involvement. This layer reflects the entirety of the education system, and shows a full approach to integrating students as partners throughout schools.

- *Classroom Pedagogy*—This is the crux of teaching, learning, and assessment in all schools. Teachers study, practice, and critically examine pedagogy, often identifying places where Meaningful Student Involvement can strengthen their practice.
- *School Climate and Culture*—The environment for teaching and learning is determined by the climate and culture of the school. Meaningful Student Involvement drives relationships between students, teacher and staff behavior, and the interactions between students and teachers.
- *Extracurricular Activities*—Student government, clubs, sports, and any other activity not directed by classroom pedagogy happens in extracurricular activities. The efficacy of out-of-classroom learning is determined by Meaningful Student Involvement.
- *Education Leadership*—Building principals, local and state boards of education, education agency staff, and federal politicians fall into this category. Meaningful Student Involvement can inform, consult, negotiate, and drive these decisions towards effectiveness.
- *Formal School Improvement*—As mandated by federal law, every K-12 public school in the United States has to have a formal school improvement plan. Integrating Meaningful Student Involvement throughout this process can lead educators towards improved outcomes for all learners.
- *Public School Reform Action*—Students around the world are asserting their voices into the national dialogue about education transformation, public school privatization, and other essential

conversations by leading student organizing, participating in community-led school reform, and active protest movements.

### ***Nesting Layer: Roles***

The second layer of Meaningful Student Involvement are the **roles** through which research and practice consistently demonstrate the outcomes of the approach. I call it the "Nesting Layer" because these activities hold the Core Layer intact by nurturing student/adult partnerships in action rather than concept. Meaningful Student Involvement is conceptual *and* practical, not either/or, and can hold all other school improvement strategies within it.

- *Students as Planners*—When students are involved in education planning, they can learn what, how, how well, why, where, and when they are learning, becoming meaningfully involved in schools. Examples include:
  - Student co-creating learning plans for themselves
  - Students co-designing curriculum
  - Students planning school day calendars
  - Students participating in new school design
  - Students planning classroom learning activities
  - Students budgeting school activities
  - Students on hiring committees for adult positions
  
- *Students as Researchers*— Using scientific method, students actively examining schools, educational practice, and school systems that they participate in. Topics include:
  - Examining curricular effectiveness and teaching methods
  - Identifying important issues among their peers
  - Analyzing student-adult relationships
  - Co-designing school improvement research

- *Students as Teachers*—Professional teachers find allies among their students in all grades when they co-teach. The effectiveness and possibilities of students teaching their peers, younger students, and adults is becoming increasingly evident in research and practice.
  - Students teaching regular lessons in their classes
  - Students serving as teaching assistants
  - Students partnering with teachers or peers to deliver curriculum
  - Students teaching peers students in lower grade levels
  - Students teaching adults and facilitating professional development
  
- *Students as Evaluators*—Schools can develop purposeful, impacting, and authentic assessments of classes, schools, and teachers. This encourages accountability and ownership for all participants in the learning process, as well as the educational systems that affect that learning.
  - Students evaluating classes and schools
  - Students evaluating teacher performance and efficacy
  - Students evaluating self-performance and learning
  - Students leading parent-teacher conferences
  
- *Students as Decision-Makers*—Starting in the kindergarten classroom and extending throughout the rest of their educational experiences, students can - and should - be actively involved in decision-making.
  - Students choosing and designing curriculum
  - Students participating in new building design
  - Students as members of local and state/provincial school boards
  - Students writing grants and evaluating government funds for schools
  - Students creating policies in classrooms and buildings
  - Students co-creating state, provincial, and federal education policy

- *Students as Advocates*— Students are working change schools around the world. They are bringing together students, parents, teachers, and community members to challenge apathy, indifference, and ignorance.
  - ✓ Students organizing public campaigns for school improvement
  - ✓ Students joining existing school committees as representatives
  - ✓ Students sharing documentation of the need for improving schools with the public
  - ✓ Students educating policy-makers about challenges in school
  - ✓ Students informally presenting student voice to administrators

### ***Surrounding Layer: Avenues***

The outer layer of Meaningful Student Involvement holds the **avenues** for transformation. Each of these reflects a different way that summarizes the major areas of action. They are:

- *Attitudes*, including the individual opinions, actions, knowledge, and beliefs of students and adults throughout education.
- *Culture*, made of the beliefs, habits values, visions, norms, systems, and symbols within a specific and definable school community;
  - The "personality" of a school may be kind and accepting, rude and disrespectful, wise and guiding, or any other mix.
  - The culture of a school makes its structure necessary.
  - The culture of a school is obvious in the relationships of students and adults.
- *Structure*, which is the named activities, policies, strategies, processes, allocation, coordination, and supervision of people throughout a school or education agency;
  - Structure includes positions, policies, practices, and procedures throughout education.
  - The education system is inherently steeped in structure.

*Adam Fletcher*

## **Part 3. Issues Addressed by Meaningful Student Involvement**

Planning the winter dance, setting the price for Valentine’s Day candies, and deciding the new school colors are decisions some schools allow student voice to influence or even drive. However, Meaningful Student Involvement amplifies student voice much further than this. There are literally countless issues throughout the education system where engaging students as partners can be crucial for success, and yet rarely happens.

There are countless issues that schools are facing and that are being discussed by people working in schools as well as those working for school change from outside schools, including politicians, community groups, and the media. Focused primarily on school transformation, Meaningful Student Involvement catalyzes student/adult partnerships for education change. Engaging students can be partners with adults to address these issues and many more through both convenient and inconvenient student voice. The following list is just a beginning of what can be addressed through Meaningful Student Involvement.

### ***The Goals of Education and Student Success***

Defining the purpose of schools focuses the direction of schools, teachers, and students. While some originally intended for public education to provide basic learning for successful democratic citizenship, others saw schools mainly as a way to support the economic workforce. Today, educational goals and “success” have become defined by student performance on standardized tests, in addition to measures like student attendance and graduation rates. While these might be part of the purpose of education, many school reformers are seeking ways to broaden the goals of education to include students’ social, emotional, and intellectual development, as well as helping students gain the skills needed to build a better and more democratic world.

### ***Voice and Engagement***

The question of who has control and authority in schools has long been answered with “leave it to the professionals,” meaning administrators and policy-makers. However, as more people push for participatory structures throughout the government, there are also efforts toward more participation

throughout the educational system. Creating opportunities for meaningful involvement for students, teachers, and parents is growing in many communities, while the federal government is increasingly asking how and where nontraditional voices can be engaged in decision-making. Businesses, community organizations, mayors, and others want roles, too. This is a topic that many people can rally around.

### **Curriculum**

The question of who decides the curriculum in schools has a big impact on what goes on in schools. With influences ranging from textbook companies to politicians, and from school boards to businesses and more, schools and teachers somehow have to sort this out and provide a meaningful learning experience for students. The federal government, along with a coalition of private organizations, is supporting the concept of “Common Core State Standards” that would create the same standards throughout the country, and many governors have urged their states to follow them.

### **Time in School**

The length of the school day has been a popular topic for decades, and particularly in recent years. Brain research has shown students have different sleep needs than adults, while it’s been popular to say that students in the US have less “seat time” than students around the world (as a matter of fact, this is incorrect: while students in some countries have more days of school than the US, most of those countries have shorter school days that actually results in *less* seat time). The length of the school year is also a consideration, as some advocates are determined to add more seat time by replacing traditional summer breaks with more frequent shorter breaks throughout the year. The amount of years a student needs to attend school is also an issue, as more public education leaders consider a “P16” system essential: pre-kindergarten through college graduation.

### **Schedule**

The schedule of a school often drives the learning and curriculum in the school. The traditional 45-minute period of high schools, for instance, means that projects and activities are harder to do and fit within that time, as is traveling outside of the school for field trips or connecting with the community. Block schedules often have 1.5 or 2 hour blocks of time for classes, which provides

some of these opportunities. Other schools provide classes for part of the time and give students self-directed learning time to pursue projects that earn them credit.

### ***Out of School Time***

Offering activities after school, in the evenings, on the weekends, and throughout school vacations and on holidays are common in some communities, while other areas do not provide them at all. Tutoring and mentoring, sports and extracurricular clubs, and other learning or social experiences are out of the norm for many students, as their families or their schools are fiscally incapable of participating. Schools and communities could come together to devise creative ways to offer these opportunities to all students, regardless of income.

### ***School Choice, Private Schools, and Charter Schools***

Charter schools are schools that are publicly funded and privately operated (outside of the typical school district), and which students and parents can choose to attend instead of the local public school. Private schools are privately funded and operated. Each is different from the next, some are experimental and innovative, while others are very traditional but with longer hours. Studies are mixed about the benefit of charters, but the issue is becoming one that dominates education today. Many political leaders are supporting the creation of more and more charter schools, while those opposed believe charter schools take the most engaged parents and students, leaving the least engaged to stay in the regular public schools.

### ***Class and School Size***

The number of students to teachers, called “student/teacher ratios,” has been shown to affect how well students learn. Many advocates call for smaller class size, while others claim size makes little difference. School consolidation, where small schools in local communities are merged into a single large school for a large surrounding area, has been happening since the 1940s. Now many of those larger schools are being closed, such as in New York City, to create smaller schools.

### ***Teacher Education***

Thinking about what teachers learn and how they learn it is important to making schools work better. The idea is that more and better opportunities for support, mentorship, and professional

development for teachers will lead to better teaching and improved teacher quality. In some countries, teachers have far less teaching time than in the U.S., and have more time to plan with other teachers and observe the teaching of others. Half of all teachers leave teaching within their first 5 years, and new teachers have a steep learning curve.

### ***Teacher Quality***

Teacher quality is one of the biggest issues being discussed now by teachers unions, politicians, and teachers themselves. Many are saying that we need to determine who is a good teacher and who is a bad teacher. What some are saying is that when students are not succeeding in schools at sufficient rates, it must be the teachers' fault. While teachers certainly have impact on their students, outside factors are also a big issue, including poverty, home life, and the outside community. Getting rid of teacher tenure (which gives teachers extra support from being fired) and firing low-performing teachers based on student test scores is the new approach taken by districts around the country.

### ***Technology in Schools***

The issue of schools maintaining their relevance in the face of technological developments isn't new. In the 1950s the US became engulfed with the Cold War, and schools were forced to innovate their educational goals with the supposed purpose of keeping America competitive with the Soviet Union. Today the issue of how to teach about technology in schools continues, as some schools limit access to the Internet, raising concerns about free speech, while other schools are increasing their use of technology in the classroom. Virtual schools and online classes are becoming more and more common, and many educators believe the future of education is found in technology.

### ***Special Education***

The questions facing special education include the labeling of students, funding the support services that special education students receive, and "mainstreaming" special education students throughout the school population. There are concerns about disproportionate representation of males and students of color as special education students, as well as equal access to support for such learners. Charter schools and other schools of choice are sometimes criticized for weeding out special education students since they have more leeway in which students they accept.

## ***School Funding***

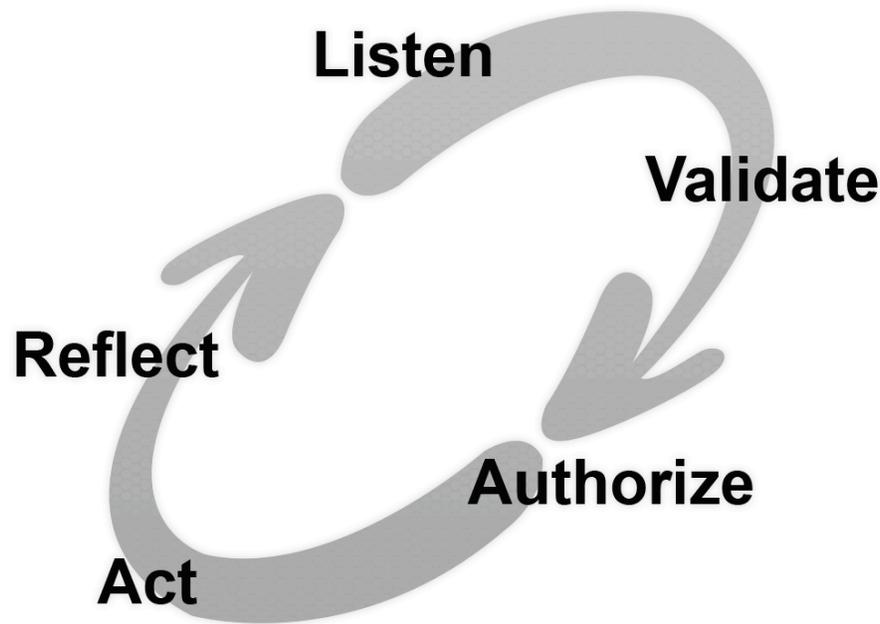
Traditionally funded by taxpayer dollars at the local, state, and (at a smaller level) federal level, in recent decades schools have actively sought funding from corporations, philanthropic foundations, and private donors as well. Funding basic education is an increasing issue in times when government support is waning, and as a result teaching materials and school buildings are becoming neglected or worn out. Teachers often purchase supplies out of their own pockets, or simply go without in communities where schools are underfunded. In affluent school districts students generally have access to better materials and teachers get paid high salaries, affording those students better educations. In turn, this reinforces the “academic achievement gap” that separates many students. Calls for equitable funding are frequent, and have found mixed success.

## **Summary**

These are some of the issues Meaningful Student Involvement can address throughout the education system. By learning more about these issues and taking firm stands, students working with adults can contribute to the conversation and take action in sophisticated, relevant ways that makes Meaningful Student Involvement essential for schools today.

## **Part 4. The Cycle of Engagement**

In my studies on student voice and student engagement, I identified a pattern of activities that occurs in every single activity where both students and adults agree there was meaning. My Cycle of Engagement identifies that pattern. It gives adults a practical guide to infusing Meaningful Student Involvement into their daily relationships with students.



*Figure 4: Cycle of Engagement*

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 Engagement, student voice is transformed from passive, disconnected activities into a process that actively promotes student engagement and school improvement.

The Cycle of Engagement is a continuous five-step process. It can be used to assess current activities, or to plan future programs. It can also be used in personal interactions as well as program or class activities. The following explanations provide more information about each step.

## **Listen to Student Voice**

Meaningful Student Involvement inherently requires simply being listened to. Providing space a platform for Student Voice to be heard can be challenging. Listening to Student Voice can happen in personal conversations, classroom discussions, agenda items in meetings, or through written reports and studies.

## **Validate Students**

When students speak, its not enough to nod your head. Validating students does not mean automatically agreeing with students, either. It is important to offer students sincere comments, criticism, or feedback. Disagreeing with students allows young people to know that you actually heard what was said, that you thought about it, and that you have your own knowledge or opinion which you think is important to share with them. Students must know that education isn't about autonomous authority, and that a chorus of voices inform learning and leading schools.

## **Authorize Students**

Meaningful Student Involvement requires *ability*, which comes in the form of experience and knowledge. Providing students with authority means going beyond traditional roles for students in classrooms by actively providing the training and positions they need in order to affect change. It is essential that adults provide students with the opportunities they need to be authors of their own narratives.

## **Mobilize Students**

Transitioning from passive participants to active learners and leaders throughout education requires students taking action to create change. Mobilizing students in positions of new authority allows them to affect cultural and systemic educational transformation, and encourages educators to acknowledge students as partners.

## **Reflect on Involvement**

Meaningful Student Involvement cannot happen in a vacuum. Educators and students should take responsibility for learning through Student Voice by engaging students in conscious critical

reflection by examining what was successful and what failed. Students and adults can also work together to identify how to sustain and expand the Cycle of Engagement by effectively returning to the first step above.

Individually, these steps may currently happen in schools. When they do happen, it is rare that they are connected with improving schools, 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.

## Part 5. The Measure of Meaningfulness

There are depths and heights in any student involvement activity. I created the Measure of Meaningfulness to be used in decision-making, planning, teaching, evaluating, advocating, and all activities that involve students. There is no single point in the process when it's inappropriate or ineffective to compare practice to this tool.

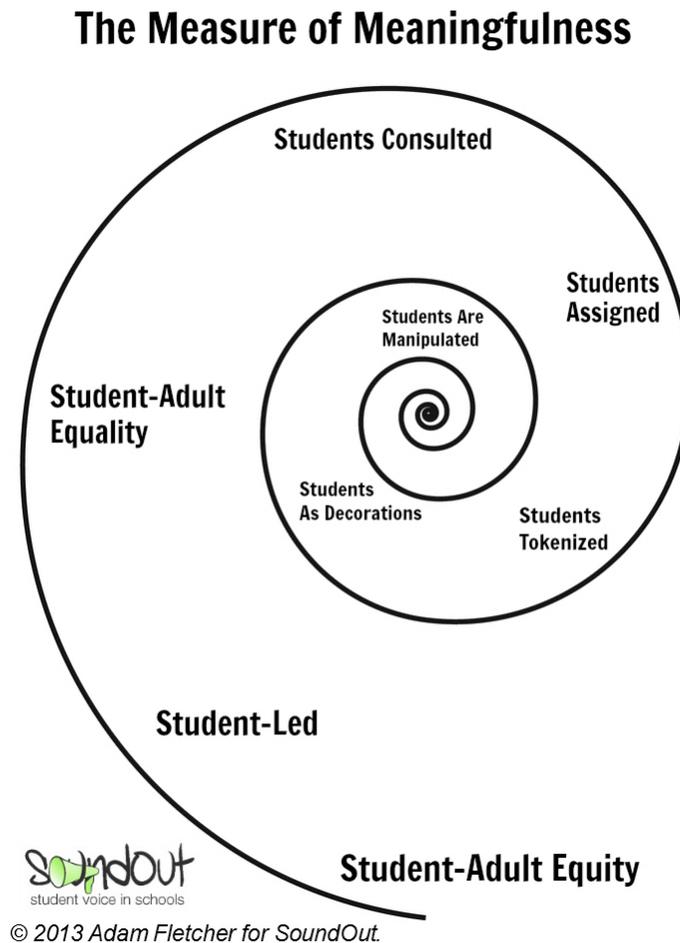


Figure 5: The Measure of Meaningfulness

This Measure is not linear or sequential. Instead, the different positions represent the coincidental and often co-occurring forms of meaningfulness present throughout student involvement activities. There is no step-by-step progression, since some activities start with manipulation while others start

with equitable partnerships, or vice versa. The Measure also reflects that perceptions of meaningfulness vary from student to student, as any student involvement activity has the potential to be meaningful.

### ***Student-Adult Equity***

Equity means that there are appropriate, personalized, and relevant differences between students and adults according to their knowledge and skills. Everyone involved—students and adults—are recognized for their impact in the activity, and each has ownership of the outcomes. Student/adult equity requires intentional commitment by all participants to overcoming the barriers involved.

It positions adults and students in healthy, whole relationships with each other while moving forward in action. This can ultimately lead to creating structures to support differences by establishing safe, supportive environments for equitable involvement. In turn, this may lead to recreating the climate and culture of education, and lead to the greatest efficacy of students' participation.

### ***Student-Led***

Activities move adults from positions of authority towards supportive roles for students, allowing them only passive or *very* behind-the-scenes roles. This gives students the platform to take action in situations where adults are apathetic or when students are not seen with regard for their contributions, only for their deficits. Developing complete ownership of their actions can allow students to drive their developmental, cultural, social, and educational experiences with a lot of effectiveness, and they can experience the potential of their direct actions upon themselves, their peers, and their larger school communities.

In this way, self-led activities by students can operate in a vacuum where the impact of their actions on the larger school community isn't recognized by the education system. Activities driven by students may not be seen with the validity of activities co-led with adults, either.

### ***Student-Adult Equality***

This is a 50/50 split of authority, obligation, and commitment between students and adults. This approach allows students to experience full power and authority in relationship to adults. This position can also foster the formation of student/adult partnerships.

However, one of the challenges of equality with adults is that there isn't recognition for the specific developmental needs or representation opportunities for students. Practically speaking, students might get bored and become quickly disengaged without receiving that acknowledgment of their needs.

### ***Students Tokenized***

As soon as adults determine what student voice should be look like, they may begin tokenizing students. Funneling, narrowing, focusing, or otherwise trimming the breadth, depth, or purpose of student voice poses the risk that it doesn't genuinely reflect the attitudes, opinions, ideas, actions, knowledge, or beliefs of students about education. This can happen anytime adults seek to engage students in a specific issue in our schools, including attendance, academic achievement, gangs, or dancing on the roof. Any of this can be qualified as tokenizing student voice.

Tokenism happens because adults expect individual students to represent themselves and all students on specific issues that adults want to hear about. It displaces the actual opinions, wisdom, ideas, and knowledge students have about their schools and replaces it with conveniently chosen, adult-guided thinking. It does not respect student voice for what it actually is, instead insisting that students only need to be engaged when adults want them to be.

### ***Students as Decorations***

Another way student voice is misused is when it's used as decoration for adult ideas. Adults make choices about schools and then use student surveys, speeches, ideals, and actions to shore up their choices. Posing students around adults at speaker's daises, having student panels at education conferences, and putting students in suits to share their thoughts in front of school boards and nonprofit leaders are some of the ways that adults use students as decorations, misusing student voice.

This is misuse because it invalidates anything substantive student voice might present. Instead, it only allows students to be props for adult beliefs, reinforcing the old adage that "Children are to be seen and not heard." Old world thinking, this couldn't be more false today. Students have the ability to make their authentic voices known in dozens of ways across the Internet and in real time that adults never had access to when we were young. Yet we still treat them as if they don't. This disconnection doesn't serve anyone, and is severely damaging our education system as a whole.

### ***Students Are Manipulated***

The last common way student voice activities happen is through manipulation. Adults force students to become involved through manipulation. Faced with losing academic credit, the acceptance of their of adults, or a paycheck, student are sometimes forced by adults to become engaged. That pinching of genuine student interest in ensuring they are engaged is insidious, even if it is well-meaning. Making sure that student fit adults' expectations for student voice shows student that the authentic ways they reveal their thoughts, beliefs, ideals, and wisdom aren't the "right" ways to be heard. This can encourage them to change their minds in order to fit the molds presented in order to get the grade or be accepted.

Manipulation is wrong because it teaches student that student voice shouldn't happen without reward or punishment. It demeans their basic humanity by robbing student of their innate opinions, inherent knowledge, powerful actions, and secure wisdom that as adults we can only benefit from. Instead, it positions them as consumers of schooling, as people who are incapable, or as people who don't desire to have their voices heard. Schools have the responsibility of being incubators of democratic society, and manipulating student voice actively undermines that responsibility while taking away the rights of student.

## **Part 6. Tokenizing Students**

With the increased interest in student voice, tokenism is bound to happen. Tokenism happens whenever students are in formal and informal roles only to say they have *a voice*, instead of purpose, power, and possibility. Without that substance, student voice is little more than loud whisper into a vacuum.

### **Exploring Tokenism**

When adults appoint students to represent, share, or promote student voice, they are making a symbolic gesture towards young people. This step is generally meant to increase or demonstrate student engagement in topics adults think they need to be heard about. It can also be meant to appease student and adult advocates and stop people from complaining.

When students specifically seek to represent, share, or promote student voice, they are generally seeking a portion of control over their personal educational experience. In schools, this can look like joining student government, starting a student voice club, or holding a protest after school or at a school board meeting.

Unfortunately, these approaches to student voice actually reinforce adultism in schools. They do this by reinforcing adult power and highlighting the inability of students to actually change anything in education without adult permission.

Tokenism happens in school policy and through activities in education every day. It is *so* deep in schools that many students and adults never know they're tokenizing student voice, and students don't know when they're being tokenized. Students often internalize tokenism, which takes away their ability to see it, and adults are very invested in it, which takes away their ability to stop it. It is important to teach students and adults about tokenism in schools and how it can affect them.

Today, adults tokenize student voice and students tokenize student voice. Following are 51 ways to tokenize student voice right now. The topic is explored at the end, and there are some resources.

### **51 Ways to Tokenize Student Voice**

1. Student voice is seen and treated like a special activity that only fits in a certain place at a certain time.
2. One particular student is asked over and over to participate in adult activities.
3. Adults discuss student voice without talking to students.
4. Students are treated favorably for sharing student voice in a way that adults approve of, while students who share student voice in disagreeable ways get in trouble at school.
5. Adults consistently ask specific students to speak about being a student in school meetings or at education conferences.
6. Student voice is only listened to for fixing specific issues in schools, instead of addressing everything in education.
7. A school club will do programs *to* specific students, without letting those specific students do programs *for* themselves.
8. Adults hold a celebration dinner for the school and invite 10 students to join 1,000 adults.
9. Students are only asked about topics that affect them directly, rather than the entire school body or education as a whole.
10. Students are not taught about issues, actions, or outcomes that might inform their perspectives activities.
11. Adults tell students they have a voice and give them the way they are expected to express it.
12. Student voice is isolated on issues seen as student-specific challenges like school colors, dance themes, bullying, and technology.
13. Adults install specific students in traditionally adult positions without the authority, ability, or background knowledge adults receive in those same positions.
14. Adults constantly tell students about their experiences when they were students.
15. A single student's busiest times of year revolve around the education calendar—outside regular student activities—because they're attending conferences, meetings, summits, and other education activities that require adults to invite them.
16. Adults don't tell students directly the purpose of their involvement in school committees or education conferences, except to say that they are The Student Voice.
17. Students are told that sharing their voice is as good as it can get.
18. Adults control who hears, sees, or communicates student voice.

19. When students walk into a meeting, every adult knows there are students attending without knowing their names, where they're from, or what school they attend.
20. During a meeting adults expect one student or a small group of students to represent all students.
21. Students or adults perceive that students are being tokenized and thereby undermine students' abilities.
22. Students are treated as if or told it is a favor for them to participate in decision-making.
23. On a panel, on the Internet, or in a meeting, students are given little or no opportunity to formulate their own opinions before speaking.
24. Students are not taught about the democratic purpose of student voice.
25. Adults invite students to share their knowledge, ideas, opinions, and more, and then ignore what they say.
26. One student speaker is invited to talk at an education conference, at a school board meeting, or in an Internet space like Twitter or a Facebook group.
27. Students who attend an education rally are singled out for their attendance.
28. Adults only invite students who are not likely to assert themselves, make demands, or complain, to adult education meetings and activities.
29. Student voice is treated as unique, infallible, or is otherwise put on a pedestal by adults.
30. Adults take students away from regular classes without giving students any recognition in the form of credit for their learning in education activities.
31. Adults choose articulate, charming students to join education activities.
32. Students are given representative roles that are not equal to adult roles in education activities.
33. Adult/student power imbalances are regularly observed and not addressed in classrooms and schools, while student voice banners and programs happen in other times.
34. Adults are not accountable to students in education activities.
35. Adults refuse to acknowledge the validity of student voice they disagree with.
36. Students are punished when student voice activities don't meet adult expectations.
37. Schools use student voice for some issues, and ignore it regarding others.
38. Adults in schools take pictures and videos of students without listening to what they have to say.
39. Adults seek out one, two, or ten students as the most popular in their school to represent student voice.

40. Students are not given the right to raise issues, vote, or share their unfettered opinions.
41. Student-led school research is used to back up adult problem-solving without engaging students in problem-solving.
42. Nobody explains to students how they they were selected for an activity.
43. Adults allow students to talk on their school's facebook page or twitter account and not at school committee or district school board meetings.
44. Adults interpret and reinterpret student voice into language, acronyms, purposes, and outcomes that adults use.
45. Students become burned out from participating in too many traditionally adult-exclusive education activities.
46. Students are not seen or treated as partners in the education system by adults.
47. Students think its obvious they have a lack of authority or power or that their authority is undermined by adults.
48. Adults don't know, state, or otherwise support the purpose of engaging student voice in the public education systems of democratic societies.
49. Students are limited to sharing their voice on issues at the local building level, not in district, state, or federal activities.
50. Students don't understand which students they are supposed to represent.
51. Students are asked to create a representation of student voice that never leaves the classroom or education program they're in.

## **Part 7. Adult as Barriers**

Over these years of action, I have found a number of deep barriers to Meaningful Student Involvement. With the increasing usage of student voice and student engagement as strategies in K-12 schools, education administration, and other education settings, it is important to spell them out.

In these places, Meaningful Student Involvement is blocked because adults give students a carrot by listening to their voices, and then these same adults turn around and blatantly use student voice to forward their own agendas without concern for what students are genuinely seeking. In this way, these barriers are like the infamous Trojan Horse. Too many schools, governments, and organizations are manipulating student voice to fit into their adult-driven, anti-authentic approaches to promoting particular education reform agendas.

### **Understanding Barriers**

Few if any teachers, principals, counselors, administrators or other adult in education wakes up and asks themselves how they are going to stop Meaningful Student Involvement today. However, every adult is apt to resist this transformation. Here is a low-down of what some of these adult barriers look like.

#### ***Adult Barrier One: Adults as Parasites***

By using the phrase student voice educators, leaders, and advocates imply they are interested in listening to the unfettered opinions, ideas, experiences, and wisdom of students. However, their approaches are similar to that of many companies that market to young people: Listening for profit. That's what many educators, leaders, and advocates hope to receive from student voice and student engagement programs: Profit. By continually uplifting the education reform agendas of adults and couching them in student voice, many people literally maintain or develop funding for their schools, or their versions of school reform. They continue to maintain or develop funding opportunities for their schools by using student voice. If that sounds greedy and parasitic, that's because it is.

#### ***Adult Barrier Two: Adults Maintaining Authority***

Most student voice programs use anti-transparent responses to young people. This merely

perpetuates the modus operandi of schools, which is to do to and for students, rather than to work with students. I conceptualized Meaningful Student Involvement precisely for the purpose of distinguishing this difference. Meaningful Student Involvement is contingent on student-adult partnerships throughout the education system. The approach advocated for by the vast majority of student voice programs is adult-dictated, adult-agenda oriented, and ultimately will only benefit adults. These student voice programs actually reinforce adult authority, which is antithetical to Meaningful Student Involvement.

### ***Adult Barrier Three: The Student Voice Vacuum***

Ultimately, the approach of using student voice to reinforce adults' preconceptions is the same for students as yelling into an empty well. Students speak into a vacuum where they don't know the outcomes of their contributions to educators, leaders, and advocates, and there is little or no accountability. Adults listen only when student voice is needed, and engage students only when adults see it as necessary. Otherwise, there is little or no substantive student presence.

The goal of all student involvement activities anywhere in schools should be to build the capacity of students to cause change within the education systems and communities to which they belong. Many student voice programs actually negate students' abilities to cause that change by capturing student voice and putting it into the hands of adults. This disengages, taking away the little authority that authentic student voice should have. It alienates students from the process of whole school reform, and ultimately serves to extinguish any level of interest students may have in the first place.

## **Overcoming Adult Barriers to Meaningful Student Involvement**

The point of Meaningful Student Involvement is to re-engage students in their health of their schools and the education system. As they stand today, the vast majority of student voice programs only serve to help students learn about their lack of power, and reinforces the belief that the roles of young people throughout society are determined for them, and they simply need to accept what is coming down the line.

These three approaches to student voice have brought our schools to where they are now. By manipulating, tokenizing, and exploiting individual students' perspectives on any given topic in

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education, entire generations of young people have been disengaged from school reform. This is not what I am about, and that is what is wrong with many student voice programs today.

## **Part 8. Students as Barriers**

While many people are taking deliberate, strategic steps towards Meaningful Student Involvement today, there are others who are fast at work without deliberation or strategy. The student barriers to Meaningful Student Involvement reflect this. Here are some of them.

### ***Student Barrier One: Whitewashing***

Students are whitewashing the diversity, depth, and breadth of Meaningful Student Involvement today. They do this by presenting themselves as being The Student Voice, intending to represent all students.

However, there is no way that any one individual, organization, hashtag, or movement can represent every student in every school all the time. In our changing world, it is more important than ever to honor pluralism. Pluralism is when smaller groups within a larger society maintain their unique cultural identities, and larger groups honor their identities. A characteristic of Meaningful Student Involvement is Personal Commitment, which includes honoring all voices for their diversity of experience and knowledge. There's no reason to whitewash Meaningful Student Involvement by pretending that all voices are represented by one voice.

### ***Student Barrier Two: Showboating***

Meaningful Student Involvement isn't the same as basketball or business, and there is no room for showboating. It is a diverse process filled with multiple perspectives and broad actions focused on many, many issues. Showboating happens when someone exaggerates their own skills, talents, or abilities.

In Meaningful Student Involvement, individual students may be tempted to self-promote and make it sound as if they are the only student voice, or their organization or program is the only student voice program of value. Instead of focusing on themselves, Meaningful Student Involvement engages all voices and teaches students and adults to honor the contributions and abilities of all students everywhere all the time in order to avoid showboating.

### ***Student Barrier Three: Pedestaling***

Adults can be easy to amaze. Seduced by mainstream media and politicians that routinely dismiss the positive power of students, adults often feel like they've discovered gold when students stand up for themselves and work together to create change. In some instances, they lean on these students constantly and raise them to the point of infallibility. I call this *pedestaling* students.

It includes romanticizing, which is making someone always right and out of way of questioning. By focusing on individuals and their specific skills, knowledge, and traits, Meaningful Student Involvement has room for disagreement and mistakes, and to model consensus and collaboration. It is a continuous learning process that engages all participants- adults and students- as equitable partners without artificially or superficially elevating one voice above all others.

### ***Student Barrier Four: Heroism***

In a room with too few representatives, a particularly loud voice standing above all others can sound brave and unique, especially when they represent an under-acknowledged majority. This is especially true in Meaningful Student Involvement. Just because a student puts on a suit and discusses education reform in a way that makes adults listen to them doesn't make them heroic or a superhero. It makes them dressed right and well-versed.

In the same way, there are organizations and programs in Meaningful Student Involvement that are made heroic too. They are made out to represent students particularly well or be the “right” whenever they talk. Among all the students in all schools everywhere though, adults do not lionize programs that make them uncomfortable or ideas that are too far from their acceptance. The ones that are uplifted are generally satisfactory to adults who make decisions about funding, data usage in schools, and education leadership. Organizational heroism is also a danger to Meaningful Student Involvement. Meaningful Student Involvement makes room for students who don't please or appeal to adults so easily, and emphasizes teaching students about the education system that affects them so much.

### ***Student Barrier Five: Lowballing***

There is more out there than just what you see. Many organizations and individuals today are calling

for students to be informants to adult decision-making in schools. They want student voice to be heard. They want a seat at the table for students. However, there's a lot more at stake for students than simply being able to talk or be represented somewhere.

In reality, students comprise up to 92% of an average school building's population. They should be fully infused into the operations of every single school, if only for their energy and to educate them about democracy. Every layer of educational bureaucracy should infuse students as well, positioning in them in powerful roles that effect not only individual students, but all students; not as recipients, but as active partners who design, implement, critically assess, and make substantive decisions about the education system as a whole. Reaching much further than simply acting like the flavor-of-the-day, Meaningful Student Involvement positions students as constant, deliberate, and fully engaged partners throughout all of education, all of the time.

### ***Student Barrier Six: Sockpuppetry***

A lot of adults use students as sockpuppets, feeding them verbiage and giving them the issues adults expect them to address. Intentional or not, this usage of students is designed to deceive the people who are listening to make them think what's being said is genuine student voice. In schools, sockpuppetry is often coupled with manipulation: If students do what adults say, they'll be rewarded; if they don't follow expectations, they'll be punished in some form. Students often don't know they're being used to prop up an adult's perspective.

Sometimes adults use students to provide an alternate or opposite perspective to their own. This is called strawman sockpuppetry. Having no real authority to enact anything in education without adult approval, adults may deliberately position students to say outlandish or contrary things, only to show their perspective as more valid, valuable, and important. Meaningful Student Involvement deliberately positions both traditional and nontraditional student voice to be heard in safe and supportive environments, ensuring that students speak for themselves and are treated as equitable partners with adults throughout education.

### ***Student Barrier Seven: Testing***

Students routinely test adults who call for student voice, insist on student engagement, or advocate for student empowerment. They call for the most outlandish things, demand the most certain terms, or engage in the most inane conversations. These are all tests, if only because they challenge adults to recognize

## **Overcoming Student Barriers to Meaningful Student Involvement**

Paying attention to the student barriers to Meaningful Student Involvement will honor the legacy of the past and present. As students around the world rally for more influence within the educational systems that are meant to serve them, Meaningful Student Involvement shows how all students everywhere can do the same, and more. That is transformation.

## **Part 9. Structural Barriers to Meaningful Student Involvement**

The structure of the education system acts as a barrier of Meaningful Student Involvement. Adults throughout education, including teachers, administrators, school support staff, and others, frequently protest that they would love to engage student voice but for the fact that a significant number of decisions are not theirs to give away or even to make themselves. Highly-controlled schools can leave adults who work in education feeling like they have very little discretion in their positions, whether in the classroom, school office, district board room, or state agency. Often, adults subject to rigid directives from above may find it easier not to resist administrators but to increase controls on the students they work with.

Structural barriers may include the following areas.

### ***Policies and Regulations***

The current economic and social conditions in a given school combined with an absence of policies that call for Meaningful Student Involvement can undermine the ability to conduct activities.

### ***Accepted Practices***

Lack of services and a sense of hostility or unfriendliness towards historically disengaged students within a school can hinder Meaningful Student Involvement. School culture and relationships between educators can limit their reception for particular types of students from becoming meaningfully involved in their educations.

### ***Social Conditions***

Adults can unconsciously discriminate against students in education spoken and unspoken norms, classroom practices, policy and enforcement, and district, state, and federal rules that can disengage students. Students, teachers, administrators, and others must educate lawmakers and school leaders about Meaningful Student Involvement.

### ***Transportation***

Many students do not have assured access to a vehicle. Education program planners should schedule activities in easily accessible locations, and should provide students with travel vouchers and/or immediate reimbursement for the cost of travel.

### ***Timing***

A lack of awareness or indifference to student schedules blocks students from participating in many education system activities. Few students have the income to buy food at restaurants, so when an activities occur at mealtimes, schools should provide students with food or with sufficient funds to pay for the meal. If they happen during the day, students should be ensured credit for participating. If they happen on the weekend, adults should double check against student calendars.

### ***Equipment and Support***

Education agencies should provide students with the same equipment as other employees, such as computer workstation, mailbox, voice mail, E-mail, and business cards. Failure to do so carries a powerful message that these students—whether they are volunteers, interns, or peer educators, full-time or part-time—are not important or, at least, are not as important as adults.

### ***Program Procedures***

With input from both students and adults, all levels of the education system should develop policies on Meaningful Student Involvement. Policies need to respect students' desire for independence and, at the same time, address the legal liability of the organization, the comfort level and legal responsibilities of adults, and parents.

### ***Training***

Adults throughout the education system need cultural competency training focused on student culture. Staff—whether working directly with students or not—will need to accept the perspectives and ideas of students and adapt to changing educational norms to meet the needs of students today and ensure Meaningful Student Involvement.

## Part 9. Critical Questions about Meaningful Student Involvement

For too long student involvement and student voice activities have been seen as ways to engage those who already engaged in schools: honors student, traditional student leaders and “star students”. Activities have not have been particularly significant or beneficial to even those students. *Meaningful Student Involvement* requires deliberation, intention and connection—among students, between students and adults, and throughout the larger education system.

Following is a brief planning guide designed to encourage students and adults to think purposefully, critically and powerfully about their intentions for involving students. Note that this is not an *activity planning guide*; rather, it is a guide designed to ensure that the activity that you are embarking upon is meaningful.

### Framing Meaningful Student Involvement

1. Why do you want to integrate Meaningful Student Involvement in your school?
2. What do you want to see happen because of Meaningful Student Involvement?
3. What challenges do you foresee for Meaningful Student Involvement?
4. Identify the type of opportunity for Meaningful Student Involvement you are going to plan for:
  - Curriculum design
  - Classroom management
  - Building administration
  - Extra-curricular
  - School improvement
  - District administration
  - Regional administration
  - State administration
  - Other:

5. Identify the type of Meaningful Student Involvement activity:

- Planning
- Research
- Teaching
- Evaluation
- Decision-making
- Advocacy
- Other:

6. What is the name of the activity?

6a. Can you write a short description of the activity?

## **The Substance of Meaningful Student Involvement**

7. Can you describe how the following steps of the Cycle of Involvement will occur?

- Listen
- Validate
- Authorize
- Mobilize
- Reflect

8. What level of authority will students have?

- No authority: Students assigned with no contributions
- Low authority: Adults lead, students contribute
- Medium authority: Students lead, adults contribute
- High authority: Students and adults lead and contribute as equal participants

9a. Can you describe student authority?

10. Identify which students will be meaningfully involved. Can you briefly describe how that specific group will be involved?

- Grade level
- Academic achievement level
- Leadership level
- Learning styles diversity
- Racial diversity

- Ethnic diversity
- Cultural diversity
- Gender diversity
- Sexual orientation diversity
- Class type
- Club type
- Special group type
- Other:

10a. Can you describe the participants?

11. Can you identify when Meaningful Student Involvement will occur and provide details?

- In class
- During school/outside of class
- Before or after school
- Weekends
- Other:

12. Can you describe the timing, and why Meaningful Student Involvement will occur at that time?

13. Where will Meaningful Student Involvement occur?

- In a classroom
- In an office
- In a different “student space”
- In a different “adult space”
- In a school setting
- In an administrative office
- Other:

14. Can you describe the space where the activity will occur?

15. Can you describe how students have contributed to creating or otherwise influencing the activity setting?

## **Readiness for Meaningful Student Involvement**

16. Can you describe how the whole school became aware of Meaningful Student Involvement?

17. Can you describe how students are prepared for Meaningful Student Involvement?

18. Do students participate in educational skill-building activities designed to increase their personal and collective capacity to be meaningfully involved?

19. Can you identify which skills are increased through Meaningful Student Involvement?

- Social relationships within peer groups
- Written communication
- Oral communication
- Public speaking
- Listening to peers
- Managing change
- Conflict management
- Diversity awareness
- Emotional management
- Intergenerational understanding

20. Can you describe what knowledge areas are increased?

- Learning process
- The education system
- School improvement
- Student voice
- Roles for students as partners in education and school improvement
- Intergenerational equity in schools

21. Can you describe how adults in the school prepare for Meaningful Student Involvement?

21. Do adults participate in educational skill-building activities designed to increase their personal and collective capacity to be meaningfully involved?

22. What adult skills are increased?

- Listening to student voice
- Treating students as partners
- Understanding adultism
- Conflict management
- Diversity awareness
- Managing change
- Intergenerational understanding

Other(s):

23. What adult knowledge areas are increased?

- Learning diversity
- The education system
- School improvement
- Student voice
- Roles for students as partners in education
- Intergenerational equity in schools
- Integrating student voice in curriculum
- Infusing student voice in building leadership
- Other(s):

## **Measuring Meaningful Student Involvement**

24. Identify which stakeholders will be impacted by Meaningful Student Involvement:

- Student and adult participants
- Student population of the whole school
- Nonprofit staff throughout the whole school
- All members of the school
- Parents and families
- Younger or older students
- Education administration staff
- School members
- Educational support organizations
- Other(s):

24a. Specifically, how will you know Meaningful Student Involvement will affect the group(s) you selected?

25. What impact areas will be measured?

- Student participant learning
- Student body learning
- Student participant attitudes
- Student body attitudes

- Nonprofit staff learning
- Nonprofit staff attitudes
- School climate
- Learning school
- Multiple stakeholder involvement
- Other(s):

25a. Specifically, how will the activity impact the outcome area(s) you selected?

26. What are the learning outcomes for the activity?

27. How will you assess learning outcomes resulting from Meaningful Student Involvement?

28. How will Meaningful Student Involvement improve your whole school?

29. How will you know Meaningful Student Involvement affected your whole school?

30. Is Meaningful Student Involvement part of your school's formal improvement plan? If so, how, and if not, why not?

31. How will the effect of Meaningful Student Involvement on your school improvement goals be assessed?

## **Sustaining Meaningful Student Involvement**

32. Can you describe how student and adult reflections on the activity be utilized beyond this one activity?

33. Can you describe how the activity be acknowledged to the following:

- Student participants:
- Student body:
- Nonprofit staff:
- Others:

34. How will this activity or its outcomes be sustained beyond this plan?

# Part 10. Meaningful Student Involvement Assessment

This assessment is designed to answer the question, “Does this activity qualify as Meaningful Student Involvement?” See below for explanations.

Characteristics	Features	Check the appropriate box		
		Currently Happening	Developing	Not Presently
<b>Are These Characteristics Apparent?</b>	Do Activities Include These Features?			
<b>1. School Wide Approaches</b>	• Student/adult partnerships			
	• Diversity			
	• System-wide activities			
	• Whole school approaches			
	• Variety of roles			
<b>2. Equitable Student Authority</b>	• Equitable relationships			
	• Increasing ability			
	• Acknowledged action			
	• Full membership			
	• Strategic growth			
<b>3. Interrelated Strategies</b>	• Systems thinking			
	• Co-learning			
	• Ongoing mapping			
	• Formal planning			
<b>4. Sustainable</b>	• Daytime infusion			

<b>Structures of Support</b>	• Policy creation			
	• Valuing sustainability			
	• Ongoing action			
	• New attitudes			
<b>5. High Personal Commitment</b>	• Scientific evaluation			
	• Mutual acknowledgment			
	• Efficacy			
	• Evolving capacities			
<b>6. Strong Learning Connections</b>	• Learning made obvious			
	• Acknowledged learning			

## **Part 11. Closing**

The essential partner in school reform—*students*—are not routinely, systemically, or systematically engaged in the process of school reform; more so, their role is continuously relegated to that of "recipient." Their roles must change in order for ANY school reform to be effective. The change that is required is the fostering of Meaningful Student Involvement.

The greatest challenge facing schools today is not the literacy deficit or even the achievement gap, as tragic and real as both those are. The single problem plaguing all students in all schools everywhere is the crisis of disconnection. It is disconnection from learning, from curriculum, from peers, from adults; it is disconnection from relevance, rigor, and relationships; it is disconnection from self and community; it is simple disconnection. While it doesn't only affect schools, it does plague schools in a special way.

The cure to disconnection is meaningfulness. Meaningful Student Involvement happens when the roles of students are actively re-aligned from being the passive recipients of schools to becoming active partners throughout the educational process. Meaningful Student Involvement can happen in any location throughout education, including the classroom, the counselor's office, hallways, after school programs, district board of education offices, at the state or federal levels, and in other places that directly affect the students' experience of education. Real learning and real purpose take form through Meaningful Student Involvement, often showing immediate impacts on the lives of students by actively authorizing each of them to have powerful, purposeful opportunities to impact their own learning and the lives of others.

As we see increased interest in the entwined topics of student engagement and student voice throughout schools, it becomes easy to misunderstand the relationships between these topics and Meaningful Student Involvement. Student voice is any verbal, visual, or other expression learners make regarding education. This can include students sharing their life stories in class, or graffitiing on the hallway wall. Student engagement is the outcome of learners' emotional, social, cultural, psychological, or other bonds towards school; it is a feeling. 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. It can be said, then, that Meaningful Student Involvement strengthens, supports, and sustains student voice in order to foster student engagement for every student in every grade in every school.

This new vision for students provides all people in schools, young and adult, with opportunities to collaborate in exciting new ways while securing powerful new outcomes for everyone involved, most importantly students themselves. The impacts Meaningful Student Involvement has are only beginning to be shown; with time, expanded practice, and investment, I am convinced that this vision will fully demonstrate not only the efficacy of the practice, but ultimately, of education, community, and democracy itself. There can be no greater goal for any school.

## Resources

These are resources related to Meaningful Student Involvement.

**SoundOut.org** SoundOut is an expert assistance program focused on promoting Student Voice and Meaningful Student Involvement throughout education. We work with K-12 schools, districts, state and provincial education agencies, and nonprofit education organizations across the United States and Canada. Online: [soundout.org](http://soundout.org) Email: [info@soundout.org](mailto:info@soundout.org) Phone: (360) 489-9680.

*SoundOut Student Voice Curriculum* by Adam Fletcher. The SoundOut Student Voice Class Curriculum is a collection of twenty-seven lesson plans, a facilitator's guide, a student handbook and an evaluation guide designed to teach high school students about how they can become partners in changing schools. (378 pgs, 2012) [www.amazon.com/1483941396/](http://www.amazon.com/1483941396/)

*The Guide to Student Voice* by Adam Fletcher. A clear, conversational guide on how adults can partner with students to improve schools, and do it successfully. Students, teachers, administrators, advocates, and others will find practical tools, theory, and implementation activities, as well as resources and more. (62 pgs, 2013) <http://amazon.com/148499504X>

*Meaningful Student Involvement Deep Assessment* by Adam Fletcher. A series of open questions are for individuals or groups to study where and how Meaningful Student Involvement occurs in a school or educational organization. Focused on motivation and culture, it features student and adult readiness, relationships, action, rigor and relevance, sustainability, barriers, and action evaluations. (25 pgs, 2013) <http://bit.ly/12XGIwl>

*Meaningful Student Involvement: Guide to Students as Partners in School Change 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition* by Adam Fletcher. Highlighting a practical framework, important considerations, and real-world examples, this Guide is all about engaging students throughout education. Recommended for anyone interested in student voice, student empowerment, student engagement, or building community in schools. (28 pgs, 2005) [www.soundout.org/MSIGuide.pdf](http://www.soundout.org/MSIGuide.pdf)

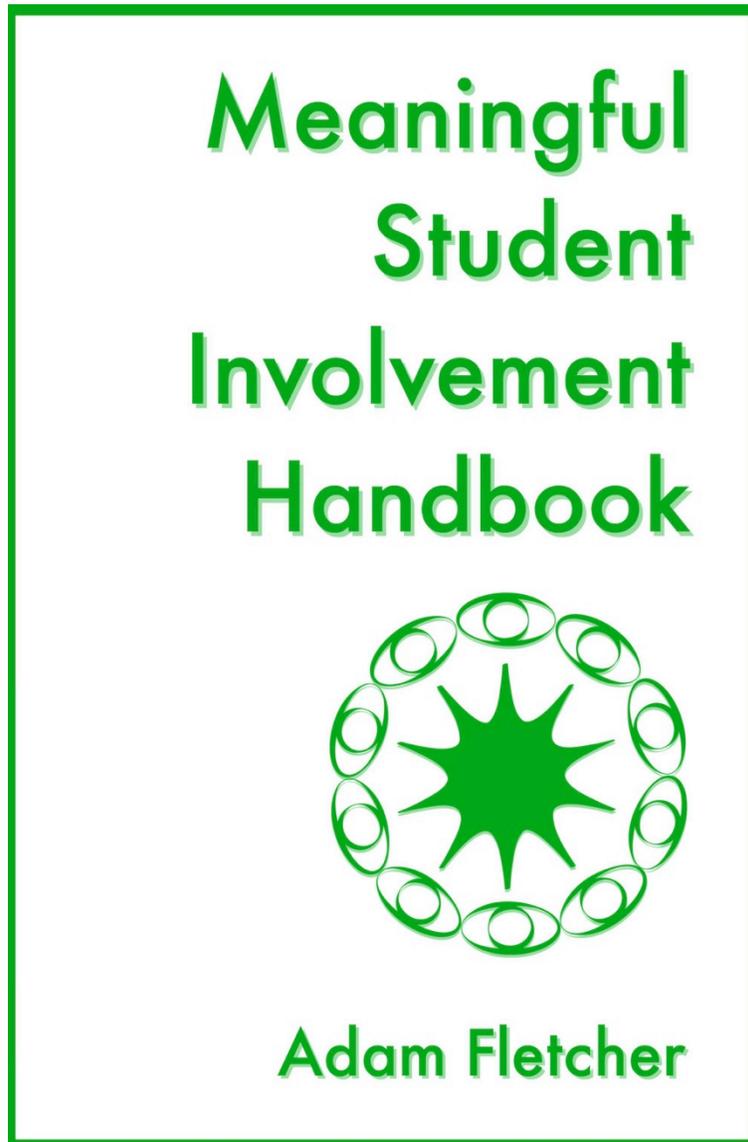
*Adam Fletcher*

*Stories of Meaningful Student Involvement* by Adam Fletcher. A collection of examples of meaningful student involvement in action in schools. These anecdotes illustrate various approaches to engaging student voice in school by exploring the applications of engaging students throughout education in dozens of diverse schools. (40 pgs, 2004) [www.soundout.org/MSIStories.pdf](http://www.soundout.org/MSIStories.pdf)

*Meaningful Student Involvement Research Guide* by Adam Fletcher. This booklet can give advocates a “leg up” in their research needs by illustrating the breadth of research available about engaging student voice throughout education. This Guide highlights 14 research studies and includes a useful listing of research available. (36 pgs, 2004) [www.soundout.org/MSIRearch.pdf](http://www.soundout.org/MSIRearch.pdf)

*Meaningful Student Involvement Resource Guide* by Adam Fletcher. This guide provides descriptions and annotations for dozens of publications, toolkits, organizations, and websites that support student voice throughout education. (35 pgs, 2003) [www.soundout.org/MSIResources.pdf](http://www.soundout.org/MSIResources.pdf)

COMING in 2015!



The *Meaningful Student Involvement Handbook* is a master guide providing information about student voice, student engagement, student/adult partnerships, and more. The official manual for SoundOut, this volume contains everything students and adults in education should learn in order to engage all students in every school as partners in every facet of education for the purpose of strengthening their commitment to learning, community, and democracy. With more than 300 citations across almost 400 pages, dozens of recent and historic anecdotes, and several unique tools, there is no other publication like this available today.



Since 2002, SoundOut has been a education movement leader focused on student voice, student engagement and Meaningful Student Involvement. Our clients and collaborators utilize SoundOut for a variety of services, including training, professional development, freelance writing, program consultation, and many other activities.

[SoundOut.org](http://SoundOut.org)