

Really Listening to Students Has an Academic Payoff, New Research Finds

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New research has confirmed a link between acting on students' feedback and their academic success, strengthening arguments for incorporating student voice into school improvement efforts.

For students, a belief that schools are responsive to their ideas correlates with a higher grade-point average and better attendance, researchers at the University of California, Riverside and Northwestern University found.

"Young people are raising their voice in powerful ways, and one of the most crucial places for them to express their views is in school—a place that has a huge impact on their lives," said Joseph Kahne, a professor of education policy and co-director of the Civic Engagement Research Group at UC Riverside.

While previous research on student voice has focused largely on student engagement and civic involvement, the new findings suggest an academic benefit as well.

Kahne and his fellow researchers based their findings on an analysis of survey responses and academic data from 12,000 9th-grade students in Chicago collected during the 2018-19 school year, and their results were published in the May issue of the American Journal of Education.

The findings come as districts around the country, including Chicago, explore ways to more formally and thoughtfully seek student feedback on school policies and classroom concerns through surveys, listening groups, and comprehensive student voice strategies.

The key to making those efforts successful, Kahne's research suggests, will be ensuring that all students, including students from marginalized groups, believe the initiatives lead to meaningful changes, rather than serving as "check-the-box" exercises.

"This work is often either a coalition of the willing, or the honors students, or that kind of thing," said Heather Van Benthuyzen, executive director of the office of social science and civic engagement at Chicago Public Schools. "We always have to ask ourselves whose voices aren't often heard that need to be heard the most."

That means making sure that students from all racial and ethnic groups, students from low-income families, students with disabilities, and students who are shy about speaking up believe educators are actively engaged with their ideas, Van Benthuyzen said.

The Chicago district is carrying out a comprehensive effort to incorporate student voice strategies into everything from classroom management to school turnaround efforts. The new research will help fuel that work, Van Benthuyzen said.

The link between student voice and academic success

The study's authors used student responses from Chicago's 5Essentials Survey, which asks students about a range of issues related to relationships, trust, and supportive school environments. The analysis focused on how strongly students agreed, on a 1 to 4 scale, with two statements: "If students express concerns about a school policy, school leaders are responsive," and "If students express concerns to their teachers about their class, teachers are responsive."

Fifty-nine percent of 9th graders responding to those statements agreed that school leaders were responsive, and an additional 12 percent strongly agreed. Sixty-one percent said teachers were responsive, and 17 percent strongly agreed. The researchers ranked schools based on student responses to those two items.

What they found: Students who attended schools that ranked in the bottom tenth for responsiveness missed about 7 percent of school days, compared to 6.1 percent of school days for students whose schools ranked in the top tenth on those student voice questions.

Students at schools in the bottom tenth in the analysis had a predicted GPA of 2.65, compared to a predicted GPA of 2.85 for students in the top tenth on the responsiveness rankings.

The link between school responsiveness and student success remained statistically significant, even when researchers controlled for students' attendance and grades the previous year and other demographic and socioeconomic variables.

To test whether the correlation could be attributed to some other measure of school quality, the researchers ran an additional analysis, factoring in parents' responses to survey questions about school quality and their children's teachers. They found that the results were still significant after that additional test, Kahne said.

Translating research into action

Students may see their school as responsive, even if educators don't prescriptively respond to all of their ideas, Kahne said.

"Sometimes it may not just be that the school is changing what they're doing, it's also that the student has a sense of belonging and connection and also a sense of agency," he said. "We know that that is incredibly valuable for adolescents."

More research is needed to understand the link between listening to students and better academic outcomes, the study's authors wrote.

And schools and districts need to do more work to scale-up efforts to listen to students in systematic ways that actually lead to two-way communication and change, said Van Benthuisen, of Chicago schools.

Chicago schools incorporated student voice into a 2019 civic life strategy, and district leaders have worked in the years since to incorporate student perspectives into existing "structures of power," like budgeting, rather than treating it as an optional add-on, she said.

Student Voice Committees in 161 Chicago schools collaborate with administrators on school improvement efforts. Students on those committees will train their peers this summer to analyze data and give feedback.

And teachers and administrators receive professional development on how to ask students "what's working for you and what isn't?" Van Benthuisen.

For example, students might create and sign shared expectations for the classroom and amend them throughout the school year, rather than abiding by set rules drafted by the teacher on the first day. And teachers may make a more deliberate effort to meet one-on-one with students who are struggling to see how they might adjust their instruction, Van Benthuisen said.

"We as adults learned to do school a certain way ... and we lose touch with the perspective of young people," she said. "If we want students to have really meaningful collaboration, we have to build adults' capacity to have those conversations too."