

CHICAGO PUBLIC SCHOOLS STUDENT VOICE POSITION PAPER

Mikva Challenge Education Council, December 2009

The Education Council at Mikva Challenge has concluded from our research and report on *How to Reinvent High Schools* that our top recommendation is for **Chicago Public Schools to incorporate authentic student voice into every high school through Student Voice Committees (SVC) composed of student leaders and concerned students.**

The Problem

We, as students, are the majority population in our schools yet we are rarely given responsibility in school decisions. Overall, there is a breakdown in communication among students, faculty and administration which is in large part due to the lack of trust. Our research showed that students who are not part of student council feel the adults in their school don't trust them as much as the students in student council pointing to the benefit of getting students involved in school leadership¹. Trust is essential for empowerment and peace.² When trust is missing, students often feel like they have no purpose in school, leading to bigger issues like dropping out and youth violence.³

We believe and research shows that authentic student voice is one of the keys in addressing these problems. We assume that organizations like Student Council will promote student voice when in reality, not every school incorporates that into their student councils. If there were Student Voice Committees in high schools, students would not only be able to make decisions and voice their opinions about issues that occur within school, but also become more engaged and connected to their school communities.^{4,5} Conflicts would decrease from this because students would feel a deeper, more personal connection to their school. Out of these councils, communication can be improved and deeper levels of trust can be achieved. When there is greater connection and trust between school adults and students, students are more likely to attend and perform at higher standards.^{2,4}

Our Recommendations and Timeline

Given the enormous task of Reinventing High Schools, through research, surveys and interviews with school officials, we have found that it is necessary to commit to the importance of student voice within a school system and individual schools as well as implement specific steps to achieving this commitment. Thus we are making two asks:

- 1. Authentic student voice should be incorporated into every high school through a Student Voice Committee (SVC).**
- 2. A stated commitment to authentic student voice in important Chicago Public School decisions.**
 - The following statement is an example of such a commitment:

Drafted Student Voice Statement

Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child states, "Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child." In accordance with that statement, Chicago Public Schools believes that students are experts on their experiences in schools. Thus, principals and administrative officials will treat them as such by including their voices and opinions in the most important decisions schools face such as safety and discipline strategies, curriculum and instruction, school culture and health.

Timeline:

- In the next year**, we want a stated commitment to youth voice in Chicago Public Schools and a pilot of SVCs in at least 12 schools.
- In the next 3 years**, we want to expand SVCs to be in half of all Chicago Public High Schools.

¹ See Appendix B, graph B-1

² Byrk, A. S., & Schneider, B. Trust in schools: A core resource for improvement. New York: Russell Sage Foundation. (2002)

³ Mitra, D., & Gross, S. "Increasing Student Voice in High School Reform: Building Partnerships, Improving Outcomes." *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, Vol. 37, No. 4 (2009): 522-543.

⁴ West, John. *An Evaluation of the Mikva Challenge Peace and Leadership Program*. Masters Candidate, University of Illinois at Chicago (2008).

⁵ McQuillan, Patrick. "Possibilities and Pitfalls: A Comparative Analysis of Student Empowerment." *American Educational Research Journal*, Vol. 42, No. 4 (Winter, 2005): 639-670.

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- **Our long-term vision** is for every Chicago Public High School and Middle School to have a SVC, youth voice to be a consistent part of the decision-making processes in CPS and for a director of student voice to be hired.

Key Implementation Strategies⁶

- Students from all grades and interests should be included on the SVC.
 - SVC must be widely advertised to ensure that all youth in school take it seriously and that it can have the biggest impact. It should be known as widely as are sports teams.
 - Perhaps start out the year with a 'student voice pep rally'
- The SVC should meet with each other at least once per week.
- Research must be a central component to the work the students do. Student research could be integrated into CPS data analysis.
 - Student-conducted survey to assess concerns of students.
 - Student analysis of existing CPS surveys and data such as the Student Connections Survey.
 - Based on research, students produce written documents of their recommendations for improvement.
 - Research about implementation and effects of recommendations will be ongoing.
- Principals must be committed to working with the students and have a consistent line of communication with SVC students outside of meeting times.
 - Principals meet with SVC at least 6 times per year (3 times per semester)
 - SVCs have some contact during the summer
- SVC must be integrated into CPS structure.
 - CPS hires a new position to manage SVCs called Director of Student Voice
 - CAOs hold principals accountable to showing how youth voice has been incorporated into their decisions.
 - SVCs are consulted by Instructional Leadership Teams.
 - LSC student is part of SVC.
- SVC should meet with all stakeholder groups within the school: Non-principal administrators, other staff, teachers, LSC, and other students.
- An adult-ally within the school, possibly partnered with someone from community organization should facilitate the committee.
 - Mikva Challenge can work with CPS to arrange training for student participants and adult allies in order to help support the work.
- Current student government clubs such as student councils could be restructured to meet the goals of a SVC.
- The main costs of these SVCs are food, stipend for adult-ally, and a project coordinator within CPS totaling less than 300,000 dollars per year.

Supporting Research

SVCs will create lasting change in schools and the system as a whole.

- In an evaluation of Mikva Challenges' Peace and Leadership Councils in Bowen, Clemente and Al Raby, 82 percent⁷ of the students involved said they would continue to work to improve their schools and communities.
- Cook-Sather (2002)⁸ cited in a journal article on student empowerment found, "when schools listen, students not only feel more engaged but are also inclined to take more responsibility for education because it is no longer something being done to them but rather something they do."

⁶ Appendix A lists more in-depth implementation strategies

⁷ West, John. *An Evaluation of the Mikva Challenge Peace and Leadership Program*. Masters Candidate, University of Illinois at Chicago (2008).

⁸ McQuillan, Patrick. "Possibilities and Pitfalls: A Comparative Analysis of Student Empowerment." *American Educational Research Journal*, Vol. 42, No. 4 (Winter, 2005): 639-670.

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- A report released by the Consortium on Chicago School Research on *The Essential Supports for School Improvement*⁹ that is the basis for The Five Fundamentals, the whole-school improvement model of CPS, cites “shared leadership” as a fundamental element important for improving instructional leadership. In particular it states, “teachers and students assume leadership roles outside of the classroom, actively participate in the school improvement process, and take ownership of resulting setbacks and successes.” Student voice committees would be an excellent way to ensure this goal is achieved.

CPS students¹⁰ and teachers¹¹ surveyed agree that SVCs will help improve their schools.¹²

- Over half of the students in cps (53%) don’t know how decisions are made around their school which means that they probably do not have a say in the decision. Students who are involved in student council and/or who have more constant contact with the principal know more about how decisions are made in their schools than those who are not. Three-quarters of students say that they are willing to participate with students that would advise the principal and make changes in the school.
- According to our survey, 76 .3% of the students agree that having a SVC would be beneficial for their school. Students who care and want to make changes in their schools just need the opportunity to do so.
- A student from the education council shared his experience with student voice, “When I first got in high school I didn’t care, I wanted to transfer. I had no friends. But my sophomore year I had to do a peace project where I had to talk to the principal. When I met with the principal she expressed to me that she wanted to see more students stepping up. It makes them (principals, administration, etc.) happy when students take initiative on making positive change in school. She would rather see students pushing administration for change and action instead of administration pushing students. I presented to her that the school should do a peace project, the principal agreed. From actually working on this project with the principal I got a whole new feeling and respect for my school and principal. In a sense I understood her more. In the end I felt more part of the school.”
- Only 31% of teachers surveyed feel that there is a lot of student voice in their schools. 72 % of students feel a Student Voice Committee would positively affect their schools. After a meeting with 21 teachers and education council students, one teacher went back to her school and began a SVC.

Principals have expressed interest and some are already enacting councils.

- Several members of the education council have brought the idea to their principals and have convinced four of their principals to start a SVC.
- Mikva Challenge is facilitating Peace and Leadership Councils, a model for a Student Voice Committee, in 5 schools currently. Some schools even had the principal request it.
- One student from the education council recalls when she was presenting the report that the education council produced to her principal, she was able to get a better understanding of why he did the things that he did for the school. Before hand there was no level of respect or connection amongst the principal and the students. From meeting and understanding her principal she feels like if there are any major problems within the school, she can sit down with her principal and he will value her opinion. He even comes to her for advice now.

⁹ Sebring, Penny B. et al. “The Essentials Supports for School Improvement.” *Consortium on Chicago School Research*. University of Chicago. (2006).

¹⁰ Statistics based on an Education Council survey of 405 students in 61 different Chicago Public High Schools.

¹¹ Statistics based on an Education Council survey of 29 teachers from 21 different schools.

¹² See Appendix B for graphs of student survey results.

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Appendix A. Key Elements for Implementation of Student Voice Committees

Every school functions differently, and thus it seems unlikely that we can discover one form of a Student Voice Committee (SVC) that fits all schools. However, there are certain bottom lines that should be taken into account with implementation in order to ensure success. The following 6 key elements are based on the Forum in Youth Investment Report, *Building Effective Youth Councils: A Practical Guide to Engaging Youth in Policy Making* (2007)¹³.

Key 1) Students: Who is recruited and how?

- The entire student body should be exposed to the process of the council formation so that students on the committee are taken seriously as representatives by the student body.
 - **Why?** Several of our council members served on Peace and Leadership Councils in their schools. The recruitment went through teachers, and they often felt that other students did not know what they were doing or why it mattered. Thus, they felt they could have been more powerful if students understood the role they played in making the schools better. Ninety-three percent of students that responded to our survey would definitely or maybe be willing to participate in an SVC.
 - **Implementation Strategies:** Full school or extra-curricular based student-elections, start off the school year with a student voice pep rally, principal/teacher recommendations with widely-publicized application process.
- SVCs should have representatives from all grades, interests, achievement levels and cultures that are present in school.
 - **Why?** Different concerns face different grade levels, thus they should all have a voice in the committee. Also, it would promote school unity to have students of different grade levels working together.
 - **Implementation Strategies:** Recruit representatives from different student groups, open council regularly to fuller school meetings to ensure all youth have access.
- SVCs should include the LSC student representative.
 - **Why?** LSCs are already an institution in all high schools and have input on important decisions, therefore the student on the LSC should be connected to what the concerns of the student body are.
 - **Implementation Strategies:** Require that LSC student reps are a member of the SVC at their school. The LSC student rep could possibly have a leadership role in the group.

Key 2) Infrastructure: Where does it happen and who pays for it?

- Chicago public schools should partner with foundations and other private entities in order to support the cost of the committees.
 - **Why?** We realize that CPS is currently in a budget crisis. In order for SVCs to be successful, outside foundations could be asked to support the extra costs of the committees.
 - **Implementation Strategies:** Write grants to inform local foundations of SVC and ask for their support.
- SVCs should have a designated meeting space within schools, a process for youth to be able to get correspondence LSC with the school community and consistent meeting times (at least once per week).

¹³ Martin, Shanetta et al. "Building Effective Youth Councils: A Practical Guide to Engaging Youth in Policy Making." *The Forum for Youth Investment*, (July 2007).

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- **Why?** It would stabilize the committee along with making sure they are organized and secure in the school. If the school community has a way of communicating with the SVC, it can more successfully represent students.
- **Implementation Strategies:** Consult with the principal to help find a safe space within the school building.

Key 3) Staff: Who staffs it? How do you train and support staff?

- There should be a Director of Student Voice at Chicago Public Schools to oversee the implementation of these committees and other student engagement opportunities.
 - **Why?** Student Voice is important for improvements in the school. The coordinator is needed to help oversee that the SVC's are functioning according to the implementation strategies.
 - **Implementation Strategies:** CPS approves the position and chooses an appropriate candidate with the help of Mikva Challenge education council. The director of Student Voice can partner with Mikva Challenge to help oversee the creation, training and sustainability of all SVCs.
- Each SVC should have a permanent facilitator who is financially compensated to help handle the logistics of the meetings and to provide leadership, social-emotional training and support for students.
 - **Why?** Students can develop trust and communication with a permanent facilitator. Students are not often asked to voice their opinions, and need an adult guide to help them in order to be a success.
 - **Implementation Strategies:** A school staff member or a facilitator from an outside organization should be asked to facilitate. The person should be compensated with a modest stipend. If it is a teacher, s/he could teach one less class in exchange for facilitating the SVC.
- SVC staff should be trained by an outside facilitator such as Mikva Challenge to help orient them to the purpose of the councils.
 - **Why?** We want the SVCs to be legitimate. Thus, it is important that all facilitators are driven by similar goals and understand the larger purpose. It is also important that they are equipped with games, activities and exercises to help engage the students in the work.
 - **Implementation Strategies:** Mikva Challenge Education Council can prepare a packet of meeting materials to distribute to all schools. Mikva Challenge could partner with CPS to provide support and training. The Director of Student Voice in CPS could also help provide ongoing support.

Key 4) Youth Skill Development: What skills need to be developed in PAC youth?

- To be strong youth leaders and have an effective committee, youth need to be trained in some key leadership skills such as empathy, critical thinking, communication skills, research skills and professionalism.
 - **Why?** The students will be representing the whole student body, and they need these skills to do it effectively. One student on the Education Council shared when he and other non-Mikva students met with their principal, the other students did not speak up. It is a unique experience for students to be asked to voice their opinions and thus they need to be trained in certain leadership skills to successfully communicate and create change.
 - **Implementation Strategies:** Ask Mikva Challenge to provide the students and facilitators with workshops and trainings.
- Youth must learn how to work together and with different stakeholder groups.
 - **Why?** Youth are often distracted by each other and are intimidated by people with different levels of power. It is important to address this issue directly to ensure the youth are effective. There are not a lot of opportunities in traditional schools to learn these skills.
 - **Implementation Strategies:** Get support from Mikva and other organizations to get activities and strategies for teaching these skills in the meetings. Make powerful people available to speak with the youth and hold them accountable to follow-through.

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Key 5) Identifying Youth-Driven Issues: How are issues selected and by whom? How do Councils strategize around issues?

- Research must be a central component to the work the students do. Student research could be integrated into CPS data analysis.
 - **Why?** Problems and solutions are more powerful when there is data to back it up. Students can build their research skills while at the same time produce findings that are reliable and useful to individual schools and CPS.
 - **Implementation Strategies:** Students can conduct surveys to assess concerns of students. They can analyze existing CPS surveys and data such as the Student Connection Survey to give more qualitative understanding of the numbers from a student perspective and help come up with solutions. After doing data analysis, students should write reports of their recommendations. Research should be ongoing.
- Issues should be jointly selected by youth and principals.
 - **Why?** It gives youth a chance to voice their ideals, opinions and professionalism while at the same time they can get the buy-in of the principal in their work. This can also help make sure that the students are working on issues for which the principal is being held accountable.
 - **Implementation Strategies:** In the initial meetings with the principal, students bring up issues in their school and present them to the principal who then provides them with feedback and guidance.

Key 6) Building Authentic Youth Voice in the School Community: What groups/individuals in the school does the council meet with? What does the council produce? How is youth voice authentically incorporated?

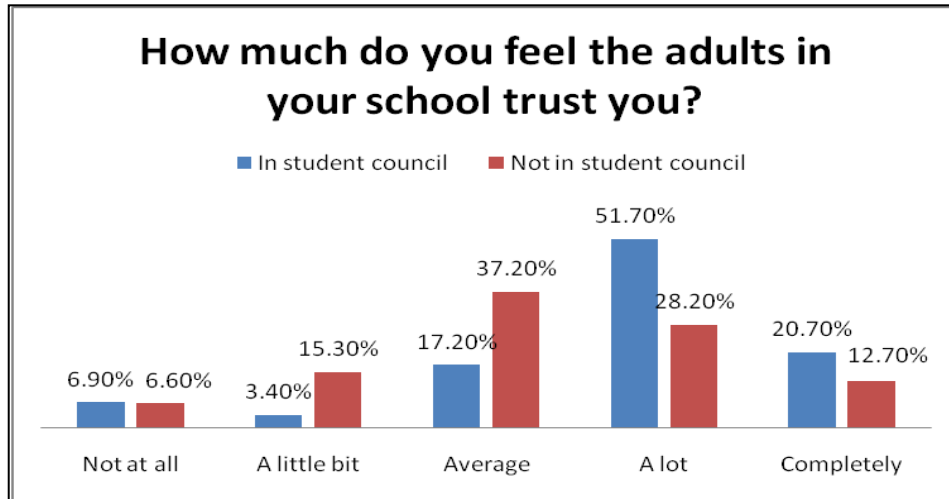
- SVCs should survey, hold forums and meet throughout the year with different stakeholder groups including non-principal administrators, other staff, teachers, LSC and other students.
 - **Why?** So SVC can collect data from all the different people in the school community and build relationships across groups. This increases trust and allows for everyone to have a voice in decisions.
 - **Implementation Strategies:** Create a structure to gain feedback. Publicize the work of the SVC and always be open for feedback and discourse.
- SVCs should meet with the principal at least six times per year
 - **Why?** So students won't lose interest in what they are doing and to keep the principal up to date.
 - **Implementation Strategies:** One student will be in charge of setting up a meeting day with the principal.
- Principals need to be held accountable by CAOs for showing how they have taken student recommendations into consideration when they make decisions in their schools.
 - **Why?** If principals reject the recommendations of the SVC when making decisions in their schools, then the students will not have achieved real power and will lose interest. It is important for there to be follow-through on the part of the Principal to ensure trust is maintained and students stay engaged.
 - **Implementation Strategies:** Student voice is included in the student connections survey and in other district-wide measurements of school improvement. CAOs are involved in coordinating trainings and evaluation of the SVCs in their areas. They have Principals report on how they have incorporated student voice in their decisions.

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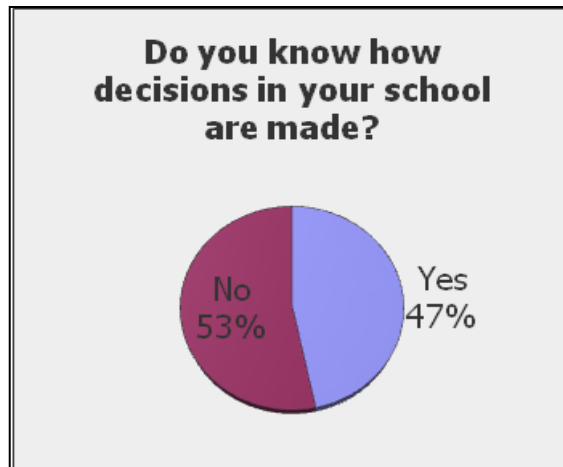
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Appendix B. Graphs of Student Voice Survey Results

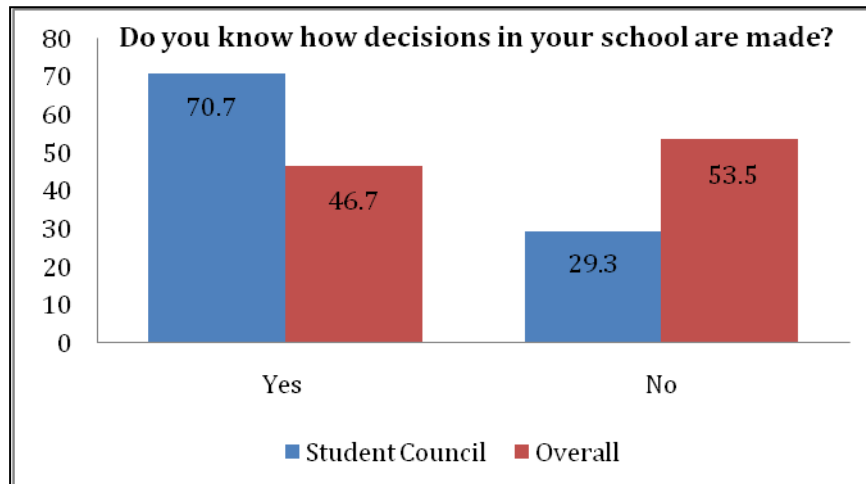
Graph B-1.



Graph B-2.



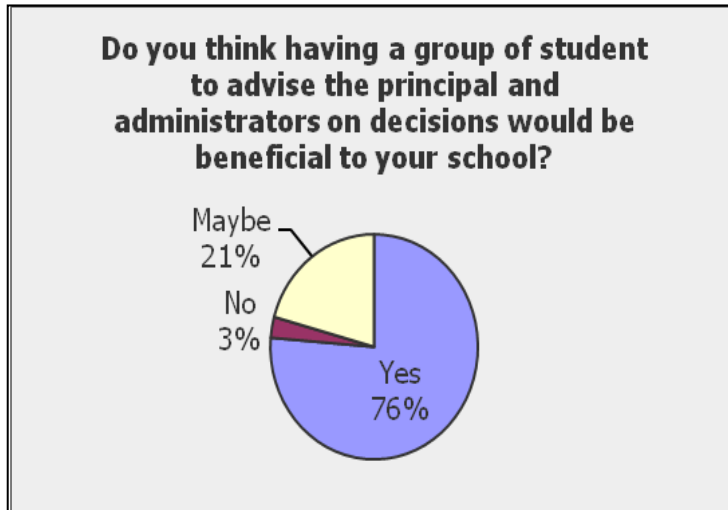
Graph B-3.



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Graph B-4.



Graph B-5.

