



YOUTH VOICE & SCHOOL CLIMATE & CULTURE IN THE MIDDLE GRADES

RATIONALE STATEMENT

For too long, we've brushed aside the importance of the middle school years. Policymakers talk about the critical need for access to quality early childhood education and the necessity to graduate with "real-world" skills. Agreed. Solutions are endless to support these milestones. But what about the middle school years? To put it plainly, what we've always done is not enough. Our schools are not equitable. The student experience in the middle grades is average at best. We need to reimagine the middle school experience for all students. We should start with school climate and culture.

School climate can be described as the attitude of a school and its effect on people's experiences of school life. **School culture** can be thought of as the personality of the school or the way teachers and other staff members work together based on the implicit set of beliefs, values, and assumptions they share.

It is widely recognized that school climate and culture impact student achievement. When youth are given the space for innovation and their voices are central, the school climate can promote equity and fairness and the school culture can allow youth to respond to their own learning needs. Engaging youth voice must be considered an essential element in creating a school climate and culture that promotes engagement and success for all youth.

How can we impact equity by centering student voice?

Before we answer that, let's talk about what we can't do. We can't wait for sweeping federal or state legislation. We can't wait for political parties to address our most pressing societal issues. We can't wait for colleges and universities to change their admission requirements. We can't wait until schools are funded differently. We can't wait until high-stakes standardized testing is eradicated. We can't wait until teachers are paid more. We can't wait until our profession becomes more respected. We can't wait until our district becomes more progressive and less concerned with the status quo. We can't wait until the next professional development day. We can't wait until we get a new principal. We can't wait until next year. Or next month. Or next week.

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An equitable school climate and culture must be a priority for all schools.

Due to systemic racism embedded within our nation's schools and experiences with interpersonal discrimination in this setting, our educational spaces can foster a climate and culture that is oppressive.

Here's what we can do: create conditions where every student has a sense of belonging and is empowered to fulfill their purpose and make a contribution.

The middle school years represent an optimal developmental period for centering youth voice and inspiring students to take action regarding issues impacting their life.

That can only happen when adults in the building look in the mirror and deliberately reflect on their biases and behaviors.

As educators, our bias can manifest in explicit or implicit ways that are impactful for school climate and culture. For instance, explicit can include teachers engaging in racist behaviors (e.g., Idaho teachers who gleefully posed for pictures dressed as the U.S. Border Wall and offensive depictions of Mexicans) and implicit bias may include unconsciously assigning a lower grade for the performance of a student who appears to have a migrant background than that of a student without a migrant background. Both explicit and implicit bias can impact students' sense of safety and belonging and the personality of the educational space.

We must also be aware of adultism, or bias against young people solely because they are young. Adultism often rears its head as adults perpetually operate with the belief that they are more knowledgeable than youth and fail to provide adolescents space for innovation. Adultism creates a school climate and culture that centers adult experiences and limits youth opportunities to be heard and to make meaningful contributions to their school communities. This can be particularly discouraging for middle school youth because during this developmental period when they seek autonomy and desire to have a key role in decision making.

We've created a toolkit that identifies potential growth areas and starting points for your school's climate and culture with some inspiration from existing and evidenced-based practices.

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Students will be empowered to fulfill their purpose and make a contribution if student voice is honored and amplified. We can't do that if teacher-centered pedagogy is our core philosophy. If we expect young adults to learn to make good decisions, we must give students opportunities to make decisions during the middle school years.

Centering youth voice in school climate and culture requires middle school educators to think critically about when they need to step up (and step out) to best support adolescence during this critical developmental period. To truly center the voice of youth, we must create space for all youth to lead in shaping school climate and culture. This is particularly important for those youth whose voices often go unheard because they are minoritized based on race/ethnicity, gender identity, sexuality, religion, ability, or other identities. To successfully accomplish this goal, our middle schools must move beyond school clubs and siloed events emphasizing student voice, and weave specific practices into the daily fabric of school life.

We've provided resources so that no matter where you are on your journey, you will be able to put student voice and choice at the forefront.

Though all of the resources in this toolkit may not be from middle schools, they can be useful because they speak to the innovative ways that educators can shift from adultism to a student-centered school climate and culture.

This toolkit provides middle school educators with steps that can be taken today and giant leaps that can be taken tomorrow, to advocate for youth voice in their school as a critical step in shaping school climate and culture.

Included in this Youth Voice & School Climate and Culture Toolkit:

Questionnaire (forthcoming) - A brief, informal questionnaire that readers can take to help them assess how their current values, beliefs and practices align to optimal conditions that create the space for youth voice in helping to shape school climate and culture.

Inspirational School Stories - Inspirational stories that illustrate how to creatively incorporate youth voice in schools, and specifically how youth voice can positively impact school climate and culture.

Resource Bank - A growing set of resources and prompts that educators can use to advocate for and support the implementation of youth voice practices in their schools to promote positive school climate and culture.