

Together for Students: INSIGHTS ON YOUTH VOICE

Students today face tremendous challenges that no single school, organization or agency can solve alone. Our three national organizations — the Coalition for Community Schools at the Institute for Educational Leadership, Communities In Schools, and StriveTogether — believe that communities must come together if we want to create a student-centered education system where all students have the resources they need to be successful.

With support from the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative, we created the Together for Students initiative (TFS), a multiyear grant to create incentives and opportunities for collaboration. We have worked to lead by example and to support four local affiliates in Chicago (Ill.), Dayton (Ohio), Lehigh Valley (Pa.) and Memphis (Tenn.) in transforming how organizations work together to meet the needs of every student. The first year of implementation was March 2019-February 2020, the second year of implementation was March 2020-February 2021, and the third year of implementation was March 2021-May 2022.

Now, after our third year of implementation and as the initiative comes to a close, we've been reflecting on what we've learned. In this brief, we capture key learnings from the youth voice project. This initiative set out to empower and uplift youth voice to make a change or advocate for their community.



METHODS

In this final learning project, focus groups were conducted with implementation site partners at each of the four sites. The goals were to understand efforts related to the youth engagement initiative over the past year as well as get reflections on the overall work of the last three years. We also conducted youth-only focus groups and heard directly from youth through video interviews. Finally, we interviewed teams at each of the three national partners to understand the overall goals and expectations they had for the TFS initiative, as well as perceived successes and challenges along the way. Learnings from all three projects are captured in the reports and briefs available [here](#).

Why is student voice important?

“Researchers show that students as young as nine years old (grades 3 or 4) can begin to separate themselves from adults and provide meaningful feedback on their education. Researchers find that students who begin to engage in student voice activities may experience increases in youth agency, self-esteem, belonging, competence, democratic skills, and leadership. Research also shows that student growth in these areas may lead to improvements in student academic achievement, social and emotional learning, and overall wellbeing. Finally, researchers have also discovered that student voice activities can lead to positive changes in education policies and practices that better serve student needs.” ([REL Pacific](#))

Youth engagement

Students have a lot to say — but are we really listening and providing the necessary resources for them to tell their stories? Through this initiative, the four site teams launched the following youth engagement projects:

- “Our Voice, Our Community” — Activating the power within youth voice and advocating for community change (Communities In Schools Memphis)
- “Our Future is Now Lehigh Valley” (Lehigh Valley Reads)
- “Dayton Strong” (Learn to Earn Dayton)
- “Shifting Chicago’s Narrative” — An asset-based approach (Thrive Chicago)

Students discovered a lot about themselves, each other and their communities as they participated in projects which required them to capture stories.

Themes that emerged were: the **importance of their own voices**, the **impact of storytelling**, teamwork/collaboration, and **safe and peaceful school and**

neighborhood communities. One key theme that emerged from conducting student focus groups is action — students don’t just want to be heard; they want their ideas to be implemented. When asked what they would like to see next, one high school student stated, “To *do* something with what we are saying, not just listen.”

Other youth insights

- “This project has made me walk in my purpose.” “I’ve broadened my knowledge and become more outgoing.” “There are more teen resources available than I thought based on my research.” (Dayton)
- “[This project] changed my perspective on Black and brown unity.” “I heard different perspectives of what people went through during COVID-19; I wasn’t expecting to hear some of the things they shared.” “I learned that I am a great communicator.” (Chicago)
- “Anyone can be a leader.” “The world is not always fair — It can be good and bad, but you can always find the best in anything if you look for it.” (Lehigh Valley)
- “I learned I can talk to my teachers about what is going on.” “Some challenges are staying positive and meeting expectations.” (Memphis)

Challenges and opportunities

How can we continue to provide opportunities for storytelling that leads to action? If we really believe that students are at the center and co-designers in systems change work — and if we want true systems change — then young people need to have the tools to advocate for themselves.

Young people are leaders that are collaborative, creative and caring members of their community. They want to be active participants in implementing solutions that lead to change.