



# How Students Can Help Build Better Education Policy

By Ashley Jeffrey and Sadie Bograd July 22, 2021

There were 53.1 million K-12 students in the United States as of 2018, the most recent official data available.<sup>1</sup> This is significantly higher than the number of K-12 administrators, approximately 460,000,<sup>2</sup> and the number of public school teachers, 3.1 million.<sup>3</sup> Yet while students comprise the largest population of educational stakeholders, they are rarely included in education governance at any level. And although they are among those most affected by education policy choices, they are often left out of education policy decision-making.

As of 2019, only 23 states included student members on their state Board of Education,<sup>4</sup> which sets school policy. The majority of those students were nonvoting members, so their influence at the state level was limited. When it comes to education policymaking at the federal level, the U.S. Department of Education uses a few strategies to incorporate student input. When it is sought, student input often comes through anecdotal stories shared at roundtables or from internships or other student outreach initiatives. Unfortunately, these efforts do not meaningfully incorporate student voice. And while many policies from the Education Department are directed at marginalized students such as those from low-income families, students of color, English language learners, and students with disabilities, these students are provided little to no say during the creation of those policies. The Center for American Progress supports community-centered policymaking in which those in power center and uplift the voices and perspectives of those closest to the issues at hand.<sup>5</sup> To develop federal education policy that helps all students succeed, policymakers must include students in all stages of the process.

Importantly, students from low-income communities and other marginalized backgrounds should have a seat at the policymaking table because these are the very students whom federal policies purport to help.

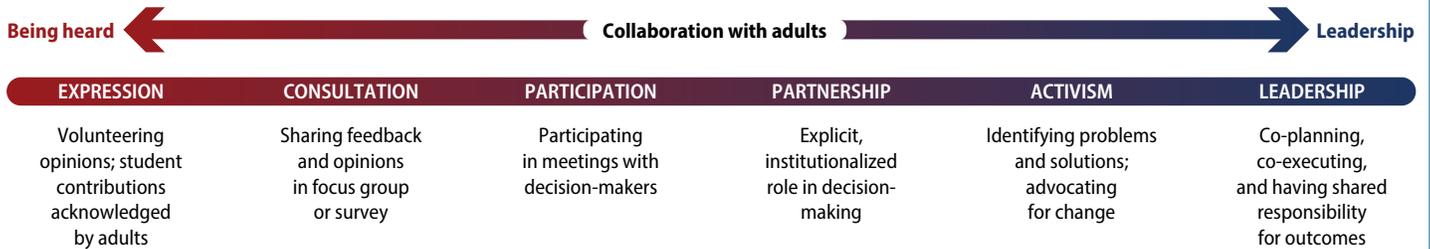
## Defining student voice

Student voice experts measure student voice on a spectrum, ranging from expression and consultation on the lower end to activism and leadership on the higher end.<sup>6</sup> (see Figure 1) For example, some experts describe student voice as a spectrum<sup>7</sup> or pyramid<sup>8</sup> to note that different levels of student engagement offer different levels of student agency.<sup>9</sup>

FIGURE 1

### Types of student voice

Adapted version of Toshalis and Nakkula's "The Spectrum of Student Voice Oriented Activity" and Mitra and Gross' "Pyramid of student voice"



Sources: This graph is adapted from Eric Toshalis and Michael J. Nakkula, "Motivation, Engagement, and Student Voice" (Boston: Jobs for the Future, 2012), available at [https://jfforg-prod-prime.s3.amazonaws.com/media/documents/Motivation\\_Engagement\\_Student\\_Voice\\_0.pdf](https://jfforg-prod-prime.s3.amazonaws.com/media/documents/Motivation_Engagement_Student_Voice_0.pdf); Dana L. Mitra and Steven Jay Gross, "Increasing Student Voice in High School Reform: Building Partnerships, Improving Outcomes," Educational Management Administration & Leadership 37 (4) (2009): 522–543, available at <http://www.buildingpublicunderstanding.org/assets/files/increasingstudentvoiceinhighschoolreform.pdf>.

This issue brief discusses the importance of community-centered policymaking and outlines how the Education Department can most effectively incorporate student voice into its policymaking processes.

### The importance of community-centered policymaking

At the heart of community-centered policymaking is an understanding that people should have a meaningful say in policies that will affect them. Unfortunately, when it comes to K-12 education policy, students have fewer opportunities to fully participate in the decision-making process than the adults in the room. This harms both students and policymakers, as student voice can create tangible benefits not only for students but for school policy as well. For example, research shows that thoughtful inclusion of student voice “can increase academic motivations, strengthen reports of positive school climates and boost students’ overall perceptions of school”<sup>10</sup> as well as that student representation can encourage the development of equitable and culturally responsive policy.<sup>11</sup> As students share their lived experiences and decision-making bodies incorporate these experiences into school policymaking, they can help ensure that these policies reflect the relevant social, racial, and cultural needs of various groups of students who might not be represented otherwise.

Indeed, students should be not only consulted but also allowed to play a role in planning and directing activities.<sup>12</sup> Including students from marginalized backgrounds in planning and partnership roles is especially important to allow their

lived experiences to inform these areas. Taking these steps would build student civic engagement, create more equitable education policy, and ensure that resources are allocated usefully and effectively.<sup>13</sup>

## How to incorporate student voice at the Education Department

At the federal level, student voice can be incorporated in a multitude of ways. The Education Department’s existing efforts tend to fall on the lower end of the student voice spectrum. For example, the department engages students in expression and consultation by inviting them to listening sessions and roundtable discussions where they can advise on education issues. But deeper levels of partnership are necessary. The Education Department could foster student participation in workgroups, commissions, and other decision-making bodies traditionally reserved for adults. It could also encourage students’ activism and leadership by allowing them to play a role in meaningful decision-making, such as helping review grant applications.<sup>14</sup>

Table 1 shows where the Education Department’s student engagement efforts fall on the student voice spectrum. Though most of the opportunities incorporate expression and consultation, they are less likely to reach higher levels such as activism and leadership. The Education Department must make explicit efforts to reach these levels and institutionalize student voice throughout the policymaking process.

**TABLE 1**  
**Student engagement activities based on types of student voice**

	Expression	Consultation	Participation	Partnership	Activism	Leadership
Roundtable discussions	✓	✓	✓			
Listening Sessions	✓	✓	✓			
Participation in working groups	✓	✓	✓			
Participation in commissions	✓	✓	✓			
Student panel participation	✓	✓				
Student internships	✓					
Review grant application processes	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	

Source: Authors’ analysis of student engagement activities and the types of student voice they represent.

### Existing department efforts to incorporate student voice are insufficient

The Education Department’s current efforts to incorporate student voice often fail to include students from diverse backgrounds. And the students from diverse backgrounds who are included can be tokenized—either asked to speak for all students they may share an identity with or to share their opinions, only to never incorporate them into decision-making.<sup>15</sup>

One way in which the Education Department can give students an avenue to help shape policy is through improving its feedback mechanisms, which are at present largely inaccessible. When a federal agency proposes a regulation—or a rule on its practice and procedures<sup>16</sup>—it opens a public comment period during which members of the public can submit their feedback before the agency finalizes the rule.<sup>17</sup> However, there is a high barrier of access to submit comments in an appropriate manner,<sup>18</sup> especially for students, who are likely to be unfamiliar with the process. Submitting a comment requires awareness of a strict submission timeline; an ability to navigate the *Federal Register* and a comment submission template that caters more to the agency’s needs than to the public’s; and an understanding of complex regulations.<sup>19</sup> Not only should students be able to participate in the public comment process more easily, but they should also have other, effective options through which to meaningfully share their thoughts and opinions.

Students who receive internships at the Education Department may get the opportunity to offer informal feedback, but their influence on policymaking is unclear.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, to obtain these internships, students must have the financial means to relocate to Washington, D.C., and many students also must be comfortable receiving no pay for their opportunity. In the Education Department’s Student Volunteer Trainee Program, for example, students spend eight to 10 weeks volunteering to gain educational experience in their career interest and “develop personal and professional skills.”<sup>21</sup> Traditionally, unpaid internships with selective applications often draw high-income, high-achieving students with significant resources.<sup>22</sup> One study estimates that it costs \$4,050 to maintain a three-month internship in Washington, D.C., excluding any travel.<sup>23</sup> This means that even when the Education Department does incorporate student voice via internships, students who are from low-income communities or other marginalized backgrounds are less likely to be able to accept these positions—and therefore less likely to offer their feedback on the Education Department’s creation and implementation of its policies. The students whose voices are currently heard often have the means to create their own seat at the table.

Such skewed student and community representation limits the usefulness of student engagement by leaving out those whose lived experiences offer unique and applicable insights—and who would benefit most from sharing their experiences. For instance, students who experience or have experienced food insecurity should advise the Education Department and the U.S. Department of Agriculture on their universal school meal efforts, and English language learners should help develop English proficiency programs and protections against language-based segregation.<sup>24</sup> The next section of this issue brief highlights several international-, federal-, and state-level examples where the voices of historically marginalized student populations were integral to decision-making processes.

When the Education Department does give marginalized students the opportunity to provide feedback, it must work to ensure that they are not tokenized. For example, the Education Department often includes students on roundtables and panels; however,

through off-the-record conversations with former and current Education Department officials, the authors were unable to determine if and how the department documents student input at these convenings and whether roundtables and panels truly allow students to meaningfully contribute to, co-create, or help shape policy.<sup>25</sup>

For example, in April, Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona and Sens. Joe Manchin (D-WV) and Patty Murray (D-WA) held a virtual roundtable with students who had experienced homelessness.<sup>26</sup> According to the Education Department’s press release, the conversation focused on students’ lived experiences and how funds from the American Rescue Plan would help other students facing housing instability.<sup>27</sup> Yet it is unclear how, or whether, this discussion will influence how the distributed funds will reach and affect students experiencing homelessness. It is also unclear whether the conversation was intended to inform any specific rule-making or guidance to ensure that relief funds target students experiencing homelessness, or whether the Education Department followed best practices to avoid tokenism,<sup>28</sup> including by selecting and speaking with this small group of students in ways that do not ask them to represent all students or solely to validate decisions the department already made.

This lack of clarity will likely make it difficult for students, parents, and communities to learn more about how student voice contributes to education policymaking surrounding homelessness or other issues. While roundtables and panels can encourage policymakers to consider students’ thoughts and experiences, these opportunities fall on the lower end of the student voice spectrum illustrated in Figure 1. The Education Department’s self-described student outreach initiatives, such as the U.S. Presidential Scholars Program and the Student Art Exhibit Program,<sup>29</sup> are valuable sources of recognition for a wide range of students, but they are not opportunities for students to contribute to policymaking.<sup>30</sup> As discussed above, students should be invited not only to share their experiences in front of a decision-making body but also to effect policy changes. If they are not given these opportunities, students may feel at best disengaged and at worst manipulated.<sup>31</sup> The Education Department must be intentional when crafting student voice opportunities for students who are typically marginalized so that their voices are heard and their ideas implemented.

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## Effective inclusion of student voice at the local, state, and federal levels

At all levels of government, student inclusion is far from perfect. However, some state and local education groups, other federal agencies, and other countries have meaningfully encouraged student input and engagement. The examples in this section highlight promising strategies that could inform future student voice efforts at the Education Department.

While the United States is the only member state in the United Nations that has not ratified the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child<sup>32</sup>—which highlights the importance of student voice and capacity building<sup>33</sup>—several countries, including

Australia and across Europe, have institutionalized the role of student voice in policymaking. For example, the Council of Europe adopted a recommendation in 2012 affirming that children under 18 should be able to “exercise their right to be heard, to be taken seriously and to participate in decision making in all matters affecting them,” including via participation in the council’s “standard-setting, co-operation and evaluation activities.”<sup>34</sup> The Victorian Student Representative Council in Victoria, Australia, meanwhile, has school- and state-level student representative councils,<sup>35</sup> and students regularly sit on Victoria Department of Education and Training advisory groups and meet with the Australian minister for education and youth, giving students a direct role in the policymaking process.<sup>36</sup>

## Student voice in Europe and Australia

Student voice has long been a guiding consideration in European education policy. The Council of Europe’s Recommendation (2012)2 reaffirms young peoples’ right “to be heard and taken seriously.” To that end, it recommends that member states periodically review the extent to which young people are heard in legislation and policy; provide young people with “child-friendly means of making complaints”; and devote financial resources to young people’s formal and informal participation, among other measures.<sup>37</sup> To achieve these goals, the council created a Child Participation Assessment Tool with 10 indicators measuring children’s right to participate in decision-making and other matters that concern them; member states have used this tool to analyze and improve the state of student voice across Europe.<sup>38</sup> One indicator is dedicated to how children are represented in “their own organisations, at school, local, regional and national governance levels.”<sup>39</sup>

The state of Victoria in Australia also makes an effort to include student voice. It maintains a formal student voice “practice guide” that aims to empower students by recognizing “the contribution that student voice, agency and leadership make to improved student outcomes, health and wellbeing.”<sup>40</sup> The guide helps schools establish student representative councils and prioritize student voice in teaching.<sup>41</sup> Student voice is emphasized at the classroom level, through pedagogical models and teaching strategies; at the school level, through student representative councils that participate in school review and “interface with other school governance structures”;<sup>42</sup> and at the state level, through the Victorian Student Representative Council,<sup>43</sup> whose members sit on various Victoria Department of Education and Training advisory groups and regularly meet with the minister for education and youth.<sup>44</sup> Members of the Student Representative Council have “provided advice, recommendations and feedback” on numerous recent policies regarding everything from the provision of free sanitary products for students to financial literacy education.<sup>45</sup>

There are also examples of meaningful student engagement in the United States, at the local and state levels. Washington state included multiple student members in its Reopening Washington Schools 2020 Workgroup,<sup>46</sup> allowing students to play a substantive role in creating recommendations and guidance for reopening school districts during the COVID-19 pandemic. In Kentucky, after a 2018 school shooting in Marshall County, the state formed a School Safety Working Group and included a high

school student as a member.<sup>47</sup> This student attended all the group's meetings as a full participant in the discussions. Although these efforts have limitations—one student on a working group, for example, is not enough to reflect the broad range of student perspectives on the issue of school safety—they demonstrate students' capacity to meaningfully contribute to education policymaking when given the opportunity.

At the federal level, agencies besides the Education Department have initiatives to incorporate student voice that rank on the high end of the student voice spectrum. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) has integrated young adults who have experienced homelessness into the funding application review process for its Youth Homelessness Demonstration Program.<sup>48</sup> HUD trained members of the National Youth Forum on Homelessness to review applications and stored the young adults' evaluations in the same database used by HUD employees. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) launched its Youth Preparedness Council in 2012, with members who are between 13 and 19 years old.<sup>49</sup> The council advises FEMA staff and partners, provides feedback on FEMA programs, and directs its own projects.<sup>50</sup> The U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy created the National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth, which launched the Youth Action Council on Transition (YouthACT) in 2013.<sup>51</sup> YouthACT worked as a five-year initiative to engage young people with disabilities, typically between the ages of 15 and 25, to develop youth-adult partnerships on local projects.<sup>52</sup>

Notably, several of these agencies' opportunities had competitive national application processes or other requirements with the potential to exclude certain student groups. Still, these examples make it clear that other federal departments do more to encourage meaningful student engagement than the Education Department—arguably the agency with the most direct influence on students' daily lives.

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## Recommendations for the Education Department to incorporate student voice

The Education Department can adopt numerous strategies at higher levels of the student voice spectrum to move beyond its current use of roundtables and panels and meaningfully engage students.

### Learning from other federal agencies

The Education Department should learn from the inclusive and meaningful student engagement opportunities at its peer federal agencies such as HUD, FEMA, and the Office of Disability Employment Policy. These initiatives can offer lessons to the Education Department as it modifies existing programs and creates new initiatives to meaningfully incorporate student voice in federal policymaking.

## Creating a formal policy at the Education Department to incorporate student voice

The Education Department should investigate legal avenues to create a formal policy that would fully integrate student voice into engagement opportunities. Students should be asked to advise on all special initiatives, working groups, and commissions that directly affect students' school experience. This can include cross-referencing existing Education Department activities to correlate with meaningful student-adult collaboration, as listed in Figure 1. The Education Department should include multiple students in various forums and host roundtables that follow best practices regarding tokenism. The following actions are just some of the ways that a formal policy on student voice could be implemented:

- **Institutionalize student voice in Education Department administrative practice and in policy:** The secretary of education can formally include student voice in the secretary's priorities, which are a set of regulations that apply to any discretionary grant program.<sup>53</sup> For example, the secretary could require grant applicants to describe how they are including student voice in their funded programs. Through such a requirement, the Education Department would make it clear that student voice is an essential component of education and educational decision-making. The department could also create a youth liaison position to dedicate an Education Department staff member solely to youth engagement issues. This would similarly highlight the centrality of student voice.
- **Connect student voice to the budget and grant application processes:** Students who are unlikely to have experience in federal policymaking can still be included during the budget process, thereby giving them a concrete role in setting the department's priorities. Student interns, for example, can contribute to budget discussions by sharing their lived experiences. Students could also play a role in awarding grant funding opportunities by serving as expert reviewers for grant competitions. For example, when the Education Department issues a notice inviting applications for grant awards, students should be invited to help review.
- **Reduce barriers to access to Education Department internships:** The current selectivity of many student voice opportunities limits their effectiveness by prioritizing high-achieving, privileged students and often excluding students from marginalized backgrounds. For example, not all internship opportunities at the Education Department come with pay.<sup>54</sup> The department should consider the barriers that inequity and unequal resource access create for students during the application and selection process. It should work to reduce these barriers by relaxing strict application processes that can skew toward students who have time and resources to participate in several extracurriculars or who can afford to do unpaid internships. Students who must work summer jobs to make money or commit to other familial commitments, or students facing other barriers, will likely be excluded from accepting opportunities in Washington, D.C.

By making more effort to increase student representation, the Education Department will ensure that federal policymaking is more well-rounded and inclusive of the perspectives of those affected most by policies.

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## Conclusion

The Education Department has the opportunity to reimagine the policymaking process by committing to incorporating student voice. This will take intentional effort, as creating opportunities that are authentic, meaningful, and equitable is challenging. There is little precedent for this type of genuine engagement; student voice is undervalued in far too many education spaces, making the Education Department a microcosm of the current education landscape.

Still, this work is necessary. The Education Department's policies serve students from under-resourced communities. These students can and should be at the table shaping the programs that are supposed to benefit them. And including student voice is not a one-way street: Incorporating students as true stakeholders—as peer reviewers or special advisers—can build leadership skills for the next generation of policymakers. Students will have a chance to become more civically engaged as they build more equitable policy for K-12 schools and districts.

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