



2016 Strength in Voices

Washoe County School District (WCSD)

The 2nd annual 2016 Strength in Voices student conference for Washoe County School District (WCSD) took place on June 2nd, 2016 at the Nugget Casino Resort. The event was attended by 218 people, 139 middle and high school students and 32 school and central office administrators.

Purpose of the Event

The purpose of our event was to showcase existing student voice efforts across WCSD as a means of introducing the value of this tool to students and staff. The purpose also encompassed considering how building more opportunities for student voice can be a tool for schools to improve the education they offer their students and therefore increase graduation. These goals were carried out through a morning presentation that discussed the purposes in-depth; twelve break-out sessions facilitated in partnership by students and adults; an afternoon student panel presentation; and an individualized school improvement workshop.

Overview of the Conference

The conference opened with a spoken word piece from four Wooster High School student poets, who discussed the challenges of their educational experiences. The poets highlighted that test scores tend to define their student identities, which often manifests itself through deprivation of time to refuel and re-motivate during their breaks when too much homework is assigned. A high school student emcee and our Superintendent followed the poem with a fifteen minute discussion on the value of student voice as a tool to understand students' experiences and ideas for change to move toward improvement. The emcees explained that as schools improve the education they provide, WCSD's goal of graduating 90% of its students by the year 2020, "90 by 20," would be explicitly supported. The direct impact to graduation would take hold as students would have greater opportunity to communicate, solve challenges in partnership, and influence school processes that help youth remain engaged with their learning.

The morning session was followed by three rotations of twelve breakout sessions delivered by WCSD students, teachers, administrators, and University of Nevada students. As partners, students and adults facilitated sessions that included brief presentations that showcased student voice efforts, interactive exercises that allowed participants to experience student voice, and small and whole-group discussions where participants reflected on these efforts. For example, one session was an exploration of a Stereotype Threat project that sophomores in an English Honors course were encouraged to develop based on guidance from their teacher. The student facilitators led the audience through an activity where participants experienced the vulnerability in being stereotyped, which led to a discussion about the need to reduce stereotyping to help prevent issues in school like bullying. A second session allowed students to create personalized videos on tablets where they responded to ten questions about their likes and dislikes, resulting in powerful videos about students' school experiences. One student discussed why they have often felt shame in her last name and how that has been a direct result of their experiences in school. These two sessions were distinct, but they each provided students and



2016 Strength in Voices

adults a perspective of different ways that student voice can be accessed and incorporated into school practices and curriculum to engage students and staff in school improvement.

After lunch, a one-hour student panel presentation and discussion was held. The intent was to provide anecdotes that reflected one of the main message of our event, that is, challenges in school exist for a variety of reasons and for all types of students, but if students and adults work in partnership to create opportunities for student voice, those students are much more likely to receive the support and resources needed to overcome those issues. During the presentation the audience was asked to consider the strategies that students used to find success, which included alternative schools, pursuing unchartered paths, making difficult decisions with the guidance of school staff, and increasing their involvement in school through activities and clubs like Junior Reserve Officer Training (JROTC) and leadership.

The event closed with a school improvement workshop that asked adults and students from each of their respective schools to collaborate in crafting one action step that they would take back to their school for its improvement. This process was initiated by reflecting on what participants heard and learned throughout the day, choosing the three key learned pieces of information that were relevant to their schools, and identifying the two most important barriers at each of their schools, to then construct an individualized action step for improvement. Because each school had only one or two adult representatives, the relevant knowledge, barriers, and improvement ideas that were identified and discussed came mostly from students. The contributions from students were captured to ensure that their voices were heard and that follow-up work with these ideas and schools would take place.

Student Voices' Resonance for School Improvement

Across all schools' improvement discussions, we heard students and adults acknowledging the value of student voice and the need to incorporate it into schools. The following statements provide a sample:

- "Everyone needs a voice at our school"
- "Let students say what they want to change their school"
- "Teachers and students need to communicate"
- "Assemblies for Student Voice!"
- "As an adult, stopping and listening to student voice is critical for their success"

The workshop asked for reflection of what was learned during the conference and what barriers students and adults feel exist at each of their schools; participants discussed that presently there does not exist enough encouragement for Student Voice in their schools.

- "We need to create something that lets students take charge and voice their opinions/thoughts"
- "Not a lot of opportunity to voice your thoughts"
- "They don't listen to what we have to say"
- "Being a "loser" for sharing your voice/having opinions"



2016 Strength in Voices

After considering what some of the challenges of each of their schools are, students and adults brainstormed solutions to remedy the lack of Student Voice and consider how it can be incorporated into school in a more meaningful and ongoing basis, the action step.

- “Create a student advisory to assist in decision making”
- “Emphasize the importance of every student’s input”
- “Student voice → Live video announcements (Monday a.m., & Friday afternoons)”
- “More student involvement and interaction with teachers and their peers”

By far, the topic of Student Voice was the most prominent across schools. As one student noted, “Students who feel they are unheard tend to stop caring,” perhaps this notion drove the value that was placed on this tool. Based on the messages from adults and students, we heard that Student Voice can be a far-reaching and effective approach to involving students in improving their schools and the educational experience of all students on their campus for school improvement and graduation *of all of our students!*