Dominique Smith | Douglas Fisher | Nancy Frey
Foreword by Marcia Tate

REMOVING LABELS

40 TECHNIQUES
to Disrupt Negative Expectations
About Students and Schools

GRADES K-12

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Please enjoy this complimentary excerpt from *Removing Labels, Grades K-12,* by Dominique Smith**,** Douglas Fisher, and Nancy Frey.

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Student Empowerment

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What: Student voice is a powerful lever for learning and for school improvement. Yet it is uncommon for students to be involved in decision-making at their school. Student empowerment provides students with opportunities to influence decisions that will shape their academic lives at school and in the community.

Why: Schools are primarily adult-driven organizations that seek to change students through academic and social experiences. A majority of schools confine student involvement to extracurricular activities, such as sports, clubs, fundraising, and social events like dances and decorating the building for holidays. Students may be consulted about certain topics but are mostly excluded from decisions. A fewer number of schools can be described as youth-driven (Larson et al., 2005). In these schools, student experiences, rather than the adults' experiences, are at the center.
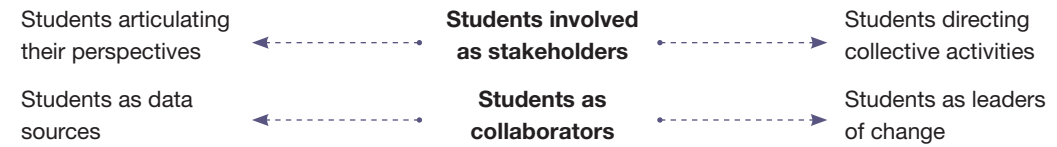
The purpose of student empowerment is to recruit students as active members of the learning community. Student empowerment moves across four dimensions: meaningfulness,

competence, impact, and choice (Thomas & Velthouse, 1990). Each of these is important at the individual level, and there are always going to be some students who reach high levels of empowerment. However, those students are usually limited to a handful whom the adults in the school would describe as "student leaders." The majority remain passive consumers of schooling, passing through the halls with a minimal investment in the organization. And who could blame them? We rarely ask students to get involved with anything of lasting consequence. The result is that adults work really hard trying to effect positive change but overlook their primary customer: the students themselves.
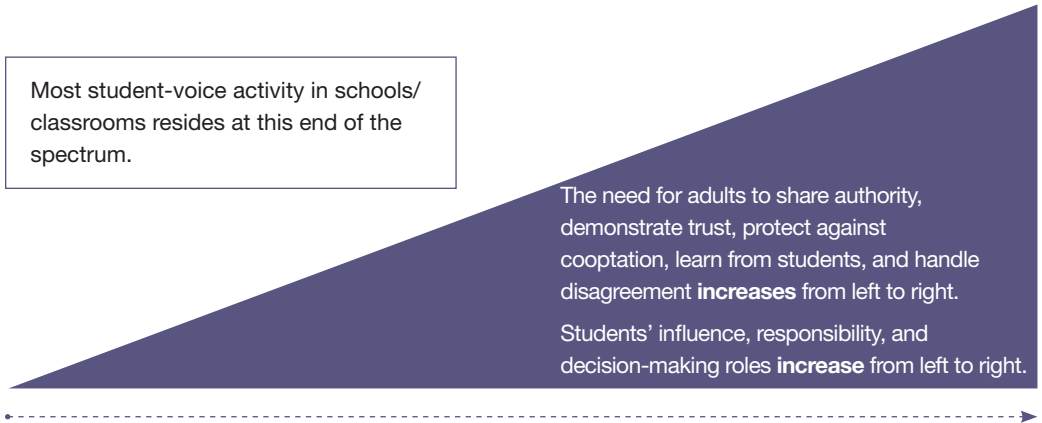
In order to rectify this imbalance, student voice programs have emerged to empower children and youth in school decision-making and increase their investment in democratic schooling. Student voice programs "demonstrate a commitment to the facilitation of student agency and to the creation of policies, practices, and programs that revolve around the students' interests and needs" (Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012, p. 23). The level and quality of student voice as an agent of school improvement exist on a continuum from less involvement to full involvement (see Figure 3.3):

- *Expression:* Student involvement is minimal and superficial.

- *Consultation:* Student opinions are gathered when adults initiate.

- *Participation:* Students are observers of adult-directed meetings.

- *Partnership:* Students are formal members of committees, and adults receive professional learning on working with young people in these venues.

- *Activism:* Students identify problems and generate solutions to address issues in the school and the community.

- *Leadership:* Students lead these efforts, co-planning with and directing adults.

Figure 3.3 The Spectrum of Student Voice–Oriented Activity

Students articulating their perspectives ← - - - - - - - - → **Students involved as stakeholders** ← - - - - - - - - → Students directing collective activities

Students as data sources ← - - - - - - - - → **Students as collaborators** ← - - - - - - - - → Students as leaders of change

Expression	Consultation	Participation	Partnership	Activism	Leadership
Volunteering opinions, creating art, celebrating, complaining, praising, objecting	Being asked for their opinion, providing feedback, serving on a focus group, completing a survey	Attending meetings or events in which decisions are made, frequent inclusion when issues are framed and actions planned	Formalized role in decision-making, standard operations require (not just invite) student involvement, adults are trained in how to work collaboratively with youth partners	Identifying problems, generating solutions, organizing responses, agitating and/or educating for change both in and outside of school contexts	(Co-)planning, making decisions and accepting significant responsibility for outcomes, (co-)guiding group processes, (co-)conducting activities

Most student-voice activity in schools/classrooms resides at this end of the spectrum.

The need for adults to share authority, demonstrate trust, protect against cooptation, learn from students, and handle disagreement **increases** from left to right.

Students' influence, responsibility, and decision-making roles **increase** from left to right.

Source: Toshalis, E., & Nakkula, M. J. (2012). *Motivation, engagement, and student voice: The students at the center series*. Jobs for the Future (p. 24). https://studentsatthecenterhub.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/Motivation-Engagement-Student-Voice-Students-at-the-Center-1.pdf. Used with permission.

The journey to increase student empowerment is not something easily accomplished with the inclusion of student membership on certain committees. But it is a necessary step in removing labels. Our mistrust and our skepticism of students as partners are understandable if we have never interacted with them in this way. Our own mindset as educators who

subscribe to beliefs about control interferes with our ability to see possibilities. Because we don't know students as partners, we believe they are incapable. Shifting our own mindsets to see the potential they have is crucial, but to do so, we must create opportunities for meaningful involvement.

How: The first step is to gauge the current status of student empowerment at your school. Begin by cataloging the ways students are currently involved in school and community matters. You may discover that there are higher levels of community empowerment after school than during the school day. Once current opportunities have been identified, evaluate each based on the degree of meaningful involvement. What constitutes meaningful involvement is subjective, but here are some quality indicators to look at as a yardstick for a self-study (Fletcher, 2005, p. 5):

1. When students are allies and partners with adults in improving schools

2. When students have the training and authority to create real solutions to the challenges that schools face in learning, teaching, and leadership

3. When schools, including educators and administrators, are accountable to the direct consumers of schools—students themselves

4. When student–adult partnerships are a major component of every sustainable, responsive, and systemic approach to transforming schools

Compare your findings with the spectrum of student voice–oriented activity in Figure 3.3. What are ways you can strengthen current opportunities? Where are places you can expand new opportunities? We have complied a list of possible opportunities (see Figure 3.4), based on recommendations by Fletcher (2005). Perhaps it goes without saying, but we'll say it anyway: Schoolwide efforts to raise student empowerment should involve students from the beginning of the self-study!

SECTION 3

Figure 3.4 Student Empowerment Opportunities

Elementary Schools
• Membership in a school improvement committee
• Co-constructed curricular units reflecting student interests
• Student-led family conferences
• Student classroom governance (e.g., class meetings)
• Student jobs in the front office, in the library, on the safety patrol, or as school ambassadors
• Student-led signature campaigns on civic engagement issues
Middle Schools
• Membership in all school committees
• Co-teaching
• Co-design and implementation of whole-school forums
• Service learning for the school community
• Agenda items for a school improvement committee submitted by students
High Schools
• Student representation on district committees, including budget committees
• Co-planning on course design
• Participation in professional development
• Membership in professional learning communities
• Positions on teacher- and school leader–hiring teams
• Design and implementation of whole-school forums about school and community issues
• Student-led educational conferences

Source: Adapted from Fletcher, A. (2005). *Meaningful school involvement: Guide to students as partners in school change* (2nd ed.). The Freechild Project. https://soundout .org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/MSIGuide.pdf.

SECTION 3