

Pathway 2 Tomorrow
Local Visions for America’s Future
Impact Statement from the Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Students are a largely-untapped resource for school improvement efforts, despite being the primary stakeholders in our public schools and spending more than 35 hours each week experiencing classrooms up close. To amplify their voices and expertise, we seek to establish the “Student Voice Think Tank,” an initiative inspired by six years of student-led field testing in Kentucky, supporting students as independent education research, policy, and advocacy partners to improve public schools.

PART 1: THE SOLUTION

THE CHALLENGE

We aspire to brand and expand our unique student-led independent education research, policy, and advocacy model in the form of a “Student Voice Think Tank.”

The Student Voice Team’s success at supporting students as powerful education partners hinges on four common elements:

1. Youth and adult partnerships that allow for expertise to emerge regardless of age;
2. An emphasis on “equitable student voice” or seeking, soliciting, and supporting students who tend to be least heard in our school systems;
3. A focus on student-generated quantitative and qualitative research including student-led school climate audits, and
4. Intentionality in supporting students to study and analyze education data and research and frame the narrative and public conversation around it.

Our proposed Student Voice Think Tank, a state-level body focusing on education issues and propelled by independent student-led research, would synthesize each of these four elements to ensure greatest impact.

ANTICIPATED OUTCOMES

We believe that the establishment of a Student Voice Think Tank will lead to significant, measurable outcomes. Among them:

- Comprehensive, engaging education policy reports, social media threads and clips, and other communication products that frame education issues, strengthen the collaboration and communication between youth and adults, bring research to life, and maintain the general public's investment in public schools;
- A deep bench of young, informed public education messengers whose political motives are less suspect than career advocates;
- The normalization of students participating in thoughtful, high-level dialogue in education professional development spaces;
- Locally-sourced solutions contributing to a more equitable education system that supports all students to learn at high levels; and
- Education policy change at the legislative level.

Additionally, the concept we describe would benefit education stakeholders in a range of ways.

For Students, the proposed Student Voice Think Tank would provide:

- Development of a range of deeper learning skills supporting successful college, career, and civic experiences including mastery of core academic content, critical thinking and complex problem-solving, effective communications, collaboration, and learning how to learn;
- Platforms to influence public policies that directly affect their own education experience and those of peers from a range of different backgrounds; and,
- A peer and professional network to sustain learning and impact well beyond high school.

For Educators and Education Advocates, it would provide:

- A better public understanding of the role and value of education research;
- A cadre of skilled and informed students-as-partners in school improvement;
- Rich, timely feedback to identify areas of success and improvement at the classroom and district level;
- Insight into education equity issues and assistance identifying innovative solutions to mitigate them;
- Opportunities to develop actionable research that is more accessible to the people it is intended to impact;
- Improved research-based relationship with public school students; and,
- A research leadership pipeline to sustain longer-term education improvement efforts.

EVIDENCE OF SUCCESS

Students are the subjects and recipients of education policymaking but are seldom agents in crafting those efforts. However, what we know from a range of emerging research and best practices, including Stanford's D. Lab, the Harwood Institute, and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation's Measuring Effective Teaching study, is that co-designing strategies of engagement *with* the intended targets-and not only for them-is among the most effective ways to ensure impact. Despite this, the primary stakeholders of our schools, the ones education should engage, are all too often excluded from the education feedback loop.

This work alone should compel us to consider ways to more meaningfully include students in the education design and decision-making process. But there is also compelling historical evidence showing that students can drive authentic, systemic change in our schools. From the Little Rock Nine who put their high school experience on the line to integrate Arkansas schools in 1957 to the modern-day DREAMers fighting for the rights of Latinos brought to the US as undocumented children to continue their education to the students of Parkland, Florida who have launched the movement to ensure safer schools, young people backed both by personal stories *and* research knowledge that contextualizes their experience have proved among the nation's most effective education advocates.

This proposal seeks to systematize the perspectives and innovations of students in the research efforts that drive school improvement. It is built around the prototype developed by Kentucky students and incubated by the independent citizens' education advocacy organization, the Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence.

About 100 self-selected students from middle school through college from across Kentucky comprise the Prichard Committee Student Voice Team. Our mission, which emerged in response to the recognition that inequities pervade public education, is to amplify and elevate the voices of students least heard in Kentucky's school system so that policymakers are held accountable for considering students when making decisions that affect them.

Since 2012, the Student Voice Team's exploration of such issues as school funding, teacher effectiveness, school climate, post-secondary transitions, and the need to include students in school governance bodies has generated three legislative campaigns, over seventy-five published op-eds, three policy reports, three statewide rallies, a book, and over one hundred thirty local and national presentations, reaching thousands of people directly and millions more indirectly.

Over the last few years, it has become increasingly clear that this prolific and powerful student-led advocacy stems largely from extraordinary student-initiated research. In nearly every instance, before members of the Student Voice Team have successfully addressed education policy issues, we have conducted extensive and often original research. From designing and disseminating student surveys to facilitating focus groups to observing classrooms in session then analyzing existing research with adult experts, the process has cultivated our ability to respond thoughtfully and publicly to pressing education issues as they arise.

Beyond our collective research related to improving equity in school governance, school climate and culture, and postsecondary transitions, the Student Voice Team model has also inspired high school and college-age members to conduct independent original education equity research. Recent research studies completed or in process include such topics as:

- The impact of sexual harassment among peers in high school classrooms;
- Unaddressed needs of low-income students on elite college campuses;
- The impact of school design and architecture on learning;
- The impact of inadequate professional development on special needs teachers and students whom they serve;
- The extent of food insecurity among University of Kentucky undergraduates; and
- The effects of high school safety rollouts (i.e. metal detectors, bag searches, drills, etc.) on students' sense of social and emotional security.

Additionally, in elevating student perspectives, questions, ideas, and data about education equity, the Student Voice Team’s research approach has supported students to become powerful public education advocates and messengers. Journalists, policymakers, educators, and conference organizers alike in Kentucky and across the country routinely reach out to us for informed student opinion on a range of education issues.

Part 2: IMPLEMENTATION PLAN

VISION FOR IMPACT

We envision beginning with an enhanced statewide model. The model builds on the foundation established by Kentucky students working with the Prichard Committee over the last six years to showcase an ambitious vision for student-led education research. It would consist of the following components over the first two years of implementation:

- Development and Dissemination of a “Students as Education Partners Institute” with training for students and adult allies around such subjects as education equity, meaningful student voice, school climate and culture, and education research.
- Establishment of an “Edquity Fellowship Program”
- Publication and Promotion of an “Edquity Research Series”
- Establishment and Promotion of a “Student Voice Team Speakers’ Bureau”

Upon establishing the Student Voice Think Tank brand, in years 3-5, the work would focus on exportation to other states. This phase would include:

- Work with existing education research, policy, and advocacy organizations like Common Ground, the Policy Innovators in Education Network, Education Trust, and Student Voice, Inc. to share curricula, outreach strategies, research outcomes, innovative metrics, and student speakers.
- Regular consultation and support for organizations and individuals experimenting with elements of the model.
- Consolidation of student-led research and development of a system to archive and make it accessible to researchers, educators, students, parents, and policymakers.
- Interstate co-branding and communications that affirm the credibility of students as education researchers and normalize the practice of partnering with students in education improvement efforts.

IDEAL CONDITIONS

The fullest realization of our Student Voice Think Tank relies on two key factors:

First, students must be willing to overcome learned helplessness and exert agency as partners in their own education system. Years of outreach in Kentucky public schools has taught the Student Voice Team that this is no small feat, as young people are typically rewarded for compliance and acceptance of prevailing wisdom in schools. Furthermore, even the most successful students learn early that when it comes to having a voice in education decision-making, they are expected to wait for permission to do so. It was after this realization that our teenage members joined or created statewide coalitions to advocate for more adequate school funding in 2014; the right to serve on superintendent screening committees in 2015; lottery funds to support income-based college scholarships as required by statute in 2016; and school safety funding to be applied to the enhancement of school climate rather than simply metal

detectors and additional police officers in 2018. Each campaign received widespread media coverage and changed the statewide conversation, yet in no case were students invited to participate first.

This experience underscores the sense that the Student Voice Think Tank must develop a training and outreach curriculum that not only exposes students to an understanding of education research tools and analysis but also to an understanding of meaningful student voice, how to exercise it, and why to exercise it in the name of public education excellence.

Second, policymakers, educators, other education advocates, and members of the media must be willing to consider student-led examination that may challenge more convenient or otherwise existing assumptions about the education system. The Student Voice Team has struggled at times to communicate information that runs counter to prevailing narratives. For example: a student critiquing a new grading system for the team's blog was subsequently chastised for writing about it by her principal; a local newspaper created a sensational headline about the introduction of metal detectors from the team's 20-minute testimony to legislators about their school climate research that elicited public ire from teachers and administrators; and, when the team's college readiness research prompted them to assert in presentations and op-eds that the ACT tests perpetuate inequities, they were perplexed by how little public resonance it received.

These distinct threats of grade deflation and school censorship, rifts in relationships, media sensationalism, and the inability to take students seriously must each be met with different strategies. More specifically, the Student Voice Team has learned from experience that the best way to mitigate the threats of censorship, grade deflation and potential threats to student and teacher relationships is to ensure that student researchers maintain their independence and primarily conduct research on schools other than their own. To combat media caricature, students must whenever possible frame our own media narratives or work in collaboration with others writing them to ensure the story is represented in the manner we are aiming to tell it. Finally, to continue to build credibility, students must maintain the high quality of our work and rely upon adult allies from the Prichard Committee and other partner organizations to publicly advocate for and with us.

REGIONAL FOCUS/OTHER PARTNERS

From its inception, the Student Voice Team has been intentional about seeding, pollinating, and otherwise supporting education-oriented groups in Kentucky and across the country that are finding ways to enlist students as authentic research, policy, and advocacy partners. A few states and communities in the team's network have emerged as particularly ripe for deeper partnership and opportunities to bring elements of the Student Voice Think Tank to national scale. They include the thirteen states who make up Seek Common Ground's initial cohort plus emerging and established student voice communities in Iowa via Iowa's Student Leadership Institute, Oregon via Oregon Student Voice, and the national group, Student Voice. We are also aware that Nellie Mae, which works primarily in New England States, is experimenting with student-led research; YPAR in California is emerging as a dynamic new research hub supporting youth in participatory action research, and that The New Teacher Project with its recently-released report, "The Opportunity Myth," has made a concerted effort to tap into student voice and perspective as a new and essential research base.

ENGAGEMENT

The Student Voice Think Tank will be independent of public schools; however, it is essential that public school leaders appreciate its value as a school improvement tool while also supporting applied student learning and innovation. That means the implementation of the enhanced model will involve numerous student-facilitated presentations at policy and professional development conferences around the state and opportunities for educators and administrators to provide design feedback and support throughout the process.

Fortunately, the Student Voice Team has nurtured partnerships over the years with researchers and free-thinking teachers and administrators who understand the nature of our work, serving as champions for its evolution among established institutions. These include researchers from the REL and a range of education nonprofits from the National School Climate Center to the State School Superintendents' Association to the Kentucky Center for Education Policy; University of Kentucky's Next Generation educators; teacher fellows from Hope Street Kentucky; GEARUP Kentucky; assorted principals and superintendents who have supported the Student Voice Team's student-led school climate audits; organizers of Educating and Celebrating Effective Teachers and Teaching; as well as the teachers and administrators who have long supported individual Student Voice Team members in their respective schools.

These are the partnerships that the Student Voice Team does not take for granted and must continue to develop through regular communication and enlistment in the design and feedback process. This is also the best, if not only way, to establish the trust required for student-led research and serious consideration of results that may challenge the status quo.

TIMELINE, KEY ACTION STEPS, MILESTONES

Establishing and promoting the Student Voice Think Tank will require four significant and early successes within the first two years, each with multiple components:

1. Development and Dissemination of a "Students as Education Partners Institute" with training for students and adult allies around such subjects as education equity, meaningful student voice, school climate and culture, and education research. This involves:
 - Recruitment and convening of research and educator advisory board
 - Designing of curriculum in consultation with advisory board
 - Field testing of curriculum with students and educators
 - Dissemination of curriculum through a one-day institute
2. Establishment of "Edquity Fellowship Program"
 - Identification of Student Voice Team member to lead and co-design the work
 - Promotion of fellowship idea, criteria, and application process among media, students, parents, and educators
 - Selection and media promotion of 5 First Cohort High School Fellows
 - Refinement of research project design and timeline
 - Establishment of review and support process

3. Publication and Promotion of “Edquity Research Series”
 - Identification of Student Voice Team member to lead and co-design the work
 - Development of criteria for selection of student research proposals
 - Development of graphic design to establish publication brand
 - Review and selection of studies
 - Formatting and publication
 - Development and implementation of communications strategy

4. Establishment and Promotion of “Student Voice Speakers’ Bureau”
 - Identification of Student Voice Team member to lead and co-design the work
 - Training for student Edquity Fellows to develop presentations based on unique personal experience combined with original education equity research.
 - Support for student Edquity Fellows to co-design media strategy including the production of at least one framing article for state and national reach.
 - Creation of the Speakers’ Bureau presence on the web with opportunities for policymakers, educators, and others to invite student Edquity Fellows as presenters with public and expert knowledge.

BUDGET

Major anticipated costs include if brought to scale:

Dedicated Adult Director		\$85K
Curriculum Consultant	\$15K	
Research Consultant		\$15K
Communications Consultant		\$15K
Student Edquity Fellowship Stipends (5)	\$15K	
Commissioned Student Research Stipends		\$10K
Basic Operating	\$20K	
Office Space		
Office Support		
Hard and Software Technology		
Office Supplies		
Meals		
Travel		\$10K
Meeting and Convening Expenses		\$10K
Graphic Design	\$5K	
Printing	\$5K	
Web Design		\$5K
		TOTAL: \$215K

COMMUNICATIONS

Following are some of the talking points co-developed with members of the Student Voice Team as various ways to communicate the importance of the proposed idea:

- Inequities in education are among the most pressing issues we face. Yet students who are in some of the best positions to identify and mitigate them are overlooked as the potential resources that we are.
- Students leading research on education inequities is a strategy for bridging education policy and practice.
- Rather than supporting students to be passive consumers of our schools, why not support us to be co-creators of a more equitable system?
- A Student Voice Think Tank confronts the absurdity that in school we examine and dissect essentially everything but school itself.
- Students acting as education research, policy, and advocacy partners is the best if not only way to ensure our public schools are the best they can possibly be.
- Power structures from the world of politics to the world of education are flattening, giving way to the possibility of increased transparency and a new wave of opportunities to influence them from the inside out. Students armed with new technologies, a realization that democratic institutions require our vigilance, and a heightened sense of agency over our own futures can and must be part of the work to improve our public schools.
- Just because most students are too young to vote does not mean we are too young to have a voice in public life.
- As primary stakeholders, students are uniquely positioned to question what is working--and what is not--in our schools. Public education can benefit from enlisting students as partners in school improvement efforts.
- Who better to examine the efficacy of public education than those for whom it is designed--students ourselves?
- Our schools are meant to foster scientific inquiry and critical thinking in our students. Why not support us to apply those very capacities to the real-world challenge of improving schools themselves?
- A Student Voice Think Tank represents the ultimate education experience. It supports students to apply knowledge in a real-world setting. It creates opportunities for students to critically examine and improve the education system. And it allows for us to meaningfully participate in public life.
- This work underscores the belief that young people are not just the future; we are very much a part of the present.