



# Youth Voice In Community Schools

## Executive Summary

Institute for Educational Leadership

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The Institute for Educational Leadership (IEL) Coalition for Community Schools (the Coalition) defines Community Schools as “a local engagement strategy that creates and coordinates opportunities with its public school to accelerate student success. It serves as a vehicle for hyper-local decision-making that responds to the unique needs of each community” (Coalition for Community Schools, n.d.). The Community Schools strategy is an equity-centered strategy that takes a whole-child approach to the role of school in students’ learning and development.

The purpose of this guide is to offer strategies for elevating youth voice in Community Schools and to recognize youth voice as a community asset that can help advance more equitable school systems. This guide is designed for use by Community Schools practitioners who are working to advance student voice, engagement, and leadership efforts. The strategies and implications highlighted in this guide are transferable to youth-related work across school levels and within communities.

To inform this guide, in Spring 2022, the Coalition conducted a literature scan, administered a national network survey, and worked with youth within six Community School high schools. The literature scan focused on two strands: a) understanding concepts of positive youth development, engagement, and empowerment; and b) the role organizational readiness, school environment, and culture play in engaging youth voice in the school community. The network survey was designed to capture field's definitions of key concepts and to understand the frequency of various decision-making structures within Community Schools. The survey was administered across three Coalition networks with 113 respondents, 26 adults and 87 high school-age students in Community Schools. To better understand the existing strategies and practices of advancing youth voice, the Coalition worked with 12 students from six Community School high schools to share stories of youth voice practices within their schools.

Based on the field-informed feedback, this guide uses the following definitions of core youth-centered concepts:

- ✓ **Youth Voice** – an expression of youth ideas, thoughts, and beliefs through equitable opportunities in which youth expressions are respected and heard.
- ✓ **Youth Engagement** – an equitable access and opportunity for youth to participate in activities that are related to their schools, communities, and self.
- ✓ **Youth Leadership** – when youth are a genuine part of the decision-making process, identifying and implementing projects of their choice, and gaining the knowledge and skills to better advance the development of their schools, communities, and self.

The above definitions are consistent with the field's literature, with equity playing an underlying foundation. For instance, youth in Community Schools care deeply if they have access to equitable opportunities to express their thoughts and if their opinions are heard and treated equitably by school and community authorities. They also look for avenues for youth engagement and leadership.

In addition to the above definitions, the survey responses found that youth and adults have different understandings of youth engagement within their own schools and communities, but that both indicate the importance of youth leadership development as necessary to engage youth in their schools and communities effectively.



### **Framework for Youth Voice, Engagement, and Leadership in Community Schools**

The national network survey results, alongside youth stories, indicate that youth and adults in Community Schools believe that opportunities and resources, leading knowledge and skills, and equity are effective elements of youth voice, engagement, and leadership in schools and communities, as illustrated in the emerging **Framework for Youth Voice, Engagement, and Leadership in Community Schools** (see figure). **Opportunities and resources** refer to the approaches and support that youth can have when expressing their thoughts, engaging in programs and activities, and leading the efforts in their schools and communities. **Leading knowledge and skills** refer to the capacity and strategies youth can acquire throughout leadership-building program/project/activities. **Equity** refers to the equity procedure schools and communities utilize to advance youth voice, engagement, and leadership in the field.

The intersection of the opportunities and leading knowledge is **youth to lead**. Young people benefit from skills and resources designed to place them in leading positions of a program/project/activity that directly impacts them. Therefore, the leading knowledge and opportunities are essential for youth to take leading roles in their schools and communities. The intersection of opportunities and equity are **equitable opportunities**, intentional sharing of opportunities for more equitable distribution of youth voice and engagement in Community Schools. The intersection of leading knowledge and equity is **youth being heard**. This is based on the responses that young benefit from leadership and advocacy skill building to ensure their voices are clearly expressed to adults, and that adults create space for youth voice. When all three key elements are met, youth are more likely to be comfortable making decisions and leading efforts in their schools and communities.

Using the above three key elements—opportunities and resources, leading knowledge and skills, and equity—this guide introduces a series of practical steps practitioners can take alongside students to foster youth voice following the Process for Youth Engagement, comprised of six stages: explore, engage, co-design, implement, study, and extend. Illustrative steps include: mapping assets, using data to inform practice, co-designing engagement protocols, developing opportunities and solutions for shared decision-making, and creating structures for youth leadership development and school/district practice change.

The implications of this guide point to the importance of: a) youth leadership opportunities in service to youth’s acquisition of new knowledge and skills, b) support of youth through various services to help them identify and cultivate interests, c) opportunities for student-led decision-making, ultimately extending power, voice, and opportunities to youth. Building youth leaders cultivates more inclusive decision-making in schools and helps to activate the next generation of leaders in our communities.

## Connect with us!

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