



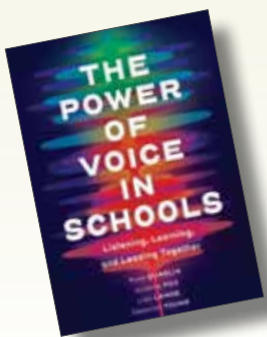
AN INTERVIEW WITH RUSSELL QUAGLIA

# Giving Voice to Voice

By Ellen Ullman

You know what drives Dr. Russell J. Quaglia crazy? When people say they are going to give students voice. “You are not giving them voice,” says Quaglia. “You are giving them an opportunity to share their voice.”

It’s an important distinction, and one that Quaglia knows well. As the founder of the 40-year-old Quaglia Institute for Student Aspirations, he’s been described as America’s leading authority on the development and achievement of student voice and aspirations. He has written surveys, speeches, policy briefs, articles, and books on the subject, serves on several national and international committees, and works with hundreds of schools to provide customized voice and leadership training for students and staff.



Earlier in his career, Quaglia was studying student aspirations and became dismayed by hearing people say that kids don't have goals or that they have goals but aren't inspired to get to them. "It's an easy out to say, 'I want to be a doctor, but I don't like science class,'" he says. "We found an incredible disconnect and began to study what created that disconnect."

Quaglia's team learned that the disconnect was due to many factors, including self-worth and engagement, but one driver kept coming back: giving students an opportunity to share their voice. As he says, "We started to understand that it's not about what they want to be but about the person they want to become. Students questioned who they were in this process and the only way to find the who was to ensure that they felt comfortable enough to share their voice."

### DEFINING VOICE

In order to ensure that everyone in your school district has a voice, the first thing to do is to clarify what voice even means. Here's how the Institute defines it: Voice is sharing thoughts and ideas in an environment underpinned by trust and respect, offering realistic suggestions for the good of the whole, and accepting responsibility for not only what is said but also what needs to be done.

Let's break that down.

The first component is sharing thoughts and ideas in an environment underpinned by trust and respect. Many people assume that it's easy to share thoughts and ideas, especially in this age of TikTok. But we need to look deeper. "In order to share ideas and suggestions that will impact decision making, there must be a foundation of mutual trust and respect," says Quaglia.

Building a culture of trust in a school takes effort, sincerity, and time. Teachers and administrators develop trust with students by displaying a genuine interest in them and their learning. Students and staff may be willing to offer ideas, but they will

see how those ideas are received and weigh the risk-reward for future sharing. Quaglia says that eye contact, appreciation for shared ideas, and open dialogue about different viewpoints all help us ensure that our ideas are appreciated rather than judged.

People are more willing to share their ideas in a culture of respect. Students respect teachers who are honest with them and take the time to know them as unique individuals with important perspectives to share.

In order to ensure that everyone in your school district has a voice, the first thing to do is to clarify what voice even means.

Teachers appreciate those same characteristics in their colleagues and administrators. When there is mutual respect, people are more likely to share their thoughts and ideas.

The second component of voice is offering realistic suggestions for the good of the whole. "With trust and respect as the foundation, it is important to be able to express not only what you think, but to offer realistic suggestions that benefit others," says Quaglia. But suggestions need to be realistic rather than noise, e.g., having a longer recess once a week rather than having recess all day every day. The goal is for people to offer realistic suggestions that are creative, inspiring, and achievable. Remember that the end goal is to support everyone's success. All stakeholders need to be willing to contribute ideas that consider the needs of others.

The third component is accepting responsibility for what needs to be done as well as what is said. "When well-planned action is taken, voice reaches its pinnacle. Too often, great ideas collect dust because no one takes responsibility for implementing the next steps," says Quaglia. If everyone is responsible, then nothing gets done. Voice includes taking action to make ideas a reality. Each of us must accept responsibility for bringing about the change we seek. Fully implementing voice includes taking ideas and turn-

ing them into action and accomplishments.

### WHY VOICE MATTERS

Back in the days when many of the people reading this article were in school, people didn't ask us our opinions and thoughts. It just wasn't done. But in this time of authentic learning — in which we encourage teachers to connect their lessons to real-world issues, problems, and applications — it's impossible to do so without students having a voice. "Student voice is the gasoline that powers our initiatives," says Quaglia. "Without voice, students are running on air and will run out of gas."

Giving students an opportunity to share their voice can make a real difference and have meaningful impact. Data collected by the Quaglia Institute from 2009 through 2018 show that when students have a voice, they are three times more likely to experience self-worth in school, five times more likely to be engaged in school, and five times more likely to have a sense of purpose in school. Other benefits of listening to and acting on student voice include a higher level of collaboration between students and teachers, improving the school's environment and culture, and forming stronger relationships and connections.

During the pandemic, student voice became even more important and purposeful, says Quaglia. "When we all listen and learn, we create a powerful community while recognizing and celebrating individuality," he says. "This kind of community allows us to be in a place where we celebrate belonging without anyone losing their individuality. That's the power of voice."

### VOICE IN ACTION

One of the first steps to take to make voice a part of your school is to gather data. Tools such as the Quaglia Institute's School Voice surveys measure conditions across an entire school. You can ask students, staff, and parents/caregivers to do quick online surveys that provide administrators with real-time reports. The next step

is to develop shared objectives and steps for improvement. In addition to school- or district-wide surveys, teachers can distribute individual classroom surveys to their students.

The Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) has worked with the Quaglia Institute since 2019. Together, they've created 13 schools of action and infuse voice into all areas, including curriculum development and discipline. In the first year, the district distributed 9,890 student voice surveys and 4,207 iKnow My Class surveys to learn from the voices of their students and work to grow and sustain practices that increase student engagement and achievement. Between the fall of 2019 and the spring of 2021, LAUSD saw gains on 47 of the 50 survey statements, including the following:

- Students respect teachers, up by 16.4 percent.
- Adults at this school listen to students' suggestions, up by 10 percent.
- Teachers make an effort to get to know me, up by 7.8 percent.
- Learning can be fun, up by 7.1 percent.

Working with students to analyze and understand the data helps create a school experience in which staff and students take shared responsibility for the health of the school community and work together on continual improvement. Recently, students were allowed to choose their own textbooks, with parameters set by their teachers.

The Maui School District, which has 30 schools, has also taken on voice as a primary focus. For the last three years, Maui has been building new schools with voice and aspiration as primary drivers. Students have been able to select mascots and to help define what the schools stand for.

**STEPS TO TAKE TO GIVE STUDENTS VOICE**

"A lot of people think voice is a zero-sum game — that I'm losing my voice if I'm letting you share yours — but that is absolutely not the case," says Quaglia. In actuality, the more you

let students have a voice, the greater your voice will become, he says. Your voice will be more insightful and inspirational. Voice grows exponentially when it's shared among students, colleagues, and administrators.

Schools can start encouraging students to share their voice by creating an environment that's underpinned by trust and respect. Students will be more likely to share what they're thinking when they feel safe. Classroom teachers can use different strategies to incorporate student voice, such as regularly asking for student input, meeting with students to set goals, and encouraging students to choose how they demonstrate their learning.

It's important to remember that all students need to be included in this work. "We need to be way more purposeful to listen to all students, including students with special needs," says Quaglia. "They are a voice that has not been heard to the level of what they have to offer." He cautions people to never assume that students who require greater attention already have voice and says that all of us — but especially students — have to be more cognizant and be taught to have better conversations.

"Voice is not just verbal. It is far beyond what we hear, and we cannot limit voice. We want it as a collective: student, teacher, parent, etc. It is critical to hear voices of all students, understand why they say what they say, what they feel, and how we can better help them express themselves," he says.

**VOICE AND LEADERSHIP**

Schools with a solid base of student voice are schools in which teachers and administrators have a voice. We often assume that principals have a voice because they are principals, but in a lot of cases they can only share what the central office allows them to share.

Quaglia says the key to infusing principals with voice is by opening channels of communication. He sug-

gests that principals be as honest and open as possible, sharing any restraints and pressure. "Don't just say no," he says. "Let teachers know the parameters you're under." The leaders who communicate and keep people up to speed on where we are and why are the most successful ones.

He recommends that leadership do these three things:

1. Assess how well you **communicate**.
2. Ask your staff if you can do things differently to create an environment built on **trust and respect**.
3. Figure out how to make it a **safe place** in which teachers are rewarded and celebrated.

When the potential of voice is fully realized, schools will look and feel different. They will be filled with cooperation, collaboration, and confidence, with the educational community working in partnership with one another. The Institute says that schools that have taken steps to implement

**"We need to be way more purposeful to listen to all students, including students with special needs," says Quaglia. "They are a voice that has not been heard to the level of what they have to offer."**

voice have seen fewer discipline problems, better attendance, more engaged students and teachers, and greater self-worth and respect between and among various community members.

"There's no way for students and teachers to reach their fullest potential if we aren't listening and learning what they have to say."

**Learn more about School Voice and the work of the Quaglia Institute by visiting <https://www.quagliainstitute.org/>.**

ELLEN ULLMAN has been writing about education since 2003. She lives in Burlington, Mass., and is the former editorial director for eSchool News.