



STUDENT VOICE, PARTICIPATION, AND RELATIONSHIPS

ABOUT LSSSI

The Louisiana Safe and Supportive Schools Initiative (LSSSI) is a four-year, federal grant-funded project intended to design and implement statewide measurements of, and targeted programmatic interventions to improve, school climate. Eight school districts were selected to participate in LSSSI: *Caddo, East Baton Rouge, Jefferson, Lafayette, Lafourche, Plaquemines, Tangipahoa, and Terrebonne* based on their school climate scores. The goals of the LSSSI Project are to create physically and emotionally safe and supportive school environments; improve learning conditions by reducing alcohol, tobacco, drugs, and violence on campus; provide students and staff with opportunities for meaningful participation; and foster a school environment where students may engage and excel both academically and socially. The LSSSI program is called *Positive Approaches for Safe and Supportive Schools (PASSS)*, and the strategies are designed to increase the capacity of school personnel to make data driven-decisions in selecting appropriate interventions to address school climate. To inform school decision-making, LSSSI created school-level school climate scores by measuring student perceptions of school climate dimensions (e.g., relationships, opportunities for meaningful participation at school, perceived violence, victimization, and substance use) and school-level discipline and attendance rates.



What are Student Voice, Participation, and Relationships?

Engaging students in their classrooms and school environments is a critical component of improving school climate. How students feel about themselves and their school is connected to how they perform academically.^{1,2} At the core of engaging students are warm, healthy interpersonal relationships that keep both teachers and students motivated



and connected to school. In particular, caring, supportive relationships with teachers – adults that some youth spend more time with than they do with their parents—are linked to a number of important youth development outcomes including students' satisfaction with, and connection to, school; academic performance; and the development of pro-social interpersonal skills.³ Activities designed to elicit student voice in school improvement decisions and activities can help build both student engagement and relationships. Providing opportunities for students to participate in relevant and interesting classroom and school activities, helps students develop autonomy and self-control while cultivating their personal talents and strengths, and engages them in the learning process. These schools are rated as having positive school climates –places where students and staff feel supported and valued.

Using Student Voice to Improve School Climate

STUDENT VOICE, PARTICIPATION, AND RELATIONSHIPS: WHY IT'S IMPORTANT

When students are given responsibility and some control over the learning process, they are more likely to take ownership of educational goals and become invested in academic and personal success.⁴ Opportunities for participation that allow students to contribute positively to the school community – classroom, school, or larger school-community environments – also help youth define their identities as productive contributors to the school setting;⁵ and for those students not used to thinking of themselves as successful, this can be a powerful experience



to help students re-frame their self-perceptions. Students' perceptions of opportunities to participate meaningfully are also associated with positive school climate perceptions and academic outcomes including more student bonding or connectedness to school, fewer students skipping and feeling unsafe at school, and higher academic achievement.⁶ This brief highlights two districts that have engaged in innovative, exemplary efforts to deliberately engage students in building relationships, student voice, and actively participating and contributing to their classroom and school environments.

SCHOOLS CRITICAL STRATEGIES AND SUPPORTS

- Not all youth are cognitively or emotionally ready to take full responsibility of student-focused activities.

Providing developmentally and culturally appropriate opportunities for meaningful participation offers opportunities for all young adolescents to participate. Gradually increasing freedoms and responsibilities as young people mature with ample support from adults is key.⁷

- People also differ in the value they place on autonomy, where certain minority groups place a high value on letting youth make their own decisions and others do not.⁸
- Ample time and support for student planning, practice, and performance of key skills should be provided. In student-led activities, students need repeated practice and performance to master key skills such as framing opinions positively. This helps to ensure what they say is heard by others.
- Leadership vision and commitment sets the tone for staff and students and increases the willingness/commitment to support student voice and leadership, especially in meaningful learning opportunities.
- In student-led activities, quick adult follow-through on student-led suggestions or goals enhances student perceptions that their voice and action matter, and helps build momentum and buy-in.

COMMON IMPLEMENTATION TENSIONS

- Managing diversity – in skill levels, culture, interest, and experiences – can be challenging. In settings characterized by a diverse set of students, balancing the right mix of students in focus and learning groups is key.
- Limited resources to consistently support student-led activities and leadership and collaborative action challenges sustainability.
- Identifying and supporting opportunities for students to have real influence and collaboration with adults is key.
- Offering honest and constructive criticism or opinions framed (in tone, non-verbal cues, and words) so others hear it is a critical component of the student listening circle activities.

Belle Chasse High School's Story



PLAQUEMINES PARISH DEMOGRAPHICS

Located in the most southeastern section of the state, Plaquemines Parish is on a narrow peninsula of land surrounded on the south and southeast by the Gulf of Mexico. The Mississippi River flows through the parish from New Orleans, south into the Gulf. The parish was hit hard by two hurricanes, Katrina in 2009 and Isaac in 2012, which displaced students and staff from their homes and schools for months. The Plaquemines Parish School District serves 3,879 students in grades K-12. The majority of students are White (59%) and African American (30%) and 66% are eligible for the free and reduced lunch program. The two schools served by the LSSSI grant are located in Belle Chasse, the largest city and furthest north in Plaquemines, and in Buras in the middle of the parish.

For the past several years, Belle Chasse High School's primary focus was on raising test and school performance scores. Thanks to the hard work and tireless efforts of teachers and staff who implemented a number of new practices, according to Louisiana state school performance scores Belle Chasse has shifted from a "C" to an "A" school in a very short amount of time. But from the perspective of students and the principal, that success came at a price – less attention to positive student-teacher relationships.

Since the 2012-13 school year, Belle Chasse High has used "fishbowls" – a particular type of facilitated focus group process that engages and supports students to articulate and share with adults their experiences, perspectives, and ideas about a school topic – to change the school environment both social-emotionally as well as academically. When these student experiences, perspectives, and ideas – or student voice – are used to plan and implement actions aimed at school improvement it not only enables students to contribute to improving school climate but can deepen ownership and connections to school, and help build stronger student-teacher relationships. Guided by the philosophy that school climate, especially strong relationships among students and

between students and teachers are directly related to school success, Ms. Jemi Carlone, principal, embraced the concept of fishbowls and student voice.

The fishbowl focus group process was first introduced and modeled at a training session in Spring 2013. The technique relies on 8-10 students from different grade levels, genders, academic achievement levels, and varying degrees of past involvement in school activities and twice as many adults. At the heart of the fishbowl is a listening circle, in which students sit in a circle and speak to adults, addressing 4-6 open-ended questions related to school climate improvement such as how students know that adults at school care about them, or what adults do to help them be successful. As students speak, the specific job of the adults is to actively listen until students have responded to all questions, hence the term fishbowl.

The listening circle is followed by a facilitated planning dialogue in which, based on what students have shared, student and adult participants plan, and assign responsibility for, one or two short and one or two long-term



actions aimed at improving the school environment. Symbolically, students move back into the larger circle to join adults in this collaborative, solution-oriented discussion.

From that first fishbowl Ms. Carlone realized that the focus on student-teacher relationships and school climate at Belle Chasse had become critical. "I really didn't realize how bad it (student-teacher relationships) had become until after we experienced our first fishbowl activity. What our kids were overwhelmingly screaming for were adults who care about them. They want teachers who smile more, who are willing to go the extra mile to make sure they are successful, and teachers who are genuinely concerned about



them as a person. After hearing their pleas, we knew we had to make some drastic changes and remind teachers why they got into this profession in the first place.”

To build momentum and commitment to relationship building, student fishbowl results were shared at the next staff meeting. The principal had five students (not the ones who participated in the fishbowl) read selected student responses to staff to better engage and impact staff while maintaining student confidentiality and privacy. “I (Ms. Carlone) would ask a question and have actual students answer it, so teachers would hear it from the mouths of kids instead of me just telling them...the kids said this.” She felt it was much more impactful and had several teachers say, “Man, I didn’t really know the kids felt that way about what we do.”

A month after the fishbowl, the principal also followed up with student fishbowl participants to talk about any changes they had observed in school, classrooms, or with their teachers. Both the principal and Plaquemines Parish School Climate Coach report students were excited by the process and felt they have a voice (e.g., “you actually did something in our school that we came up with”).

Belle Chasse now conducts a fishbowl about once a semester and intends to do so even though LSSSI funding is disappearing. An “alumni” fishbowl was even held this past January 2014. Ten recent graduates now in college or the workforce were invited to participate in a fishbowl to give teachers and the school feedback about what they liked and didn’t like at Belle Chasse, what they wish the school did differently, and what the school did to prepare them for college/the workforce. Since graduates “can’t get in trouble any longer,” the principal felt their feedback is invaluable and more useful using the formalized structure of a fishbowl.

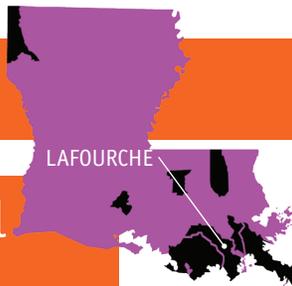
The success of this strategy for Belle Chasse is evident from a number of indicators. Since the LSSSI grant period began, student perceptions of caring adults and high expectations in school on the LSSSI student survey has steadily climbed from 47% in 2011 to 55% in 2014. Smaller but similar increases are seen in student survey indicators of school connectedness and Belle Chasse’s school climate score overall. As importantly, parent perceptions of the extent to which Belle Chasse High is an inviting place for students

to learn has steadily increased since 2011. And finally, from several accounts students now believe “when a fishbowl happens, we see results”—ensuring that students know their voice is an integral part of Belle Chasse’s continued efforts to improve their school environment.

CRITICAL PLAQUEMINES STRATEGIES AND LESSONS LEARNED

- Finding the right mixture of students is key. In order to get good feedback, you “want kids who are open and honest; not just the kids who are going to say the right things so it’s not all rainbows and sunshine.”
- Strong balanced facilitation is key so no student is afraid to speak-up. It’s easy for strong personalities – whether positive or negative – to dominate or control a discussion as happened at one of the fishbowls at Belle Chasse, making it harder for other students to voice their opinions. Besides facilitation, practice prior to the fishbowl, which gives students time to practice responding to questions in a constructive, non-threatening way, is also critical to success.
- According to the principal, immediate follow-up with staff and students is the most important part of the fishbowl; they always include at least 1-2 action items that get implemented quickly to build student and staff beliefs that student voice matters.
- Professional development for all staff at the start of the 2013-2014 and 2014-2015 school years helped teachers enhance their repertoire of strategies for building positive relationships and engaging all, and even the most difficult, students. An all-day seminar by Brian Mendler focused on practical ideas and tips for working with all students, especially the unmotivated and disruptive ones followed by coaching for small groups of teachers during their planning periods in the subsequent year. Well received, the principal reports “this is the only person my teachers could listen to all day and come away thanking you for their professional development.”
- School leadership, particularly the principal, commitment to the value of voice for school climate improvement and student success is a critical component for making student voice strategies effective.

Lafourche Parish School District's Story



ENGAGING STUDENTS IN CLASSROOMS

LAFOURCHE PARISH DEMOGRAPHICS

Lafourche (pronounced la-FOOSH) Parish, southwest of New Orleans along the banks of Bayou Lafourche, is a part of Acadiana, or French Louisiana, home of the Cajun people. The Lafourche Parish School District serves approximately 14,500 students in 28 K-12 schools. The majority of students are White (66%) and African American (21%), and 61% of students are eligible for the free and reduced lunch program. The two schools served by the LSSSI grant, Thibodaux and Central Lafourche high schools, are in Raceland and the parish capital, Thibodaux.

In the Lafourche Parish School District, teachers from multiple grade levels and subject matter are participating in a one-year training to improve student engagement within their classrooms through the use of technology—specifically, the use of iPads. Participants complete on line modules monthly developed by EdTech Teacher⁹ that focus primarily on free applications those teachers and students can use to more actively participate and create in their classrooms. Lafourche believes that the challenge of encouraging teacher innovation while maintaining academic rigor and student performance is met through this opportunity by building teacher capacity in technology while meeting the needs of student by developing the critical skills of creativity, critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and connection.

Through investigation of the LSSSI surveys, discipline data, student focus group information, and evidence-based programs and activities, Lafourche Parish has created a structure to improve the climate of their schools.

Using this framework, two Parish schools recently implemented innovative and promising practices for improving student engagement in classrooms and schools. When students are actively engaged in critical elements of classroom and school learning, and when they are given some responsibility and shared control over the learning process, they often grow more invested in their academic success and feel better connected to school. One area of concern when reviewing the student survey data was the low percent of students



reporting that they had opportunities for meaningful participation at school. Following are two examples of how Ms. Guidry and her school climate teams worked on improving that perception.

For instance, Ms. Katy McCarthy, an English teacher at Central Lafourche High, had students use the iMovie application on iPads to create mini films of different acts from Macbeth. Small groups of students interpreted

and performed those acts in modern language and shared the films with their peers, thus providing students with more opportunities to actively engage in class. Students were excited to perform, share, and discuss their interpretations with the class, which has led to wonderful conversations about the power of inflection, and the translation of Shakespeare's words into modern day cultural understandings. Through this strategy, students also have an array of opportunities to lead class

discussions and present content-based information in inventive ways building their competencies to communicate effectively and increasing their motivation and connections to school.



ENGAGING STUDENTS IN SCHOOL

Although Thibodaux High has participated in the LSSSI project for 3 years, Principal Haydel acknowledges that he believed because there were “no disturbances everything was OK.” After a year of working with Ms. Guidry, the Lafourche school climate coach, and Ms. Heber, the school climate team lead at Thibodaux, he realized the importance of reaching out to all stakeholders and asking them what they would like to see. The next steps began during the summer of 2014, when faculty, school climate committee, and the community (parents and students) were invited to a meeting to share their ideas about reforming school climate. He listened to faculty, students, and parents who addressed several areas for change. One area that stood out was how to better recognize all students for doing things above and beyond regular schoolwork.

facilitated planning dialogue, students at Thibodaux High School suggested creating a student recognition program. The result was the creation of the student recognition board, “Pawesome Profiles,” on which a diverse range of students can be recognized for school accomplishments as well as personal achievements. During the summer, students on the PASSS Team (Positive Approaches for Safe and Supportive Schools) created boxes to collect the nominations and distributed them to each teacher. Students are encouraged to write about themselves or a peer’s achievement and place their nominations into the designated box in each classroom. Weekly, teachers review the entries and share them with students. Students vote on the submissions they feel exhibit extra special accomplishments that warrant submitting them to the school recognition board. Photographs of selected students are posted on the board with a brief explanation of their achievement. The recognition board is on the wall right outside of the main office and is visible to the entire school community (e.g., teachers, students, and parents). Thibodaux High’s “Pawesome Profiles” wall—they’re the Tigers—and two profiles are shown in the photos that accompany this story.



CRITICAL STRATEGIES AND LESSONS LEARNED

■ School leadership, particularly the principals, commitment to the value of voice for school climate improvement and student success is a critical component for making student voice strategies effective. Sometimes this means stepping outside one’s comfort zone and trusting in the process.

■ Providing students with opportunities for meaningful participation, engaging them in school activities, and guiding them in leadership roles and responsibilities requires adults who are available to take time to structure, organize, and mentor students. Partnering with other funding sources in the school (i.e., grants or other designated funds) is a critical piece for sustainability.

Additionally, student feedback from fishbowls (described in the previous example, and also known as student listening circles) conducted in several schools in the district indicated that recognition of all students, not just student athletes, honors students, or students with discipline problems, was something that students in Lafourche Parish School District wanted to improve upon. During the



- Allowing students to work collaboratively on student-centered projects requires a leap of faith for educators who prefer to have more structure and silence in the classroom.
- Building strong relationships with district/school administrators and keeping them in the planning loop helps mitigate challenges with calendars when scheduling teacher training time, scheduling substitute teachers, and other issues that impact the school day as these programs are being rolled out.
- Web-based student-centered projects require a strong wireless infrastructure with good district support from the information/technology support services. Including them in the planning stage can prevent problems that might arise regarding district restrictions about access to sites, district policies regarding allowing students to access websites, parental permission, compatibility issues (e.g., software versions, hardware, computer platforms, search sites), and state laws regarding sharing student data with outside vendors.

KEY RESOURCES FOR ENGAGING YOUTH

- Youth Move National – We are Change Agents “Motivating Others Through Voices of Experience” – <http://www.youthmovenational.org>
- Youth Engaged for Change (YE4C) – <http://engage.findyouthinfo.gov>
- Youth Leadership Institute (YLI) – <http://www.yli.org>
- National Resource Center for Youth Development – <http://www.nrcyd.ou.edu>
- National Career Academy Coalition (NCAC) – <http://www.ncacinc.com>

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