

# Giving Voice to Our STUDENTS

Student voice is a necessary  
piece to safe schools

*Michelle McGrath*

**F**or most people, when they hear the words “student voice,” they immediately envision a forum filled with unrealistic demands, chaos, and a lot of noise they hope will be short lived. My 22 years in education, along with what we’ve witnessed recently in light of the tragedies in Parkland, Florida, and elsewhere, prove it to be much different.

Student voice, on my journey, has always been filled with an abundance of authentic examples of purposeful and meaningful

engagement. Connected and engaged students are a necessary piece to safe schools.

On Dec. 16, 1965, Mary Beth Tinker, a 13-year-old student, wore a black armband to school to protest the war in Vietnam — a bold action

that was purposeful and meaningful and still impacts the way we address the integrity of the First Amendment for our young people.

Educating, empowering and engaging students has been a priority for the Wisconsin Association of

of the Sheboygan Area School Board, shares, “Personally, I am keenly aware that it wasn’t long ago that I was sitting on the other side of the table advocating for changes in our schools as a student. Those skills are still with me today. As a board

member, I want students to know that I am listening and looking for their input as much as I am listening and seeking input from their parents, teachers, and administrators.”

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planning, mentoring, and the necessary training and student advocacy forums to guide change.

To understand the importance of student voice, it’s essential that we reflect on the research. Leading student voice researcher, Russ Quaglia,

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School Councils (WASC) spanning the last nine decades. In fact, the WASC is the only organization in the nation where students have equal representation on its governing body.

Kyle Whelton, former WASC Student Officer and now a member

shares these important statistics, “When students have a voice they are seven times more likely to be motivated to learn, eight times more likely to experience engagement in school, and nine times more likely to experience purpose in school.”

The most surprising thing is what’s actually happening in schools. According to Quaglia, “Sixty-one percent of students believe they have a voice upon entering middle school. By the 12th grade, that number dips to 37 percent.”

There are a number of schools and community organizations engaging in authentic, student voice initiatives. Here are a couple setting the bar in Wisconsin.



Mount Horeb High School

■ **Mount Horeb School District** made the decision to capitalize on the passion of their students and collaborate with them regarding the “March 14th Walk Out” to remember the lives lost in the tragedy in the Florida school shooting. They invited myself, community leaders, school administration, and students to learn about what the students’ needs were in regard to school safety. They then took time to collaboratively plan an event focused on student voice and advocacy. Mount Horeb Student



Nekoosa High School

School Board Representative Joshua Busher shares, “As a student, you do have power, and you can make impactful, positive change. I am extremely fortunate to live in a place where those activities are abundant.”

■ **Nekoosa High School** provides several venues for students to voice their opinions including “Coffee with the Principal” and serving on various school committees traditionally only for staff. Principal Keith Johnson shares, “Students are the reason we are at school in the first place and often they are the last people we ask for an opinion.”

■ **Waunakee High School** created the “Justice League” with a mission to offer courageous conversations for students and create a safe and welcoming environment for all who enter. Through the work of the Justice League, students have brought voice to district committees and administration on economic disparity in their community, along with the conflicts and struggles of students that in the past had gone un-noticed. Joan Ensign, Waunakee school board president, shares, “Schools are in the business of serving students and who best to help guide school boards than students themselves.”

The WASC is also working with

a plethora of organizations to empower students and share voice:

- **Rotary Ethics Symposium.** A full-day event where Madison area schools bring a team of students to engage in courageous conversations with fellow students and community leaders on ethical decision making and hot topics in our schools.



Waunakee High School

- **WOW April 25/26 Event.** A collaborative effort with the Department of Public Instruction where participants will examine the power of student voice, reflect on Russ Quaglia’s timely research, and create purposeful, meaningful student engagement. Learn more at [dpi.wi.gov/ee/wow](http://dpi.wi.gov/ee/wow).
- **WASC Events:** IGNITE Student Leadership Summit, Leadership Institute, and Summer Leadership

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Students from around the state participated in the WASC's annual conference in Madison.

Camp. All providing opportunities for students to learn the necessary skills to effectively share their voice and forums to engage in purposeful change. Learn more at [wasc.org/programs-events](http://wasc.org/programs-events).

An effective student voice model includes listening, learning, and leading. Encouraging students to have more of a voice in schools starts with first preparing the educational leaders to be genuinely open to listening to and learning from their students. Learning effective strategies for student voice is equally as important.

Leading involves using the voices of our students to create meaningful and sustainable school change. To learn more about what students and school leaders can do to create positive and safe environments, visit this page dedicated to student voice: [wasc.org/leadership-standards](http://wasc.org/leadership-standards). ■

*Michelle McGrath is executive director of the Wisconsin Association of Student Councils.*

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