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**Should a Student in School be Seen and Not Heard?**  
**An Examination of Student Participation in U.S Schools**

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**ABSTRACT**

This article addresses the issue of youth participation in decision-making in schools in the United States. Since schools began, decisions have principally been the prerogative of administrators with input sometimes from teachers and occasionally from parents. Rarely have students had a say in such matters. But with the growth of democracy and some successful models being developed in the U.S. and elsewhere, this may be changing.

**KEYWORDS**

Student Voice, US Schools, CRC, US Constitution, The First Amendment

## 1. THE RIGHT TO PARTICIPATION

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) is the most important international document pertaining to rights of children. Article 12 is seen by many to be the lynchpin of the Convention especially in its call for participation of young people. Section 1 of that Article provides that:

‘State Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.’

Jean Zermatten has asserted that this is much more than a simple statement of rights since it calls for the participation of the child in society. He characterizes it as ‘the great innovation in the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century’ (Zermatten, 2003:16). He goes on to say that ‘the CRC gives children the right to speak and obligates that adults listen’ (2003:16). The United States, with Somalia, differs from much of the world as one of only two countries that has not ratified the CRC. Even so, there are many innovations presently going on in U.S schools regarding student voice. In the U.S there is a legal basis for student participation in the First Amendment to the U.S Constitution. The relevant provision reads:

‘Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances’ (U.S. Constitution, Amendment I).

The First Amendment is very important to the issue of ‘student voice’ because the five freedoms listed within it - religion, speech, press, assembly and association - all pertain to the elements that facilitate the articulation of student voices. These freedoms also correspond to provisions of the CRC including; Article 12 (right of the children to express their views on matters that affect them), Article 13 (freedom of expression), Article 14 (freedom of thought, conscience and religion), Article 15 (freedom of association and assembly), and Article 17 (right of access to information from the mass media and elsewhere). Though I will refer to the CRC, the best way to look at student voice in U.S schools is through the lens of the First Amendment to the U.S Constitution. My argument is that the First Amendment provides students with a legal basis for a claim to the right to participation.

But before undertaking a discussion on the importance of student voice, I will provide a working definition of the term as used in this article. For purposes of this article, I define student voice as a process that allow youths to state opinions and being heard, resulting in meaningful participation in decisions which concern them. The concept of student voice is not a new phenomenon in the U.S education system. For as long as schools had students, it is likely that there were always some students who attempted to influence school decision-making. However, American schools have generally been authoritarian by nature, based on the premise that adults know better than children. In the 1960s and 70s there were student power movements mostly on university campuses, but also some in schools. These movements advocated for the right of students to participate in decision-making in classrooms as well as general matters relating to the school environment. However, their existence was short lived as they largely vanished in the middle half of the 1970s (Mitra 2004: 652). Perhaps this was because the U.S became increasingly more conservative in the 1980s, and rights were often seen as not properly balanced with responsibilities.

It is interesting to note, however, that the more recent resurgence of student voice in a number of schools in the last decade has not placed much emphasis to the notion of 'rights.' This appears to be out of favour as a result of a backlash to the demand for rights made in the 1960s by many groups including African-Americans, women, the disabled, students and others. This led to many court cases and a feeling that many of these cases were a burden on the defendants, who were frequently the school administrators, and went too far in awarding 'rights.' To some, rights began to be seen as 'license', whilst to other school administrators and teachers, rights also began to be seen as a threat to maintaining control.

Indeed, schools are the most important institutions in which to promote student voice. This is because they have the capacity and mandate to reach virtually every young person, making them a key contributor to the development of social norms (Billig 2004:8). It is plausible to say, therefore, that if students are given effective voice in school, they are more likely to exercise an effective voice in their post-school lives. The issue of student voice involves a tension between those who want to protect the child and those who want the child to participate. Those who want protection point out the dangers of turning decisions over to those who are too young or immature to make them. Those in favour of participation say students are mature enough to make decisions and that the experience of decision-making will help them grow in maturity.

## 2. THE FOCUS ON FIRST AMENDMENT SCHOOLS (FAS)

In order to better appreciate student decision-making in the U.S, I have selected a school reform project centered on the concept of vibrant student voice. This project, the First Amendment Schools, was a joint initiative of two Washington area based NGOs, the First Amendment Centre of the Freedom Forum and the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, which is now the sole home for the project. The project was begun 9 years ago and the name comes from the First Amendment to the U.S Constitution. Given its emphasis on student voice, I have selected the FAS project to examine how student voice is being implemented in some schools in the U.S. FAS grew to over 100 schools and at one point included over 70,000 students. The goals of FAS was to create and sustain First Amendment principles in schools, establish schools in every region of the country, encourage curriculum reforms that deepen these principles and educate school leaders, teachers and others about the significance of the First Amendment (First Amendment Schools). These schools have a shared commitment that:

1. students and all members of the school community are given meaningful opportunities to practice democracy;
2. students learn how to exercise their individual rights with responsibility, and experience what it feels like to serve the public good;
3. families, students and educators work together to shape the school culture; and
4. civic education is translated into civic engagement through service learning and problem solving (McCloskey and Chaplain 2004:38).

Student voice is being implemented in FAS and based on my interactions with the FAS principals, teachers and students, indications are that it is a principle supported across the spectrum of its participants. Six schools were selected through consultation with FAS co-director Sam Chaplain who provided me with a list of ten schools where he believed a substantial amount of student voice was being exercised. They varied from small schools

(e.g. 200 students), to larger schools (e.g. 1000). Some schools had been in the program for five years; all had been in at least two. The selected schools are geographically diverse, ranging from the East (Massachusetts) to the West (California) to the South (South Carolina) to the Mid-west (Wisconsin) to the Southwest (Utah and Texas).

Throughout this article I will reflect the views of the principals and students I interviewed at the six FAS schools. Rather than use names of either the school or the person interviewed, I will identify each person as follows: principal, California or student, Massachusetts. Before looking at how students manifest voice, it is helpful to examine how U.S law either expands or restricts student voice.

### 3. STUDENT VOICE AND THE LAW

The United States Supreme Court, in a series of landmark decisions, has set standards for schools to follow in such areas as freedom of speech, freedom of the press, religion and assembly, all of which are relevant to my exploration of student voice. We will now examine look at speech, press and assembly.

#### 3.1. FREEDOM OF SPEECH

Throughout modern U.S history most schools have been and continue to be basically authoritarian institutions. The principal has the final say on all policy matters that are not the province of the local school board or the state board of education. A good principal, like any good manager, reaches out for advice from teachers and parents, but the reality is that many principals rarely ask advice from students. The opportunity for student voice has been suppressed under the umbrella of arguments such as immaturity, lack of competence and a general one, which is frequently expressed in the phrase 'a school is not a democracy.' While it is true that a school is not a democracy, U.S Supreme Court Justice Abe Fortas remarked in a case that 'it can hardly be argued that either students or teachers shed their constitutional rights at the schoolhouse gate' (*Tinker v Des Moines* 1969: 503). *Tinker* is one of the most relevant cases to student voice because it established the standard for free speech by students in schools. The facts in this case were that several students had planned to wear black armbands to school to protest the Vietnam War. School officials quickly adopted a no armband rule and suspended Mary Beth Tinker when she came to school with one on. The U.S Supreme Court recognized the First Amendment right to free expression in school unless school officials could reasonably forecast that the speech will cause 'a material and substantial disruption of school activities, or collide with the rights of others' (*Tinker v Des Moines* 1969: 506). This has become the legal standard for many subsequent school cases.

The question that may be asked is can students in school say anything they want unless it is disruptive? There is certain speech which is almost always forbidden and this includes obscenity and bullying. In addition, drugs, alcohol, gang symbols or violent images are usually not allowed on tee-shirts (these were all examples of forbidden speech provided in interviews by FAS students and principals). However, all the principals interviewed said political speech was allowed including speech that most of the students, teachers, and administrators disagreed with. Also there are other types of speech students cannot use. One student, Frazier from the state of Washington gave a nominating speech for another student at a school assembly, and used sexual innuendos in the speech. Much laughter ensued among the students. Based on the school's no disruption and anti-profanity rules, he was suspended. The U.S Supreme Court ruled in favour of the school saying that it could suppress this type of student speech (*Bethel School District v Frazier* 1986: 675). This particular student voice, using obscenity, could not be heard inside the school.

### 3.2. FREEDOM OF THE PRESS

Freedom of the press is also protected in the U.S by the First Amendment but does this mean you can write whatever you want in the school newspaper? Out of the six FAS schools, four had either a newspaper or a television show put together by the students. All said that teachers or administrators worked with the publication or broadcast and they occasionally censor something such as obscenity or a direct criticism of a teacher or another student. One principal (Texas) said, 'Our TV show is screened for good taste' (principal, Texas). In the school context, there is more censorship than that which commonly occurs in a newspaper or on television outside the school.

The U.S Supreme Court has also decided a major case regarding students and freedom of the press. In this case (*Hazelwood School District v Kuhlmeier* 1988: 260), the court decided that the rights of a student, who was not allowed to publish articles on teen pregnancy and the impact of divorce, had not been violated. The Court said the school could do this as long as it had reasons related to legitimate educational concerns. The court felt that in this case the articles might embarrass certain students who were mentioned and this was a legitimate educational concern.

### 3.3. FREEDOM OF ASSEMBLY

Though the right to assemble technically applies to schools, in practice, it is a particularly difficult way for students to have a voice. For example, in one FAS school (principal, South Carolina) students asked for and were allowed to have a 'spirit assembly' to generate spirit for the school. Another FAS school had a walkout of class and then an assembly on the issue of a termination of a well-liked school secretary, protesting her dismissal (principal, Utah). Most schools have never had student-generated assemblies and the FAS students interviewed didn't sound like they knew whether or not they could do this. No major cases have been decided on Freedom of Assembly grounds in the school context, though the Tinker 'material and substantial disruption' rule would undoubtedly be argued and likely apply. If it involved a walkout of classes this would stop and disrupt the school day and probably cause a 'substantial disruption.' If there were no walkout and students wanted to have an assembly during the lunch hour, this would be a closer question. However, forbidding this action may be justified under the standard of 'material disruption of the educational process.'

### 3.4. CONCLUSION

Serving as a speaker at the graduation ceremony is a big responsibility for a student, and it is often a powerful experience. Nevertheless, one principal's nightmare came true when four students were selected to make speeches and a student named Brad was one of them (Beaudoin 2005: 46). Brad was a bit of a non-conforming student but he had good grades and was slated to attend a good university. The usual practice was for the students who were speaking to run a draft of the speech by the assistant principal before graduation day. But Brad did not do that. In addition, when he spoke, he strongly criticised the administrators for initiating unfair rules and not listening to the students. The assistant principal, as well as most of the audience, was shocked but the next student speaker came to the rescue. He said, 'well, I guess Brad and I didn't go to the same school.' The whole student body stood up and clapped. Free speech had won the day when both opposing viewpoints and student voice were allowed.

This situation illustrates the tough decisions administrators must make when it comes to allowing students to exercise their freedom of speech. When the assistant principal didn't insist on seeing Brad's speech ahead of time, a speech resulted that was somewhat



embarrassing to the school. However, another student exercised his free speech in criticizing Brad's remarks. I would argue that this was the preferred outcome as freedom of speech resulting in what some see as embarrassing speech is better than censored speech where students may just say what they think administrators want to hear. Except in extraordinary circumstances, student voice must be freely exercised.

#### 4. STUDENT VOICE IN THE CLASSROOM

Classrooms are where students spend most of their time so to give students a voice in school wide decisions but not change classroom practices seems counter-productive. The movements for student-centered education, discussion of political issues and the use of participatory methods of instruction are obvious compliments to student voice (Beaudoin 2005: 25). Student-centered (or learner-centered) education puts the student first and is designed to meet his or her needs. Participatory methods involve students taking part in classes in an active way. For example, the teacher may employ teaching techniques such as role-plays, small group work, discussion of controversial issues or other more formal simulations such as a model United Nations mock legislatures or mock trials. These were highlighted in *The Civic Mission of Schools*, a national report in which simulations of democratic procedures were singled out as a promising approach to civic education (CIRCLE and Carnegie Corporation of New York 2003: 6). Billig *et al.* (2005: 54) studied 1000 high school students and concluded that the use of active teaching strategies was highly likely to impact on civic knowledge, skills dispositions and civic engagement.

Some youth development specialists believe that engaging youth in their own learning experiences, while offering student choice and responsibility, can best be done through a cooperative, project-based and active learning approach. Students must be able to choose content, set learning goals, ask questions, reflect on the learning, practice communication and problem solving skills, and assume leadership roles in the classroom (Forum for Youth Investment 2005: 2). Participatory teaching strategies are something with which I am quite familiar with having been part of the education organization Street Law Inc. Street Law's mission is to provide practical, participatory education about law, democracy and human rights that enables people to transform democratic ideals into citizen action (Street Law Inc.). We have found that interactive methods work very well and that generally, students and teachers are very enthusiastic about them. Consequently, we caution teachers about delivering long lectures. Lectures can signify that the teacher has all the information and is filling up the student like an empty vessel. Though any method can be used in an authoritarian or democratic manner, a participatory lesson is more likely to involve student interaction and support student voice.

Student-centered education and participatory methods often result in classrooms that some would call noisy, and this may cause some teachers and administrators to complain. However, as school Principal Nelson Beaudoin has noted 'a silent school is not a school at all' (Beaudoin 2005: 22). Noise can indicate positive involvement, and if it is part of a constructive learning activity, the students may learn more in this manner. Obviously, noise needs to be contained so it does not infringe on the education of others, but participatory activities can be fun, and schools might change for the better if more students thought of school as fun. An educational reform movement that stresses change in the classroom is known as the *Paideia* approach. This grew out of the writings of American educator and philosopher Mortimer Adler. The program advocates three types of teaching:

Didactic instruction (which should be relegated to a minimum of the school day and kept as interactive as possible)

Coaching (which is viewed as learning by doing and is supported by a variety of techniques such as labs, cooperative learning, and project-centered teaching and learning)

Seminars (which are advocated as a regular instructional method and seen as a vehicle that will bring about the greatest educational transformation) (UNCTV)

Educationist David Campbell advocates for student involvement in civic classes. He defines this as 'the discussion of contemporary social and political issues by teachers and students alike' (Campbell 2005: 8). He refers to the IEA Civic Education Study which looked at such things as whether students felt their classes promoted freedom to disagree openly with teachers or students, encouraged them to make up their own mind, addressed current political events or allowed them to express their own opinions (Torney-Purta and Richardson 2005). It is my view that this philosophy is a natural complement to the use of participatory methods and will enable students to practice discussing issues before they participate in a real-life decision-making outside of school.

One of the most effective ways to involve students in the classroom is through discussion of controversial issues. This is the discussion of two or more public policy positions which are focused on solving specific problems. For example, 'discussing the issue of sexual harassment' may not be specific enough while 'whether sexual harassment is a problem in our community' would be. Many see the controversial methodological issues as essential to a democratic classroom. Diana Hess, who has written extensively in this area, has stated that there is a connection between learning how to deliberate controversial issues and participate in a democratic society (Youniss et al 2009: 62). As Mansbridge has pointed out 'democracy involves public discussion of common problems, not just silent counting of individual hands' (Mansfield 1991:122).

These classroom activities all include student voice and prepare students for a greater role in school, or in state or local school district wide decision-making. If students have not had the opportunity to exercise their voice in the classroom, we cannot expect them to exercise it effectively outside the school or in the community. Another student voice activity that can begin in the classroom is students helping other students in the learning process. This can be done by having students mentor, coach or tutor other students who need help. This requires that courses and classrooms be organized in a way to facilitate such action. It is important that there be multiple learning opportunities for students with various learning styles. One educational leader, Ted Sizer believed that students need practice in learning on their own. He said that 'the most important reason to give kids authority in the classroom is so they can acquire the habit of reasoning out for themselves the intellectual problems we all face' (Coalition for Essential Schools, 2006:4 ).

Sizer, was the founder of one of the nation's leading school reform organizations, the Coalition for Essential Schools (CES). CES promotes small schools and the idea of having smaller classes. U.S schools traditionally had 30-35 students in a high school class with teachers usually required to teach five classes a day. CES recommends 30 or fewer at the high school level and 20 or fewer students in primary schools. Coupled with smaller numbers, CES calls for the student in the classroom to be the 'worker' not just the receiver of information from the teacher. Lastly, CES encourages 'democratic practices and classes



involving all that are directly affected by the school' (Coalition for Essential Schools, 2006: 2). To my mind, having smaller classes and fewer students in a school raise the possibility of greater student voice and more likelihood that it will be heard.

One activity that grows out of classroom work is student-led conferences. In schools one of the most dreaded times for students is when parents meet with teachers and hear how the students are progressing in their class work. Principal Nelson Beaudoin uses the technique of having the students lead the conference meetings with the parents, and having the students explain what they have done in the class, including the pros and the cons of their performance and how they can improve in the future (Beaudoin 2005: 39). This makes the important point that students are in charge of their own education. Another classroom generated project is sometimes referred to as 'the senior project' or the 'culminating project.' These projects are usually planned so that the students will be given an opportunity to show some of the skills and knowledge they have gained in their four years of high school. The students decide on the topic and sometimes they are so encouraged that they select something related to a career in which they may be interested, recognizing that for some it is very early to think of a career. 'At their best, senior projects motivate students to take control of their own learning, and give them a sense of accomplishment and an awareness of what they have learned and how far they have progressed' (Miller 2004/2: 2.). This project gives the students more control over their own time and prepares them for life after school, especially if they go to a university where they must use time responsibly (Wood 2005: 136).

The project can also give students a chance to exhibit their expertise in front of their family, giving parents and siblings an opportunity to hear the student's voice as well. (Coalition for Essential Schools, 2006: 2). Another method that produces an opportunity for student voice is student internships, which are usually organized out of a class or as a school-wide internship program (Wood 2005:130). This also can take the form of community service projects where students volunteer and work on activities contributing to the betterment of the community. Some schools require a certain number of hours of community service before the student is allowed to graduate. Internships can also be where students choose a type of work and usually go once a week (some schools have half days free once a week to facilitate this) and then work a certain number of hours (Wood 2005: 172). This is usually unpaid, but sometimes there are stipends involved and at other times it may lead to a paying job. There are many opportunities for student voice and decision-making within an internship. Another activity, that is an important basis of student voice, is writing a constitution. This can be a school constitution or one for the classroom. This activity focuses students, teachers and administrators on the goals of schooling and the philosophy of education. It also makes an affirmation that this school or class is so important it requires its own constitution, and that in a democracy they should take part in writing it.

## 5. STUDENTS AND SCHOOL REFORM

Can students play a role in school reform efforts? Nelson Beaudoin (2005: 2) and George Wood (2005: 137) hold the view that student involvement is essential if reform is to be successful. One youth development organization has noted 'sustained progress to improve education policy and practice at the classroom, school, district and community levels cannot be met without engaging education's primary consumers - young people - in the process' (Forum for Youth Investment 2005: 1). Nelson Beaudoin has also noted that 'there is no better engine to pull the train of school reform than student voice, and once it picks up steam it is difficult to derail' (Beaudoin 2005: 2).

If a modern workplace were to initiate major changes in how the office operated, it would be essential to have the employees who worked there to participate in the planning of any level of change. It seems that people at all levels in the company should not only be able to contribute but they would also be more likely to buy in and support the change if they did participate. Therefore, if one is changing a school, it is important to involve the students. Principal George Wood says that when he first looked at restructuring his high school, he had the students engaged in the same discussions as faculty to figure out how to improve the school. He also had the students involved when the reform committee visited other schools. When options were discussed, students were part of the discussions (Wood 2005: 137). If the reform efforts neglect to include the voices of youth, the reform initiatives run the risk of failure (Forum for Youth Investment 2005: 3). As youth coordinator for California, Elyshia Aseltine said,

One of the things I notice consistently in my work with students is that they have an awareness of what's working or not working long before some of the adults do. As adults, we tend to rely on intricate or complicated methods to evaluate the work we do and, in doing so, we overlook the most accessible and significant source of information about program effectiveness, our young people. (Forum for Youth Investment 2005:3).

If a school reform effort is to be undertaken, one should include youth from the beginning. A youth committee might be set up to meet and come up with important ideas or react to the proposals of a reform committee. The reform committee should also include students as full voting members. In addition, those members should report through a structure that enables student voice to be heard. Another option would be to have them report to a youth committee. Reporting and gathering of input may take place through a system of 'clusters,' 'advisories,' or 'families' which were used by some of the FAS schools as smaller units of students to facilitate student input into decisions (principals and students, Massachusetts, Utah and Texas).

One successful school reform initiative took place at the Ethan Allen School in Vermont. This is a K-8 school with 850 students, 35% coming from a government designated poverty background. A student leadership club was formed with the goal of transforming the way the school educated students (McKibben 2004:79). This club had the effect of changing the parent-teacher organization to a student-parent-teacher organization and completing a school action plan based on two key skills: listening and consensus building (McKibben 2004: 80). Leadership was redefined to mean inclusivity and collaboration. Stephen McKibben, the Director of the Foundation for Excellent Schools and a key player in the project emphasized the importance of tapping into the power of student idealism. He said, 'as educators, we have a responsibility to do everything we can to ensure that students never lose that sense of buoyant confidence in the power of their voices' (McKibben 2004: 81).

## 6. STUDENT COUNCILS AND OTHER FORMS OF DECISION-MAKING

Student councils exist in virtually every U.S high school and some primary schools. Though they sometimes consist of students democratically elected by students, it is rare that these councils discuss school-related policy issues or vote on rules that affect them. Some schools have set up a student government course in which students learn leadership and decision-making skills. Students from this class then serve on the student council (Miller 2004: 1). This approach has one drawback in that the students who enrol in this class automatically

become part of the student council and are not democratically elected. As educational reformer George Wood stated,

one of the things I remember most about my own high school experience is how few decisions we really had to make as students. Even though I served as a class officer, it seemed we were not asked our opinions about very much. We did get to choose the location and band for the prom (a dance), and the theme (within limits) for homecoming. Beyond that, there wasn't much over which we had much control (Wood 2005:137).

Along a similar vein, educator Dennis Littky noted, 'in many cases students go through twelve years of schooling without making one democratic decision' (Beaudoin 2005: 1). Democratic decision-making is one way of engaging students in their own education. As Nelson Beaudoin said, 'I view student engagement as the lynchpin of great schooling. Unless we engage our students - unless we get them to care- not much else will matter' (Beaudoin 2005: 5).

### 6.1. SCHOOL GOVERNANCE

Looking at the six FAS schools we can see a general commitment to student participation, but varying methods of trying to get there. One very interesting approach is from a FAS primary school in Wisconsin that declared that it would be organized like a city and elect its own mayor and city council. Only fifth graders (usually about 10 years old) could run for mayor. The school even adopted a city name. The principal said that this generated great enthusiasm with many students wanting to be mayor. She noted that this election process also taught students 'how to lose' an important skill (principal, Wisconsin). More than 500 people including local officials, parents, community members and others showed up for the city naming at the school. The school also has a common council with teachers and students represented. This council makes recommendations to the principal who then makes the final decisions. The principal said 'parents like it that way.' However, students have influence and they know it. They become better decision makers. As a 10 year old student from this school said, 'students should make the rules because they know what kids need. The students want to learn how to make a change and when they grow up they might grow good in life' (student, Wisconsin).

Student government is unusual in primary schools but in the Wisconsin school above and the people from the other two FAS primary schools that I interviewed, it is a major part of their programs to stimulate student voice. The principals in these schools believe that students cannot be too young to exercise their voices. The FAS primary school in California has an elected student council and a teacher sits in on their meetings. The council can take their ideas to the principal or bring about a meeting between the principal and some of the students (principal, California). However, students organize the meetings and the student interviewed said the student council came up with things like 'crazy hair day' and the administration approved it (student, California). One 11 year old female student saw this as very beneficial saying 'since they were the ones learning, they should make the decisions.' She also made the insightful comment that 'maybe this will make them want to come to school more' (student, California).

The third primary school in the FAS project (South Carolina) has an elected student government and, again, it seemed very useful for students to serve as officers. In this school, the principal had the whole school write a constitution together, which she felt involved everybody in thinking and discussing what the school was all about. The principal believes in

giving students practice in voting on small decisions like what film to watch on 'Family Movie Night' (principal, South Carolina). However, the student government has become involved in very real community issues such as going to the high school and registering students who were over 18 to vote. They also worked on the issue of services to a low-income neighbourhood where some of the students live. They wrote petitions to have a sidewalk put in and a bookmobile stop in this neighbourhood (student, South Carolina).

The three FAS high schools were also all committed to student voice and employed various methods to try to achieve it. In the Massachusetts school, a common council was set up with 75% students and 25% faculty as members. The principal (Massachusetts) retained the right to veto any decision, which he rarely does. This council has taken on issues such as the dress code, students having to pay for advanced placement courses, and parking policies (This is something very important to students who can drive, Principal, Massachusetts). The student (Massachusetts) interviewed did not believe all decisions should go to students, as some would want no homework and no tests. Students, he said, 'will go too far.' As we have seen, the principal kept a veto power as a check on students going too far. He believes very strongly in students being involved in some decisions. The principal believed that this involvement will give them a better understanding of the democratic process, as well as teach them how to accept defeat (Massachusetts).

The second of the FAS high schools where a student and a principal were interviewed (Texas) has a system of all students being assigned to a 'family.' Each family elects two representatives to a community management council that also includes teachers and administrators. This seems to be an active group that draws up proposed policies on topics such as tardiness and food and drink. Some students have brought up, through the community management council, the issue of male students wearing hats and earrings. The students will have an opportunity to present their case to the superintendent. On another issue, the administration wanted to extend the school day for 10 minutes. The students spoke out against it and the administration dropped the idea. As one student from this school stated, 'rules affect them and they should have a say, 'this will make students and faculty happier' (student, Texas).

The third high school (Utah) has a system of organizing students into 'advisory' groups of students and a faculty advisor who meet at least 15 minutes each day and 30 minutes on two days. This is an opportunity to raise issues and then representatives can take such issues to the student government or to the School Advisory Council, which is made up of students, teachers and parents. This is where many school policy decisions are made though some may have to go up to the Board of Trustees that oversees the entire school. Sometimes all student school meetings are held to discuss an issue. For example, when some students refused to pledge allegiance to the flag, an all-school meeting was held. It was decided to allow them not to participate. As one student who praised this system said, 'this makes a student not just another face in the crowd. There is more regard for you as a person' (Texas). The principal (Texas) added, 'if we don't share decision-making, it is us vs. them. Adults cannot be the only ones who make rules for kids to follow as this will result in tension.' Her goal, she said, was to 'build people I want to live next to.'

There are a number of schools outside the FAS network which have been promoting student decision-making from their beginnings. One is the School Within a School (SAS) in Brookline, Massachusetts. SWS is an independent school of 115 students within a larger high school. The students share decision-making with 8 faculty members. (Bresman, Erdmann & Olson 2009: 68-71). The heart of the school is a weekly town meeting where all students and

faculty discuss, debate and vote on issues such as future course offerings, admission policy, and school rules. All students are required to serve on committees which also address the issue of new teacher hires. One student summed up the SWS experience this way 'I know I began to sense the value of a single human being and each person's responsibilities to each other and the world in SWS' (Bresman, Erdmann & Olson 2009: 71).

## 6.2. STUDENT INVOLVEMENT WITH LOCAL SCHOOL BOARDS

Local school boards sometimes have one or two seats reserved for students. These students are elected by students attending schools in the District. Sometimes these students can vote and sometimes their votes are advisory. They usually have an opportunity to express a student view on an issue and they may serve on committees, where their voices may be heard. These committees might discuss issues such as school budgets, staffing, instruction facilities and legal matters. Some say these matters are beyond the maturity of students but others disagree. The students who serve are most often high school students, usually between age of 16 and 18 years.

The issue of student voting on school boards is handled in many different ways by the various districts that have student members. For example, the school board in Jackson, Wyoming, states that student board members "shall not have an official vote in Board matters, but shall be entitled to an unofficial vote recorded in the minutes" (Miller 2004:3). In the state of Maine, state law declares that only elected members can vote but one local board got around this by encouraging the students to tell the other members how they would vote if they had one. These non-official votes often influenced the elected members (Beaudoin 2005, pp.90). This type vote is called an "honorary vote" in the Cumberland County School System in Crossville, Tennessee (Miller 2004/2:3). In the state of Maryland, any county board of education may give students votes on some matters. For example in Baltimore County, they may vote on all matters except suspension or dismissal of teachers, principals and other personnel, collective bargaining, capital and operating budgets, school closing and boundaries and special education placement appeals. Maryland also has a student representative on its State Board of Education. Other states that allow (but don't require) boards to have student members include Montana, Nebraska, New York and Virginia (Miller 2004/2:3).

I believe that students can be valuable advisors to a principal and the teaching staff regarding curriculum and the methods teachers use to teach. Students are the consumers of education. They have laboured in this role for a number of years. That experience is valuable. When decisions are made such as block scheduling, where classes meet for longer periods fewer time per week, who better than students to give their input? Some students should participate on any curriculum revision committee.

Some district school boards have created a mechanism for student voice such as student reports to the board and advisory groups to the superintendent. A teacher in Maine who sat on a hiring committee felt it was "amazing" to sit on the same committee as a 9<sup>th</sup> grader (usually 13 or 14 years olds) and treat each other as equals (Beaudoin 2005:87).

One of the most interesting systems is in Madison, Wisconsin, where students may run for office in regular school board elections against adult candidates and have sometimes been elected to the board. In addition, there is Madison Student Senate, which is made up of eight elected students, one from each school, and this body sends one student representative to the board (Miller 2004/1:5).



The advantage of having students on school boards is that the adult board members sometimes take their own roles more seriously. Student presence helps the board stay focused on student concerns (Miller 2004/1:4). Therefore, student voice may improve the operation of a school board.

One local school board where student representation has taken hold is Anne Arundel County, Maryland. For the past 25 years a high school student has served as a full voting member of the county's board of education. These students have voted on all issues, including the budget. But the county does not just restrict student voice to the board of education; it has students serving on all kinds of committees that work on policy matters. In addition, students participate on local school improvement teams (Fletcher, 2003).

## 7. WHAT DECISIONS SHOULD STUDENTS BE ALLOWED TO MAKE?

Before making recommendations regarding student decision-making, it is important to remind ourselves why student voice is important. In this article, I hope I have captured what principal Beaudoin called "The Magic of Student Voice" which to him and many others cited in this paper is essential to achieving great schooling (Beaudoin 2005:1).

A few reasons why student voice is important are:

1. It brings teachers, parents, students, and administrators closer to each other so that they can work together to provide students the best education possible.
2. It opens a dialogue which uncovers problems and proposes possible solutions.
3. It makes classrooms come alive with more participation, greater student-teacher and student-student interaction, and a student-centered approach
4. Students will feel closer to and more supportive of their school.
5. Students will be better prepared to make decisions in their own lives and to be active citizens.

Nelson Beaudoin is one principal who takes a strong position on student government. He believes involving students is an idea that is not only sensible but should be part of the school's responsibility (Beaudoin 2005:84). He goes on to say that he cannot think of a single decision that would not benefit from student input. He does not go so far as to say students should make all decisions but rather that they should have input into all decisions.

Which decisions should students have input into and which issues should they not? How about a personnel decision such as firing a teacher? In one of the FAS schools students walked out of classes to protest the firing of a school secretary. It seems to me that personnel decisions such as a teacher being considered for termination would often benefit from student input, but I do not think they should be involved in the actual decision. Legal restraints, such as union rules regarding teacher termination, might also prohibit this.

How about student involvement in hiring of teachers? In the interviews of the six FAS principals, three of the six had students sit in on interviews of prospective teachers. (Utah, South Carolina and Massachusetts) and the primary school principal (South Carolina) said that the kids gave very good feedback on the teachers who were job applicants. But why did the other three not do this? One principal said the teachers were against it (principal,



California). At one of the schools where the students were involved in interviews, a teacher who was a candidate for a job at a FAS school (South Carolina) said she would not want to work at a school that allowed students to participate in interviews. She was not hired.

Another fairly common way of involving students is on committees. As we have seen, students sometimes serve with parents and teachers on a school-wide "community council," "advisory council" or a "common council." Whether the principal listens to the views of this council will determine whether there is really a student voice. Some feel that having just one or two student members on a committee can take on an aura of tokenism. Principal Beaudoin (2005:87) says that he never sends just one student to be on a committee and that he strives for student parity with adults whenever possible.

An important issue is whether student input will be solicited before decisions are made. A good example of such a process took place in one of the Project 540 schools, Newport High School in Newport, Pennsylvania (Project 540). First, the leadership team was formed and included four students. This team decided it would train 60 student facilitators to lead dialogues. The purpose of the dialogues was to identify issues that should be addressed. Examples of student concerns were the lack of a pool/swim team, a student lounge, and air conditioning. A presentation was made to the school board and a new group was formed called the Forum for the Education of Newport and it would have 16 members: 6 students (one from each grade level), 4 faculty members, 4 community members and 2 school board members. The establishment of this group created an ongoing forum that would make recommendations to the principal and the school board (Project 540)

Some say that there are few decisions students can make in school, however, what follows is a good list of possibilities. Fourteen Ways Students Can Participate in School Decision-making (Patmor & McIntyre, 1999):

1. Deciding the number of employees in each school position
2. Selecting textbooks and instructional materials
3. Selecting a new principal when there is a vacancy
4. Consulting with principal when other vacancies are filled
5. Deciding what is to be taught
6. Deciding which classes teachers will teach
7. Deciding which teaching methods will be used
8. Deciding what classes students will take
9. Deciding how time will be used during the day
10. Deciding how the school building will be used
11. Making discipline and classroom management policies
12. Deciding issues concerning extracurricular activities

### 13. Determining how available funds are to be spent

### 14. Planning activities for teacher in-service days

Is there a danger that if students are given decision-making power, they may make a poor decision? In 2006, the principal at Woodlawn High School in Arlington Virginia delegated the power, along with a budget, to a group of students who were to decide on a gift which every student would receive at graduation. The students decided on a flask, made for serving liquor. Parents and others who heard about it were shocked. The principal reversed the decision and said, "Students didn't make the right decision, so we had to step in." Does this mean students should never be given decision-making power? No, but it does illustrate the need for training in decision-making for some students or perhaps a check is needed such as having a student-faculty committee make such decisions. There are obviously times that students, like adults, make decisions, such as the flask purchases, that need to be changed. However, this does not mean they should never be given decision-making power. Rather it means just that there should be some review or check on their decisions. I do not believe that having some student decisions reviewed than a decision by a teacher being reviewed and reversed by a principal, or a principal's decision being subject to review by a superintendent of schools. Do not we all sometimes need checks?

The heart of this change is from a teacher centered classroom to a student centered one where students interact more with the teacher and with each other. This topic was discussed (see Sec.V above). For it to take root in the work of teachers, some training will need to focus on it. Findings indicate many important motivational benefits to this practice (Meece, 2003:109).

Teaching classes using the participatory methods described above (see Sec. V) and integrating the First Amendment into a number of classes (e.g., English, Civics, History, Science etc.) can help produce more active and productive classrooms. The FAS project has created many valuable lessons to use to teach about the First Amendment including some on freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom of the press, freedom of assembly and freedom of association. (FAS). Teachers should be provided these lessons and the training needed to go along with them.

Because civic education is closely tied to student voice and good civic education as identified in the CMS Report includes many of the recommendation made in this article (CIRCLE *et al.* 2003:6), special attention should be given to teaching of government law and human rights in the school's curriculum. Three of the leading U.S. national projects in this field should be consulted for information on curriculum, and teacher training. They are the Center for Civic Education (see [www.civiced.org](http://www.civiced.org)), Constitutional Rights Foundation (see [www.CRF-USA.org](http://www.CRF-USA.org)) and my former organization Street Law Inc, (see [www.Streetlaw.org](http://www.Streetlaw.org)). These organizations are also well versed in participatory activities that highlight student voice such as mock trials, We the People competitions or other simulations (see their websites listed above). Street Law can also provide assistance in incorporating human rights education into the curriculum.

## 8. CONCLUSION

Coupled with training on how to teach law and government and how to use participatory methodology, should be training in the philosophy of participation. Teachers, students, administrators and parents need to understand the underlying philosophy before they can be expected to participate effectively. One must build a foundation before one can build a house.

I believe the answer to the question in the title of this article; "When Should Students In School Be Seen and Not Heard" is "no." I have provided numerous examples of schools giving students the opportunity to exercise their student voices and participate I have also shown that student decision-making should not be without some limitations and safeguards. For example students making the decision to terminate a teacher would not seem appropriate though giving input into teacher performance is. However, at the end of the day, I agree with Alfie Kahn who said: "Students should not only be trained to live in a democracy when they grow up; they should have the chance to live in one now." (Kahn, 1993)

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