



Leveraging Student Voice to Improve Education

In the State of Michigan, there is currently no uniform measurement of students' wellbeing nor a common way to evaluate student engagement and the impact of related services and interventions for students beyond standardized test scores.

Yet the research is crystal clear about the significant role of student engagement and student belonging on student success. Engaged students are 2.5 times more likely to say they do well in school and 4.5 times more likely to be hopeful about the future (Jackson, C.K. et al. Linking social-emotional learning to long-term success. Education Next.).

In 2019, a group of superintendents in Kent County, Michigan developed a common survey that could provide a holistic picture of student experience including student engagement, social-emotional learning (SEL) and belonging. This led to the development of the MI Student Voice Perception Survey, which was administered by 20 school districts across the state in 2022. Participation nearly tripled in just one year, with 58 districts administering the survey in spring 2023 – a total of 33,366 students – and interest continues to grow.

Statewide data from the spring 2023 Student Perception Survey underscores the need to truly listen to students. The data shows that one in five students have low SEL skills, largely stemming from relationship skills and responsible decision making. Additionally, student engagement is notably lower in middle and high school compared to elementary grades, impeding college enrollment and advanced degree attainment. Likewise, students in elementary grades have a higher sense of belonging than students in high school, particularly as relates to relationship and cultural awareness.

Public Opinion Affirms Need for Assessment on Student Engagement

In summer 2023, a public opinion poll was commissioned with EPIC-MRA to better understand public sentiment around student engagement. The results loudly validate the need for and importance of the work in student voice and engagement. Of the 600 individuals polled, 79% believe that students' performance should be graded on much more than just standardized test scores; and 60% believe student engagement is more important than how students do on standardized tests in measuring classroom performance and understanding the material they are being taught. Additionally, 75% of respondents think it is important for their local public school district to join with other Michigan public school districts in adopting policies that have proven to increase the level of student engagement – both in Michigan and nationwide.

The MI Student Voice Perception Survey is now playing a transformative role in how education leaders approach district and school improvement planning by prioritizing the voice of

students. Many of the districts used the data to conduct student focus groups to further validate and understand the findings. This data allows school districts to assess where students are at now and use it to inform district and school improvement plans, professional development, interventions, classroom improvements and so much more. The survey is intended to be a complement to existing tests, helping to provide a more holistic view of students and their education.

As a state, we have been remiss not to have student voice incorporated into our district and school improvement planning and assessments. If we truly want to see student performance increase and position Michigan to be a Top 10 state for public education, we must take care of our students' social, emotional and mental well-being. Students need to know that we care and the best way we demonstrate that is through our actions, first by listening to them and then taking steps based on their voice, their concerns and their ideas.

The MI Student Voice Perception Survey provides a tool to do just this and we urge more districts to start administering the survey and advocating that this become part of our statewide assessment strategy.

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