For over 30 years, the team at the Quaglia Institute for School Voice & Aspirations has been collecting information about what students and teachers think, believe, and feel about school. The data has shown time and time again that students and teachers must exhibit an active voice in the educational community if they are to reach their fullest potential. When students and teachers know they’re being heard, listened to, valued, and respected, they report a much higher level of engagement and involvement—leading to higher levels of academic and personal motivation.

The story of Youngstown City School District illustrates the power of School Voice in impacting engagement, higher aspirations, and gains in academic achievement.

For more information about School Voice, visit www.corwin.com/school-voice or contact a Corwin representative at (800) 831-6640.
Youngstown City School District (YCSD)

The Context

Youngstown City School District (YCSD) is an urban district comprised of 12 schools located in Youngstown, Ohio. Interim Superintendent, Stephen A. Stohla, currently leads the district. Under the direction of a state appointed Academic Distress Commission, Col. Stohla (US Army, Ret.) has continued a turn around effort begun by previous superintendent Dr. Connie Hathorn and former Deputy Superintendent Doug Hiscox. Administrative turnover in central office, and at the building level, has been part of the challenge in the district.

Demographics

- 356 classroom teachers
- 5,408 students
- 89% of students on free/reduced lunch
- 4% ELL students
- 24% of students with IEP

The Challenge

In 2011, YCSD became the first LEA in Ohio to be designated “in Academic Distress.” This designation was assigned after a comprehensive study of the district indicated academic, as well as fiscal, community, and administrative concerns. Declining standardized test scores, graduation rate, and enrollment were indicative of larger social and economic factors in the city and surrounding area. At the same time, the school district’s struggles were considered to negatively impact those larger dynamics. As part of a comprehensive turnaround effort, the Quaglia Institute (QI) was engaged to work with administrators, teachers, students, and the community to improve the teaching and learning environment in YCSD schools. The approach includes increasing student voice and the effects of an improved learning environment on academic outcomes. The hope was that, while simultaneously implementing various curricular reforms, engaging students in the learning environment would produce better and more rapid results than traditional top-down, adult-only efforts.

16% decrease in Out of School Suspensions
Implementation

At the time, the Quaglia Institute’s model was based on a three-year partnership with the possibility of continuation as needed. Given the number of schools, a roll-in strategy beginning with 4 elementary schools was pursued. Through a total of 3 phases, all 12 schools were eventually included. In each school:

- **Step 1:** QI field specialists and consultants conduct orientations and overviews for entire staff.
- **Step 2:** Concentrated professional development for a team of teachers in each building monthly.
- **Step 3:** Leadership training provided for a representative team of students monthly.
- **Step 4:** Quaglia School Voice surveys for students and staff deployed.
- **Step 5:** Questions developed and focus groups with students and staff conducted.
- **Step 6:** Teams consider school policies, systems, and structures that may contribute to a diminished teaching and learning environment and reduced student Self-Worth, Engagement, and Purpose (Quaglia’s 3 Guiding Principles).
- **Step 7:** Changes implemented and tracked.

Key Outcomes

Within two years YCSD reversed previous downward tendencies, and replaced them with upward trends in all core subject areas. There were aggregate increases of 10% in reading scores (77% proficient in most recent testing year), 4% in writing scores (89% proficient in most recent testing year), and 5% in math scores (65% proficient in most recent testing year).

A significant factor in this progress is an advance in students’ academic motivation.

- Students with Voice were 3x more likely to report being academically motivated*
- Students with Self-Worth were 4x more likely to report being academically motivated*
- Students who are Engaged were 15x more likely to report being academically motivated*
- Students with Purpose were 28x more likely to report being academically motivated*

“**I have a teacher who is a positive role model for me.**”

**11% increase for 12th graders**
Interviews with students, teachers, and administrators reveal positive feelings about their system and schools’ new direction. In particular, improvements to teacher and student relationships are frequently cited as contributing to a more productive learning environment. Students and staff have noticed the impact to student voice, teacher-student relationships, and engagement.

“Now when we say something, our administrators and teachers hear us. They do their best to incorporate it into our everyday lives.”
—Male Student; Grade 8

“In my class, now we have a say about what you learn and how you learn it.”
—Female Student; Grade 5

While each of the 12 schools undertook a variety of projects based unique survey and focus group results, a concerted effort was made district-wide to improve teacher-student relationships through valuing student voice.

“I think with all the testing and stress we are under as a district [we] tend to get so wrapped up in data that we forget that by letting the students have a voice, it may actually improve their learning and not hinder the learning.”
—Melissa Forde; Academic Coach

As a result, students who were in grades 9–12 in Youngstown in 2013–2014 reported improvements to their relationships with teachers from when they were in grades 9–11 in the previous school year. In particular, eight to ten percent more 12th graders believed teachers made an effort to get to know them, had a teacher who was a positive role model, cared about them as an individual, cared if they were absent from school, and were approachable if they had a problem. Over 80% of younger students also reported positive relationships with their teachers.
Testimonials

“I feel that Quaglia has helped with building a cohesiveness within buildings and throughout the district. This increases attendance, thus helping improve scores.”

—Holly Welch; Curriculum Coordinator

“I have learned that when students have a voice in what goes on in the building they will have more buy in and take more personal ownership to meet both personal and building goals. I will continue to ensure that the 8 Conditions of Quaglia are a focus of my staff and students, because I have seen the positive impact Quaglia has had on student achievement and involvement.”

—William Baun; Principal

Youngstown has been a story of transformation grounded in a practical approach that sees students and the community as partners. This growing partnership has led to improved academic outcomes. In the most recent year that testing data was collected, Youngstown students in grades K–3—previously consistently the lowest performing in the state—outperformed their peers in Ohio’s “Urban 8” by an average of 30% on the state’s literacy test. Working together to improve relationships, students have come to feel valued and understood. Principals and teachers have been open and willing to learn from students, bringing student ideas and energy to the effort to increase engagement and a sense of academic purpose.

Next Steps

Student Voice and a partnership between adults and students is now an integral part of most YCSD schools. Students regularly participate on Building Leadership Teams and Teacher Based Teams. Having improved relationships between students and teachers and classroom engagement, students are now working to move their schools away from command and control schemes for addressing student behavior. Students are considering policies and systems that increase student responsibility as related to perennial student concerns such as dress code and cell phone use. Additionally, including student voice at the district level is the next horizon for the work.

*than students who do not experience these factors in school.
**students’ names withheld to preserve anonymity
3 Ways to Get Started

1. School Voice Surveys
Get real time feedback on your school’s climate and levels of student, teacher, and parent engagement. This comprehensive set of surveys is a great way to get started on your School Voice journey!

- Student Voice Survey
- Teacher Voice Survey
- Parent Voice Survey
- iKnow My Class Survey

2. Student Voice and Aspirations Workshops
This series of four one-day events (which can be taken as a series or independently) explores strategies for harnessing a voice that deserves to be heard; cultivating an engaged classroom; and ensuring overall positive academic, personal, and social outcomes for the school and district through the creation of a better teaching and learning environment.

3. Student Voice eCourses
Enhance your Student Voice work with this series of eCourses. These online learning modules provide:

- An alternative learning experience for teachers and leaders who are unable to attend a workshop or consulting day
- A cost-effective PD option for schools/districts looking to focus on specific topics
- A sense of how deep implementation of School Voice work can impact school improvement efforts