

## Leadership Activity: Initiating Student Voice Panels

How can you create a welcoming environment but not welcome students to the conversations? I had many conversations with teachers who said that they wanted to create a welcoming environment. Is that welcoming environment a creation through your lens and your experiences? What does a welcoming environment look like for all students from different racial, religious, and gender backgrounds? Use these tips to tap into your students' needs. Once we listen to our students, the question becomes, What are we going to do with that information?

**Objective:** Amplify student voices in school decision-making processes.

**Materials:**

- Copies of this reproducible for facilitators and panel members
- A planning timeline and rotation schedule template
- Student interest letter template
- Parent and guardian informational letter template
- Meeting norms and protocol guide

**Duration:**

- Initial setup: Four to six weeks
- Meeting frequency: Monthly or bimonthly
- Student term: Semester or school year

Follow these steps.

1. **Form student voice panels:** Invite a diverse group of students to participate in regular meetings with school leadership.
  - Ensure the panel reflects different racial, cultural, linguistic, gender, ability, and socioeconomic identities.
  - Include students from varied academic standings, social circles, and behavioral histories, including those who are justice involved or have experienced exclusion.
  - Determine term limits and rotation. Allow students to serve one semester or one full school year. Midyear rotation opens space for more voices and keeps the work energized.
  - Do not label or disclose student circumstances (disciplinary records or socioeconomic status, for instance). Selection should be strengths based, not deficit driven.
  - Send a letter of invitation to students. Frame it as an honor and opportunity to lead. Encourage students who may not see themselves as leaders to step forward.
  - Send a letter home to families. Inform parents and guardians about the panel's purpose, meeting times, and benefits. Assure them it will not interfere with academic responsibilities and emphasize its leadership value.

2. **Establish norms and meeting protocols:** Rotate roles like facilitator, notetaker, and timekeeper. Create shared agreements on how students do the following.
  - Interact
  - Make decisions
  - Resolve disagreements
3. **Facilitate student-led initiatives and projects:** Guide students in designing solutions to improve school climate and belonging. Focus their work on tangible initiatives, such as the following.
  - Launching or improving affinity groups
  - Cocreating a revised mission or vision statement
  - Helping plan student-led professional development
  - Contributing to the belonging task force
  - Identifying key trends by studying results from the “Sense of Belonging Tool”
4. **Ensure student feedback is integrated into policy and practice:** Set clear accountability measures.
  - Document student recommendations and align them with school improvement goals.
  - Assign leadership team members to respond to feedback with status updates at the next meeting.
  - Share with the broader student body through advisory classes, school announcements, or visual dashboards (You Said, We Did boards).