

# Improving Academic Achievement Through Student Empowerment

NDE Standard #4 Establishing a Culture for Learning

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## PROJECT OVERVIEW

*How can schools effectively engage and empower all students to create a culture of high achievement?*

**"When adults...think of students, they think of them as potential beneficiaries of change. They think of achievement results, skills, attitudes, and jobs. They rarely think of students as participants in a process of school change and organizational life."** –Michael Fullan

While many schools pride themselves in strong models of school improvement with all components in place --from data analysis to interventions, strategies, committee meetings, and assessments, many are determining that while growth may be seen, there is a considerable amount of room for improvement. With the idea that it is imperative that the climate and culture of the school be at the forefront of all school reform efforts, the inclusion of engaged and empowered students within the school improvement model will help to propel learners to higher achievement.

Rather than viewing our students as passive participants—receptacles waiting to be filled-- a shift needs to be made to where educators are sending a clear message to the students that we believe in them. Trusting our learners as valued partners in education effectively sends this message.

**"Empowered learners are more motivated to perform classroom tasks, and they feel more competent in the classroom, find the required tasks more meaningful, and feel they have an impact on their learning process."**  
–Marian L. Hauser

Equipping our students with the foundation needed in order to be strong leaders, learners, and citizens will cultivate invested stakeholders who contribute to the greater good of not only the school community, but also of their homes and community at large.

## REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

School Improvement Initiatives are deeply rooted in data that depicts the areas in which students are weak, as well as their strengths. A team of educators working together in order to develop strategies and interventions to address the needs within their schools is paradigm. One area where the data seems to get neglected; however, is the area of student efficacy, autonomy, and motivation.

The work of authorizing student perspectives is essential because of the various ways that it can improve current educational practice, re-inform existing conversations about educational reform, and point to the discussions and reform efforts yet to be undertaken. Authorizing student perspectives can directly improve educational practice because when teachers listen to and learn from students, they can begin to see the world from those students' perspectives." Alison Cook-Sather (2002)

Traditionally schools view students as recipients of teaching, and hopefully learning. When school reform or improvement initiatives include students as possibly the MOST invested stakeholder, a dynamic shift can occur that will boost schools into greater academic achievement.

According to Adam Fletcher, founder and director of the Freechild Project, "Meaningful student involvement does not happen in isolation; rather, it is the implementation of a set of interrelated strategies and activities that is infused with other efforts directed towards increased school success for all students." Simply inviting students to use their voice and join in would be an ineffective chaotic calamity. With a supportive framework in place that focuses on student engagement through leadership and citizenship training, as well as concentration on development of the learner, students will be armed with what is needed to not only be an effective learner in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but a formidable leader as well. John C. Maxwell states in his book *Leadership 101*, "The lower an individual's ability to lead, the lower the lid on his/her potential. The higher the leadership ability, the greater the effectiveness." Each day comes with it opportunities to build personal leadership skills and have powerful impact on those around us--peers, family, teachers and community.

Providing an instructional amalgam of leadership, citizenship, and learner skills to empower each individual will serve as a vehicle to increase student ownership within the schools. When students conceptualize themselves as empowered participants who have real value and impact, student hope undoubtedly increases. The Gallup organization has done extensive research on the issues that plague our public schools. Jim Clifton states in his book *The Coming Jobs War*, "Hope predicts academic success and graduation better than grades or standardized test scores." With the idea that hope and engagement are related, the Gallup Organization's finding indicate that our nations' students become less engaged with each year they are in school. The numbers are significant. In elementary school, 76% of our students are engaged. This percentage drops to 61% in middle school, and 41% in high school. Moving away from the traditional participation structures toward empowerment our nation's youth, and including them in all improvement and reform initiatives will lead to increased engagement and higher achievement.



CONTRIBUTORS TO FAMILY, SCHOOL, AND THE GREATER COMMUNITY

## TIMELINE AND ACTION PLAN

	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4
<b>Leadership Class</b>	6 <sup>th</sup> /7 <sup>th</sup> graders (Entry-level) formal instruction	6 <sup>th</sup> /7 <sup>th</sup> graders (Entry-level) formal instruction • Returning Students Booster	• Continue from Year 2	• Continue from Year 2
<b>Leadership Counsel</b>	• Identify a Leadership Counsel structure for Year 2	• Establishment of Leadership Counsel (fall) • Begin engagement activities with School Improvement Team 2 <sup>nd</sup> semester	• Increase membership • Engaged year-long with School Improvement Team as partners (along with other committees, i.e. Technology)	• Established as partners with School Improvement and other committees all year
<b>Student Learning</b>	• Coach Student Self-Advocacy within Leadership class • Learning Inventory Administered • Learning Styles Student Report sent to all teachers and parents and students • Learning Style "help sheets" placed within student handbook as a reference • Teachers begin facilitating engaged students in instruction	• Continue fostering self-advocacy with students • Administer Learning Inventory to incoming students/new students only • Learning Styles Student Report sent to all teachers and parents • Learning Style "help sheets" placed within student handbook as a reference • Teacher facilitate engaging students in instruction	• Continue from year 2	• Continue from year 2
<b>Student Citizenship</b>	• Focus on commitment to greater good of home, school, and community • All-school service day (One day second semester)	• Establish School Service Club that focuses on ways to contribute to greater good of home, school, and community • All-School Service Days (One each semester)	• Continue School Service Club • All-School Service Days (One each semester)	• Continue from Year 3
<b>Assessment</b>	• Collect Data • Gallup Student Poll (Hope Survey) taken in fall and spring--reviewed in spring • Learning Inventory (i.e. VARK)—taken in the fall • State, Local, and Nationally Normed Assessments as normally scheduled • All Data reviewed by the School Improvement Team and Shared with Staff • Custodial/Maintenance staff track reports/instances of destruction/ disrespect of property; Review for decrease with Student Engagement strategies	• Continue from Year 1 AND: • Review Academic assessments in relation to Student Empowerment strategies (fall) • Compare Student Gallup Poll from spring to fall for returning students, and in the spring for new/incoming students	• Continue from Year 2	• Continue from Year 2
<b>Staff Development</b>	• Develop School Improvement Goals • Training for Leadership Class • Instructional Strategies that cultivate meaningful student engagement and differentiated instruction • PLCs develop SMART goals that align with SI goal of increased engagement • Share-outs on engagement/ teacher visits to other classrooms	• Continue from Year 1 AND • Leadership Class Training—Train the Trainer model to increase qualified instructors • PLCs present SMART goals each month and strategies/interventions	• Continue from Year 2 AND • Add students as partners in PLC presentations	• Continue from Year 3

## RESOURCES

- Assessments:**
- Gallup Student Poll (Pro Bono) Learning Inventory (i.e. VARK for Young People <http://www.vark-learn.com/english/page.asp?peyounger>)
  - Measurement of student voice in schools (<http://www.soundout.org/framework.html>)
  - Gallup Strengths Finder
- Frameworks:**
- After School Program/ other structure to support Leadership Counsel/Service Group
- Sponsors:**
- Administrators
  - Teachers
  - Community Members
  - Community Foundations
  - Business Partners
  - Parents
- Engagement Resources:**
- Leadership Curriculum (i.e. "Building Synergistic Leaders")  
Time for training, engagement activities  
[www.freechild.org](http://www.freechild.org)  
[www.youthboard.org](http://www.youthboard.org)  
[www.whatkidscando.org](http://www.whatkidscando.org)  
[www.forumforyouthinvestment.org](http://www.forumforyouthinvestment.org)  
Funders Collaborative on Youth Organizing [www.fcyo.org](http://www.fcyo.org)
- Staff development:**
- Personal leadership training
  - District resources on differentiated instruction

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