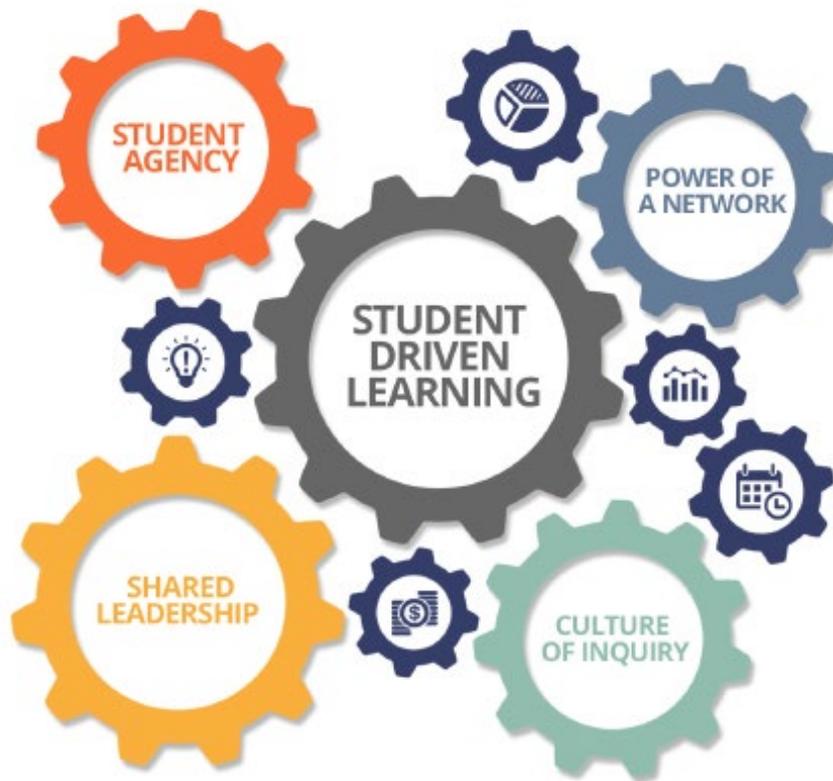




*Building Bright Futures Through High School Redesign.*

# Student Agency



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# Student Agency



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# Student Agency

## INTRODUCTION

How do learning environments embrace student agency in a way that allows students to create their own pathways and be engaged allowing the deepest learning and involvement possible?

The irony of school life is that the students at the center of the educational enterprise are the least empowered members of the community. Without opportunities for students to create their own voice



and influence what learning could look like in their communities, students will have an educational experience that lacks substance, purpose and relevance. In order to better serve students, schools must create a set of conditions in which students are empowered to become key partners in the decision-making process about issues that affect their daily experiences in school.

In the ideal student-centered environment, student input is sought, listened to and addressed authentically. Programs, organizations and structures in the school share the vision that all students deserve the opportunity to have voice and choice, and recognize that young people are capable of participating, leading and taking action in the school community. Students

can become the chief architects of their learning, and contributing citizens to the school community. Schools that embrace student agency drastically improve learning environments where teachers are facilitators of knowledge and all students are prepared for life after high school.

Student agency is based on the idea that every student can uniquely contribute to the successful transformation of the learning community if given the right opportunities. The following conditions promote the development of student agency in the classroom.<sup>1</sup> Students overwhelmingly cited the development of critical skills necessary to be well-rounded members of the 21st century global society. In doing so the students set the expectations for the entire i3 New England Network project, and made their desire for increased agency well known. Once students became involved, the change process tended to gain traction and accelerate. Schools discovered that student and adult partnerships, in particular, shifted the climate and culture of the school.

<sup>1</sup>DiMartino, J. and Clarke, J. (2008). Personalizing the high school experience for each student. Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. Alexandria, VA.

# Student Agency

Student agency begins with adult/student relationship-building, which thus was a critical focus of the school change coaching in years one - three of the project. The 2014 Summer Institute, following year three of the project, hosted a turning-point session on student voice where students assessed their schools using a rubric developed by the Student Voice Collaborative in New York City. This rubric became a tool for highlighting the standards and components of student voice at all thirteen schools in the i3 New England Network. The use of this tool in the final two years of the project systematized a purposeful approach to authentic student agency and culture change initiatives. By the end of the five-year project, students in all thirteen schools had become major contributors to their own learning, as well as to the learning process for the entire school community.

- *Opportunities to develop and express a personal voice.* Students must have the chance to express their ideas as they gradually form and engage in dialogue that can connect different perspectives and facilitate new solutions to challenges in the learning environment.
- *Chance to belong to a working group.* Students are empowered when working with other individuals – teachers and students – to effect positive change in the learning environment.
- *Adult advocates.* A productive relationship with a trusted adult is critical for students to feel known and valued in their school.
- *Learning choice.* Students increase their sense of personal competence through a variety of experiences both in and out of the classroom. Students have the opportunity to decide what they learn, and how they learn it. Connecting these varied learning experiences helps students build value and direction for their personal paths.

By promoting student agency in the i3 New England Network, schools affected all other redesign efforts. Rooted in CSSR's Skills and Professional Development Framework, school-change coaches helped sites initiate the development of student agency by asking student participants at the 2011 Summer Institute one simple question: When you graduate high school, you want to know what? [AF1] Students overwhelmingly cited the development of critical skills necessary to be well-rounded members of the 21st century global society. In doing so the students set the expectations for the entire i3 New England Network project, and made their desire for increased agency well known. Once students became involved, the change process tended to gain traction and accelerate. Schools discovered that student and adult partnerships, in particular, shifted the climate and culture of the school.

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Student agency begins with adult/student relationship-building, which thus was a critical focus of the school change coaching in years one - three of the project. The 2014 Summer Institute, following year three of the project, hosted a turning-point session on student voice where students assessed their schools using a rubric [AF2] developed by the Student Voice Collaborative in New York City. This rubric became a tool for highlighting the standards and components of student voice at all thirteen schools in the i3 New England Network. The use of this tool in the final two years of the project systematized a purposeful approach to authentic student agency and culture change initiatives. By the end of the five-year project, students in all thirteen schools had become major contributors to their own learning, as well as to the learning process for the entire school community.

All thirteen schools embraced the philosophy of student agency, but differed in their implementation based on unique school, community and student needs. Changes were gradual and individual sites were guided through a process that started with understanding their current capacity for student agency, [AF3] then exploring what was possible through school visits and student shadowing, and ended with student agency taking on a different look and definition in each learning environment. Schools in the i3 New England Network largely advanced the development of student agency through the following four practices: 1) Site Council; 2) Leadership and Advocacy; 3) Purposeful Advisory Programs; and 4) Student- Driven Learning Opportunities. These practices, described in detail below, are overlapping and interrelated; it is useful to consider them separately—understanding that each contributes to a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts.



## STUDENT GOVERNANCE

Part of the vision for the i3 New England Network project was that each of the thirteen schools would have a governing body made up by a majority of democratically elected students, charged with making school-based decisions not governed by local authorities. Each school's ultimate structure for doing so is slightly different, yet the purpose remains the same: to provide students the opportunity to influence all aspects of the learning environment, including decision-making and authority around practice, procedures and operating structures. Students involved in these governing bodies make decisions that have a direct impact on the entire school community.

# Student Agency

The site council at Pittsfield (NH) Middle High School is an exemplar of student governance and agency. As a result of previous coaching from CSSR, Pittsfield's school board agreed to create a site council just months before the i3 project began. CSSR coaches facilitated workshops with the site council to help them become operational and impactful. Through these workshops the council crafted a team charter, researched exemplars, adopted by-laws and garnered community support. The Pittsfield Community Site Council held its first official meeting in early May, 2011. Since that time they have effected the following school-wide changes: determined the structures of their advisory program, approved a flexible schedule providing more opportunities for student and teacher creativity, and created a restorative justice program. More importantly, the Site Council work will be sustained after the grant-funded period.

Transformational student-led governing bodies differ greatly from traditional student governance structures that typically conduct work focused on social events rather than educational matters, and don't typically include a representative body of students. Structures like Site Council become embedded into the fabric of the school culture and community where adults value and act on the voices of students.

Will DiGravio, a graduating senior at Plymouth North (MA) High School describes the energy student voice and agency provides as "a disease;" once it starts, it takes over the entire school building. PNHS, which had an existing student council at the start of the i3 project, held numerous student engagement community forums and gradually amplified student voice within the existing structures. They have dramatically reworked their student council to better align with the belief that schools must create conditions where all students' input is sought, listened to, and acted upon.

Among their innovations was the creative use of technology and social media to receive input from the student body and communicate their work.



# Student Agency

i3 New England Network schools have all committed to be more inclusive of student viewpoints in shaping transformative practices and policies. They were intentional about providing their students with legitimate governance opportunities. The result is students with more ownership of their schools, and a greater awareness of the many factors involved in shared decision-making. At the end of the day, the students have been given authentic experiences in citizenship and the democratic process. They have developed valuable skills and competencies in communication and collaboration. It is noteworthy that these changes required very little in the way of fiscal resources and have paid huge dividends in student and school outcomes.

## LEADERSHIP & ADVOCACY

Leadership and advocacy are close cousins of school governance. They represent a shift in mindset—asking students to become active and committed citizens in their school and to not only speak about issues, but to influence stakeholders on issues such as education policy and redesign. The impact of embracing student leadership and advocacy extends beyond the walls of the learning environment, and impacts decision-making throughout the community and in other neighboring districts. This shift in mindset values students as resources for the school, rather than products of the school

Sometimes a simple comment can be enough to compel a school to reexamine their priorities. This was true at the 2012 i3 New England Network Summer Institute for Abbey Macintosh, a student at Nashua (NH) High School South. After participating in Believe in You!, an Institute session where she and fellow students were asked to rank their school on the continuum model for understanding youth participation, Abbey, as the spokesperson for the group, stood up in front of three dozen educators and told the group: “we rank at the level of tokenism!” Nashua Principal Keith Richards remembers the moment saying, “It was a shot to my heart. I felt like I had been stabbed in the back.” Project site coordinator, Peggy Reynolds said, “We heard the word, and knew she was right. The student involvement was not meaningful.” Abbey’s opinion was not only heard, but was quickly acted upon at both district high schools.

The moment was transformative for the Nashua School District; district and school leaders began to radically rethink student voice. One of their first steps was to include students in planning sessions about creating a more personalized school environment for students. The result was E-Block a 35-minute period of time set aside each day for academic support. It allows for students to complete work, see teachers for extra help, and engage in enrichment opportunities. This was the schools’ attempt to provide equitable opportunities for all students, many of whom could not readily access afterschool academic support programs, or clubs and activities, because of family and employment obligations. The involvement of students in the creation, planning and proposal phase played a key role in getting this major schedule adjustment approved by the Board of Education.

# Student Agency

Student support and enthusiasm for new programs can often sway adult opinions and get broad-based support. Nashua students continue to be involved in conversations about policy change. The district has invited students to weigh in on changes impacting grading and reporting policies, class rank and 21st century skill building. A student-led team recently translated the 21st century skills into student-friendly language that was adopted into policy. Student leadership and advocacy went beyond enriching the conversations, to guiding them.

Abbey recognizes that her comment “profoundly touched them.” The moment changed her entire high school experience and allowed her to better understand the leadership structure at both the school and district level, and how students can have an authentic voice in those structures. Over the past three years teachers and administrators continually brought up Abbey’s comment as part of a commitment to making sure that the transformational change in Nashua was purposeful and focused on increasing the level of student engagement at all times.



## CREATING A PURPOSEFUL ADVISORY PROGRAM

A strong advisory program can be one of the most effective vehicles for developing student agency. Advisories are an important part of ensuring that all students are known and served well, and a leading indicator for improved learning outcomes. Advisories serve many purposes—from simply being a place where students can have a conversation with a trusted adult, to a place where personal learning plans and portfolios of student work are developed and assessed. Powerful advisory programs energize and engage students in their own learning in a more personalized way. Schools in the i3 New England Network went a step further and used advisory programs as part of a planned and concerted effort to engage the entire school community in meaningful and actionable conversations about transforming the school’s culture and climate into a more personalized, performance-driven learning environment.

# Student Agency

Putting students at the center of the planning process makes them the chief architects of their learning experience. The design of an advisory program to support student agency should include the development of Personal Learning Plans (PLPs) and Student-Led Conferences (SLCs). PLPs support each student's journey through high school by providing a systemic way of guiding students to examine who they are by exploring their talents, interests, and aspirations—and linking these to their learning experiences (coursework, extended learning opportunities, career exploration, etc.) SLCs are a platform for students to publicly take ownership of their learning plans and outcomes, and share them with an advisor, parent/guardian, and sometimes even a member of the larger community.

Many schools in the i3 New England Network used advisory to support PLPs and SLCs. These schools realized dramatically greater parent participation for SLCs than previously seen for traditional parent-teacher conferences. By hosting the conference and referencing the PLP document, students do most of the talking and learn to articulate who they are, how they learn, where they are headed, and what they need to do to get there. Giving students the opportunity to advocate for themselves in this way is an important part of helping them take responsibility for their lives after high [AF1] school.

Schools who took their advisory programs a step further used them to effect transformative change in their learning environments. As we have identified in other guides throughout the platform, the development of a student-driven learning environment must begin with relationship-building and trust between students and adults. An advisory program creates the right conditions and structures for those relationships to develop. However, to fully realize the power of advisory, all educators must reflect on their roles in a way that may challenge their core beliefs.

## STUDENT-DRIVEN LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

Classroom culture is a powerful activator of student agency. The classroom is where students spend the majority of their time. Conditions have to be created where personalization and student voice and choice are at the heart of the experience. Student agency is unlikely to flourish in a classroom that is teacher dominated or rigidly structured. This requires a fundamental role shift—teachers facilitate and coach learning, rather than package and deliver learning.



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Furthermore, administrators must address barriers like bell schedules, graduation requirements and tracking practices that obstruct efforts to promote change. Lastly, students must take responsibility for all aspects of their school experiences and resist the urge to merely be compliant.

Many schools in the i3 New England Network offer a Senior Project or Extended Learning Opportunity (ELO) as a means for students to direct a large project in pursuit of their interests and passions. These learning opportunities often have a stipulation that they serve the community in some way. Giving students occasions to participate in, and learn from, projects that provide service creates rich conditions for the deepest learning possible, and is a powerful way to engage even the most disenfranchised students. An ELO, as defined by the New Hampshire Department of Education, is the primary acquisition of knowledge and skills through instruction or study outside of the traditional classroom methodology, including, but not limited to apprenticeships, service, internships, online learning and independent study.<sup>2</sup>

## **The following paragraphs highlight several of these projects from schools in the i3 New England Network.**

Kelli Thornhill, a senior at Nashua (NH) High School South spent the entire 2014-2015 school year completing an ELO on the Performance Assessment Review Board in order to better understand the process of high school redesign and education policy. As part of her project, Kelli participated in multiple school visits, contributed to final reports, and provided the PAR Board with valuable perspective on student-driven learning best practices. Kelli's ELO is a powerful example of a performance assessment that directly resulted in increased student agency in her school.

Krista, a student at Plymouth (MA) North High School, completed a Senior Project creating a cappella group at her district's middle school. Krista demonstrated student agency in three ways: embracing the opportunity to make a choice about the work she was going to do, and how she would demonstrate learning; exploring a career area about which she was curious; and creating an experience that served more than twenty students in her community.

Hanzla Sheikh from Nashua (NH) High School North, created and helped implement a mentoring program where older students provide support to younger students transitioning into high school. Inspired by Hanzla and his team, the other district high school – Nashua South – joined forces with Nashua North to form Panther & Titan Connection. The program recruits upperclassmen to serve as mentors to incoming ninth graders in both schools. The commitment begins at ninth grade orientation and extends throughout the year during E-Block. Upperclassmen were motivated to initiate the program out of their own realization that they had wished for more support when they first entered high school.

# Student Agency

Ryan Marquis, a student from Pittsfield (NH) Middle High School, became involved in his school's Site Council as a freshman. Through his participation he not only learned key skills for democracy and social advocacy, but also learned about meeting facilitation, development of lesson plans, and tuning of teacher materials. As a senior, Ryan proposed running a Learning Studio course. A Learning Studio is a course offered once per week where students can choose from a diverse selection of mini seminars, typically facilitated by teachers and community members, that are aligned with required competencies, but allow for a wide range of teacher and student interests to drive the curriculum. Ryan was the first student to lead a Learning Studio, and in the process of doing so he decided to change his future plan from becoming an engineer to becoming a teacher.

The projects demonstrated above are powerful examples of rich learning experiences driven by students. There are several ideal conditions for sites to consider when using student agency to drive learning. Sites must promote a culture of collaboration with and among students and adults, including by intentionally building skills for effective communication. Personal safety for students working outside of the traditional school environment is paramount. Teachers and students must trust one another, and teachers must make a concerted effort to empower students in all areas. Preparing students for interacting with adults and others outside of the school building requires community access and cultural competence. Above all else, teachers must learn to work as facilitators of learning and embrace anytime, anyplace, any pace learning as a framework for students to drive their own learning experiences.

<sup>2</sup><http://education.nh.gov/innovations/elo/>

## CREATING A CULTURE FOR CHANGE

Creating student agency will require people in the school community to think and act differently. Schools must be willing to put in the time to identify the conditions that must be changed in order to fully embrace student agency. For some schools this might mean developing collaborative skills for both adults and students, whereas for other schools this might mean confronting beliefs about teacher and student roles. Each school will have a different set of challenges to contend with as they embark on this work. Without really stepping back to evaluate conditions, some schools may be able to achieve increased student voice or even engagement, but true student agency requires schools to think more broadly about changing longstanding traditions. CSSR coaches helped create conditions in the i3 New England Network sites that allowed students and adults to have authentic conversations on student agency in a productive way that built on, rather than threatened, long-standing traditions.

# Student Agency



Schools in the i3 New England Network encountered numerous challenges in the process of embracing student agency, and have many lessons to share. The biggest challenges involved students and teachers confronting changes to their traditional roles. In most schools it was relatively easy to energize a cohort of students interested in working towards greater student agency. These were typically the students who jump at any opportunity to be more involved. Sites had to work diligently about engaging all students, especially those who had previously not been successful or trusting in the traditional school environment.

Similarly for educators, it was not difficult to gather a group of teachers interested in bolstering student voice and choice. These were typically the teachers who agree to serve on student council or have had success with student voice and choice in their classroom. Before sites were able to build a critical mass of educators ready to embrace student agency, most held a number of courageous conversations before realizing that rather than giving students the keys to the school, they were giving students the keys to learning and success. As with any major school change initiative, if a site is not dealing with resistance to change, they are really not changing.

Lessons learned in the thirteen schools of the i3 New England Network were many and varied. There were however three lessons that were noteworthy and ran fairly consistently across school sites.

You can't change culture, or develop student agency, if you do not start with the students and understand what is possible. Ryan Marquis said in his address at graduation, "The student body will surprise you. They are smarter than you think and all you have to do is give them the keys. They might crash at first, but eventually they will learn to drive and they will impress you with where they end up." For students to be truly engaged and empowered, we have to provide them an opportunity to voice their needs and be fully engaged in the process to make major school decisions. This approach of developing students' agency impacts everything at the school, including their participation, leadership and advocacy. It becomes the way schools think; it becomes the philosophy and pedagogy of the environment and stakeholders.



# Student Agency

The second lesson is that student agency takes on a different meaning, and can be implemented via a variety of best practices, based on a learning environment's unique needs. The majority of project schools embraced Senior Project, ELOs, Advisory, and Site Council; yet the purpose, structure, content and assessment were very different. The outcomes were the same, but how the schools got there was very different. The process is slow and deliberate work, and may not be as tidy as we'd like, but it does mirror the cycle of educational growth and life. Student agency can be learned, but it is not easy. You need a strong vision, carefully constructed conditions, and the energy to act.

Finally, most people desire to be part of something larger than themselves – to have an impact and be part of an ecosystem of change. It begins in pockets and over time encompasses the entire learning community. It calls for a shift in thinking and behavior but once teachers and students begin to see the impact of authentic agency, a school is able to make the full transformation to a student-driven environment.

Students want and need more say in their education. It is important to educate students for life in a democracy and help them see how they can help build their communities, in both the present and the future. The path to student agency will require commitment and time from everyone in your school. You will find that enlisting students is a multiplier for progress in school redesign. learning community. It calls for a shift in thinking and behavior but once teachers and students begin to see the impact of authentic agency, a school is able to make the full transformation to a student-driven environment.