

# BUILDING CONSISTENT AND AUTHENTIC STUDENT VOICE INTO SCHOOL POLICIES IN MINNEAPOLIS PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOLS

By Nou Vang

When I first moved to Minnesota from California, I was 13 years old, about to start my first year at Patrick Henry High School. My freshmen year consisted of me trying to make friends, trying to find my place while adjusting to Minnesota. During my sophomore year, I became more involved in school by joining the school newspaper and the Literary Club as well as running for student council. I knew I wanted to join spaces where my voice could be heard. However, I only wrote one article for the school newspaper and served as part of the editing team for the Literary Club. I was afraid to use my voice because I was never taught how to use it.

That was over 10 years ago. Today, I work as the Career and College Center (CCC) coordinator at the same school where I started as a freshman. In my work with students, particularly with seniors getting ready to graduate high school, I realize how important it is to have student voice. Part of my job now is to advocate for my students and try to do what is best for them. How can I do that if they don't get a say in what is best for them? Finally, this nagging feeling in the back of my mind has a name: student voice. Where is student voice in all the things we are expecting students to do? Where is student voice in deciding what graduation requirements translated to a "career and college ready" student?

## LAYING THE GROUNDWORK

According to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), every child has a right to a quality education, particularly with the goals of the "development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential" (United Nations General Assembly, 1989, Article 29, section b). That resonates with Dr. Gisela Konopka's "Requirements for Healthy Development of Adolescent Youth," a study done in 1973 commissioned by the Office of Child Development of the Department of Health Education and Welfare and the Center for Youth Development and Research at the University of Minnesota. In this framework, Konopka identifies adolescence as an age of commitment that "elevates adolescence from a stage frequently regarded as one that must be endured and passed through as rapidly as possible to a stage of earnest and significant human development" (Qualities of Adolescence, para. 9). We are educating our future citizens and teaching them skills to function as citizens and healthy human beings. One essential skill is teaching students to advocate for themselves, to use their voice to fight for their rights. As Konopka states, "Those working and living with youth can foster healthy value formation by *encouraging open discussion* and refraining from trying to superimpose their values upon them" (1973, Conditions of Healthy Development of Youth, para. 5). Further in that section she states "*Adolescents should have a genuine chance to participate as citizens, as members of a household, as workers-in general, as responsible members of society*" (para. 9). If we want our students to be ready for life after high school, we need to get them to participate in meaningful decision-making and advocacy.

Before we can begin to examine student voice, it is important to define it. What is authentic student voice? Authentic student voice is realized when young people speak and advocate on their own behalf and adults respectfully and seriously listen and consider student views when making decisions that will impact them.

This means being accountable to students and clearly stating how their input will be used in the decision-making process. For example, if students are given a survey, it should be clearly explained how results will impact them and/or decisions being made. Authentic student voice is intentional and purposeful. It should not be something that is included to make a policy “look good” nor should it be used as a sort of youth-endorsed stamp of approval.

Why is student voice important to me? It is important because it demonstrates to students they are valued and heard. It is their right as youths to be heard, to be educated. The United States signed the UNCRC, and every UN member but two (the United States being one of them) ratified it. There is substance to the UNCRC, a document that says our children are human beings and entitled to rights. Those of us in power need to hold ourselves accountable to upholding those rights. School is about them: why would you *not* want their voices? As Konopka alluded, and as I’ve seen in my current and former work with high school students, the prevailing view of students is one of immaturity and irresponsibility. Teachers, myself included, think and do what we think is best for them. Nowadays, we have a variety of college and community programs at our school to help support students: College Possible, Get Ready, Beacons Boys and Girls Club, Check and Connect, etc. I reflect back to my days when I did not have they all these community partner programs to guide me. I had to do everything on my own because I did not know who to go to for help or the questions I needed to ask to be ready for post-secondary. I wonder if we have lost our student voice because they have been crowded out by other voices.

To try and answer this question and others related to it, I decided to talk to Henry students and the Minneapolis Youth Congress to get their perspective. I wanted to see what youth voice looks like today at Henry and in the community.

## **SURVEYING THE CURRENT SITUATION**

My first month as the CCC coordinator, I remember being mesmerized and impressed by a student who was making a sign in the hallway about student safety and public transportation. This student was inflamed that the school and the district were not doing more to protect their students who were constantly harassed and put in unsafe environments as they tried to make their way to and from school. She was in student council and hoped to get their voices heard on behalf of their peers. Fast forward months later and I had heard nothing about this change I was waiting to see happen. What happened to this student who was on fire at the beginning of the year? What happened to her flame?

Aside from student council, students at Henry have the opportunity to join various clubs and activities to get their voices heard. Senior Committee planned what they want their school activities to look like (school dances, prom, Senior Night, etc). Black Student Union educated staff and students about notable African Americans from the community for February via school announcements and posters. Link Crew is a space for upperclassmen to provide leadership to their peers and school, whether it be to speak on a student panel or help direct parents/families during parent-teacher Conferences. Henry also has “You<sup>th</sup> Are Here” youth workers who serve as advocates for students, functioning as a third party who does not work for the school or district and thus can ease tension between staff and students. There are many opportunities at Henry where students can get their voices heard in school activities. However, where are their voices in other spaces at school? Adam Fletcher (2005), founder of SoundOut, a program that promotes meaningful student involvement through publications, states:

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*Meaningful student involvement is the process of engaging students as partners in every facet of school change for the purpose of strengthening their commitment to education, community and democracy. (p. 5)*

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Henry is involving some degree of student voice in its school. However, we need to do more to involve students in all spaces that affect them, particularly in school policies and rules. As a student expressed to me in regards to the no-pass policy, “Why are we being punished for what other kids do?” This is not to say there should not be a no-pass policy, but that there should be a step of student consultation and discussion required before such a wide-reaching policy is put into place.

Currently, our high school is going through some big changes. Next year, all freshmen and sophomores will be in the Middle Years Program. This program requires that all freshmen and sophomores do a personal project. In addition to this new initiative, our school will also be adding advisories back to the school schedule. All these changes are going to have major impact on students, but how are student voices being accounted for?

What is being done to ensure we are getting *authentic* student voice in these processes? In the past, Henry has generally given surveys to students as a way to gather input—thus, indirectly getting student voice. I believe that Henry High School places value on student voice, but the reality is that there is not enough time nor are there structures in place to solicit and make effective use of authentic student voice. Authentic student voice is an investment that takes time for its value to be seen; it cannot happen overnight. It is not something with immediate results that schools can report back to the public or the district. As such, student voice has become secondary to more public-garnering priorities such as graduation rates and test performances.

I initiated interviews and conversations with several Henry students in order to hear views about the role and utility of student voice in their school. It is important to keep in mind that all the students I talked to were students who either showed an interest in student voice through their involvement with student council or other activities, or were students who knew how to seek out resources (e.g. students who often came to the CCC). All whom I spoke with agreed that their voices and opinions were heard and respected in most classrooms: teachers fostered discussion in classrooms and students felt that most teachers respected them and allowed them to speak their minds. However, when asked about changes in the school policies and rules, all but one student stated they had little to no voice about changes. An example was the no-pass policy. When I asked one student why he thought students had no say, he said that the administration feared their input and that students would cause disruption to the flow of school. Another student said he believed the administration did not think youth were mature enough to make important decisions. “They don’t want our voices heard because they think we will make unrealistic expectations like, ‘Hey, let’s have a pizza day’” (Henry student, personal communication, April 22, 2015). Another example one student described related to the sit-in that happened at Henry after the Michael Brown decision. Michael Brown was an unarmed, 19-year-old African-American male who was shot and killed by a white police officer in Ferguson, Missouri. The morning after the decision was made to not indict the police officer a handful of students decided to not go to classes and sat outside the main office hallways as a sign of protest. This student felt the administration was not supportive and instead wanted to quash their voice. Why is it that teachers seem to listen more to students than the administration does? The expectations of the role of a teacher compared with that of an administrator are vastly different.

To get a broader sense of what student voice may look like in Minneapolis, I also went to talk with the Minneapolis Youth Congress (MYC), described on its website as

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*A representative body of youth that has authentic power and influence in decisions and policies relevant to youth. The Minneapolis Youth Congress works in collaboration with elected officials focusing on a common understanding of the welfare of the youth in the City of Minneapolis (Minneapolis Youth Coordinating Board, 2015, No Decision about Us without Us).*

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Students interested in becoming members of MYC apply in the beginning of the school year and are interviewed and selected by the committee coordinators (adults). Throughout the last school year, MYC members met weekly to discuss policies and issues that were pertinent and important to youth in Minneapolis. They helped effect policies they deemed important. For instance, the MYC Health Committee helped get the Clean Air Act passed on e-cigarettes by working in partnership with the city's health department. At one of their meetings in April, I had the opportunity to ask the group of roughly 35 MYC members for their opinions on youth voice in Minneapolis. All were students from a Minneapolis Public Schools (MPS) high school and/or Minneapolis residents. For the most part, many felt their voices were heard and respected in Minneapolis. They felt empowered and had an outlet for their voice to make change. When asked about their respective schools, it varied by school. Some felt their school was supportive, others not as much. Students who attended school in South Minneapolis seem to have more positive experiences with student voice compared to those in North Minneapolis. South Minneapolis students were also the students who spoke up more at the meeting.

## **BUILDING THE FOUNDATION FOR THE FUTURE**

In the past 10 years, Henry High School has had four principals and the MPS district has had four superintendents. Such frequent changes in leadership make it hard to build and maintain systems to support students. This situation is not unique to Henry or MPS, it is true of many urban school districts. Therefore, it is even more important to have student voice systematized so that it becomes ingrained in the school and the district. It is encouraging that this year the first ever student representative was sworn in to the MPS School Board. Even more encouraging, this student was selected by his fellow student council peers across the district. MPS also holds a monthly meeting for student council members from all high schools.

Last year MPS also created the Office of Black Male Student Achievement (BMA), realizing there was a need in this group of students who were the lowest performing academically. The director of BMA has made it a point to talk to students across the district to get their perspective and feedback on why MPS is not succeeding in educating its Black male students. Henry also has its own respective BMA group. From this BMA group, events were planned to encourage BMA participation and a new BMA Coordinator for Henry was hired. Students met with BMA staff to talk about how the school could better work with this group of students and were assigned a staff mentor. BMA students also did a professional development presentation for Henry staff about how they felt they were being treated in school and ways to improve. Clearly, through Henry's various opportunities for student involvement and our focus on BMA, Henry values a youth's right to education and to his/her right to participate as a citizen in voicing his/her concerns. However, more work still needs to be done to make it consistent.

Some may ask why student voice is so important. Henry was designated as a Reward School by the Minnesota Department of Education (2015) last year, and this year U.S. News and World Report (2015) ranked it as the third best high school in Minnesota. The need for more authentic student voice is not to say Henry is not doing a good job in many arenas. The need for student voice is so we can better continue the good work of Henry and MPS to ensure our students are college and career ready. Being college and career ready means more than performing well academically. It also means knowing how to advocate for oneself

and how to claim one's rights. This needs to be at the forefront of conversations at schools. Doing this work will require a new way of thinking. It is imperative to read and use the framework of Fletcher and Konopka, as well as the UNCRC, to understand that at its core, student voice is about human rights. We, as those in power, are responsible for making sure students know and are accorded their rights, if we truly care about their future.

Again, it is important to note what authentic student voice should look like. Authentic student voice includes meaningful student involvement that makes students an integral part of the school just as the principal is integral to running it. At South High School, there is an Equity and Diversity program coordinator who seems to take on this role of student voice and also leads a student leadership group. Thus, to be more equitable in obtaining student voice, the first step is to require that every school has a staff position that is tasked with student voice, whose primary responsibility in the first year is to gather information. Similar to what the director of the Office of BMA has been doing in his first year, the priority of this person should be to investigate, to gather information and take an inventory of student voice by asking some key questions:

1. Where are spaces for student voice?
2. How is student voice used within those spaces?
3. Is the school seeking out student voice? If so, where and how? If not, why not?

After answering these questions and more, it is vital to gather the whole student perspective. For instance, those who do not usually speak up or are not successful academically in school must also be included. This must be purposeful and executed with clear intention. It cannot be just another survey that gets lost in a pile among the dozens given to students. The ultimate goal would be to create a student-led group with this new staff position where student voice is regularly sought out and expected when it comes to school policies, much like Henry's BMA group, where students are regularly consulted and respected for their expertise and experiences. The goal would be that student voice becomes integrated in the school system seamlessly, that no matter the change in leadership, it remains in place. Thus, it will take time and patience, trial and error. More importantly, as a student from the MYC said, "it has to be legit-- students want[ing] to do it" (Personal communication, Minneapolis Youth Congress, April 2, 2015).

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**NOU VANG** is the first to graduate college in her family. Education was important to Nou and led her to serve as an AmeriCorps member with College Possible fresh out of college. That experience introduced her to the field of youth work and college readiness, paving the way for her to be where she is today, helping youth reach their full potential through her work as the Achieve!Mpls Career and College Center coordinator.

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