



*Elevating the Voice of Those We are Called to Serve—
System Design with Student Engagement and Voice*

Pathway 2 Tomorrow Impact Plan Iowa Department of Education

Executive Summary

Student engagement within the educational setting is critical for establishing a sense of belonging and connected relationships that are needed to thrive within a learning environment. Research has shown that absenteeism, social isolation, behavior issues, truancy, dropping out, and mental health issues are observable in environments where a connection of students with peers and adults is lacking.

National statistics show that millions of students each year are not engaged in their learning, mental health issues are rising, and although national graduation statistics are moving up, there are still a large percentage of students not completing their PK-12 education. This ultimately impacts the lives of these students into adulthood and has a significant impact on their health, their family, community engagement and financial impact on our communities, businesses, states, and country.

The good news is that, more than ever before, educators are implementing evidence-based practices and utilizing brain science to understand and develop systems to meet the needs of our students. One of those basic needs is for a foundation of authentic relationships and a sense of belonging. Students are capable of participating in their own learning and have a unique lens on how the environment impacts their ability to learn as well as how to actively engage in their school and community to address academic, social, emotional, and physical safety.

Schools and communities throughout Iowa and around the world are finding young people thirsty for opportunities to use their voice for change. There are wonderful leadership programs, service-learning opportunities, school clubs, before/after school programs, and community youth-serving organizations providing youth with civic and service opportunities. Youth-serving organizations are significantly ahead of schools in implementing research-based, positive youth development strategies providing opportunities for youth voice in decision-making. The implementation of positive youth development strategies are not how schools have traditionally viewed student voice. If you think back to your years in PK-12, you most likely will remember that the majority of student leadership opportunities in your school focused on students who are already successful and have leadership experience. In most places, that is still the norm.

Our challenge is to create examples of policy and processes that assist educational entities to include student engagement and voice as a comprehensive and sustained part of their system. This includes authentically engaging students in student/adult partnerships collecting, reviewing,

analyzing, problem-solving, and generating action to create learning environments where they tackle the small to large issues of concern. The other challenge is to empower schools to provide these opportunities through participation that mirrors the demographics of the school including students who are struggling academically, socially, and/or emotionally who need their voices heard as well.

We know that our students, given more agency, opportunities for engagement, and an opportunity to share their voice in these systems will lead to positive outcomes in their social-emotional learning and academic achievement that will serve them both while they are in school and as they move forward into the world.

While for some, student engagement and voice implies engagement in societal and political issues. The Phase 1 efforts are focused specifically on school climate through Iowa's new required annual school climate assessment for grades 3-12, *Conditions for Learning* (CfL), one component of our Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) process. While we know that there is a growing body of research and resources for students becoming more genuinely engaged in how they learn in the classroom, that is the next Phase of the work.

The focus of our Impact Plan is on student engagement through student/adult partnerships addressing the data from CfL as a first step of encouraging student engagement and voice as a sustainable component of a Multi-tiered System of Supports (MTSS). All Iowa schools will be encouraged to include authentic and comprehensive student engagement and voice within their ongoing MTSS process for the review, analysis, and problem-solving for CfL's five constructs of: Adult/Student Relationships, Student/Student Relationships, Emotional Safety, Physical Safety, and Expectations and Boundaries.

While the completion of the CfL annual survey is one step in the process of finding out how students perceive these constructs, the plan calls for additional, systematic engagement of students in the understanding, review, analysis, strategy identification, and action as an ongoing part of the multi-tiered system of supports. Based on the success of the Iowa Safe and Supportive Schools (IS3) efforts of 2009-2014 using this survey and toolkits providing a student/adult partnership process with a small number of schools, it was found to be not only inspiring for the students, but for the adults in the district/building as well. The original focus of IS3 on high schools will be expanded to include all grades taking CfL from 3rd-12th. The plan includes updating the Toolkits for each construct to provide a sequential process for schools to purposefully and authentically engage students with the data and problem-solving.

Through ISE, participating schools using the CfL survey and the processes outlined in the corresponding Toolkits demonstrated the positive impact this process can have. Over a five year period, 100% of schools with fully implemented interventions and sufficient data reported a decrease in student alcohol use; 81% reported a decrease in harassment or bullying on school property; 90% reported improved school safety scores; and 62% reported a reduction in the number of suspensions due to violence without serious injury.

IDOE will create the specifics of what is needed for training and coaching to help schools implement student/adult partnerships addressing CfL. Typically in Iowa, the regional Area Education Agencies (AEAs) provide direct training and coaching services to local districts and buildings. IDOE, in collaboration with the AEAs, has established a training cadre process to coordinate both content and processes by and between IDOE and the AEAs for the local school districts/buildings.

While the main focus is on district and building engagement of students, it is important IDOE models the importance of listening to the voices of Iowa students. To do so, an annual student forum will be held to provide students who have participated in the process in their own district/building to share not only their collective concerns and ideas, but also share the strategies and outcomes they have implemented in their own schools. As IDOE and invited AEA staff interact with students from across Iowa they will have a perspective not currently available to align with their work.

Part 1: The Challenge

The mission of the Iowa Department of Education (IDOE) is to champion excellence for all Iowa students through leadership and service. One priority of IDOE is for all Iowa schools to foster a culture and climate in which students feel safe and supported. Through a statewide effort the IDOE and the regional Area Education Agencies are assisting schools to develop a multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS). MTSS is a systems framework that includes universal instruction and support for all students including those who need minimal support to those who need the most intensive supports. MTSS is based on an integrated data system informing decisions through teams at the district and building levels reviewing data and identifying students in need of additional academic, behavioral, social, and/or emotional support. A comprehensive system of supports has grown more vital as education faces continually changing and troubling statistics about students.

National statistics indicate that more than 8 million students in 2015-16 missed more than 10 % of school days. Research has demonstrated that when students miss even just 2 days per month they are likely to fall behind and/or dropout. Suicide is now the 2nd leading cause of death in adolescents between the ages of 13 and 24. Students, ages 13-18, with a mental disorder include: anxiety 31.9%; behavior disorders 19.1 %, mood disorders 14.3%, and substance use disorders 11.4 %, with an overall prevalence resulting in severe impact at 22.2 %.

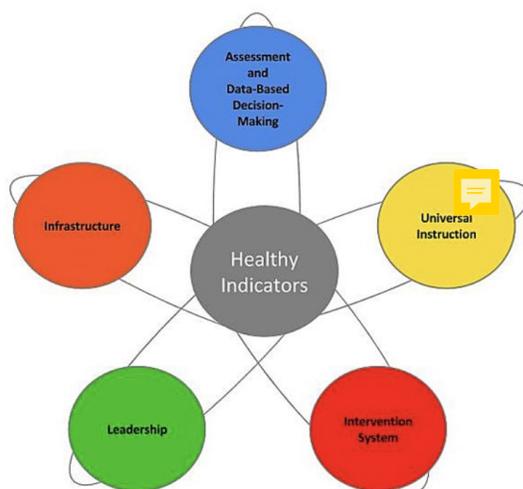
If those numbers aren't reason enough for this focus, neuroscience is now also emphasizing the need to change how we consider school climate and address social engagement of our students. It emphasizes that we must address the whole child because learning is not just academic, it is also social in nature.

Schools are rallying behind reviewing a wider breadth of existing data they have addressing school climate. Schools are acutely aware that to teach students, they must be in attendance yet chronic absenteeism is a major concern. Research confirms that for optimal student

engagement, there must be solid relationships with adults in the building and a culture and a climate conducive to learning. However, as the adults in all levels of education, government, business, and community organizations faithfully explore the identified needs, analyze data and implement strategies, there is a conspicuous voice missing in the dialogues taking place--*the voice of the student*.

The growing research on social-emotional learning provides evidence that we need to attend to more than just academics in our schools. We must use effective, evidence-based practices to provide settings where the healthy growth and development of students are central to the design of the district/school as a whole. Sustainable systems must focus on both academic and non-academic needs of students and ensure educators also are immersed in a positive and supportive environment.

Currently IDOE and the AEAs are implementing MTSS statewide and have developed regional, district, and school building self-assessments on literacy, math, and social-emotional-behavioral-mental health within the following Healthy Indicators:

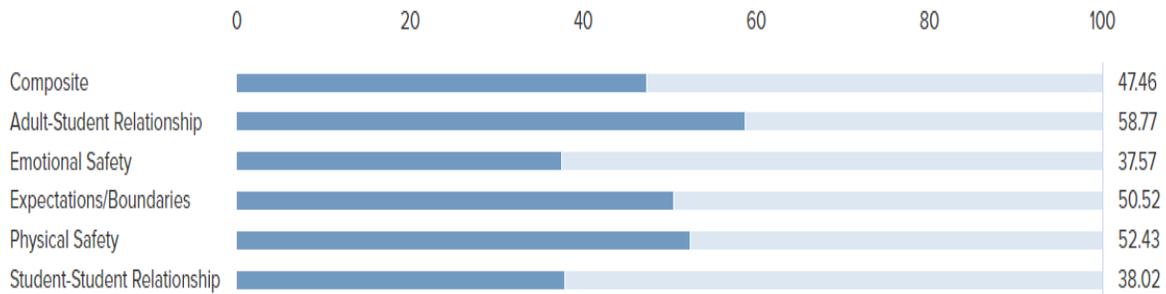


Purposeful alignment with the existing assessments for the Healthy Indicators will be done throughout the development and implementation of the CfL focus.

Having recognized the importance of social-emotional-behavioral-mental health within a MTSS framework, systems are being developed to support adults and students. As noted previously, within the state accountability plan, schools are annually required to have all 3rd-12th grade students complete the school climate survey, *CfL*. In spring 2018, the survey was given for the first time to 5th-12th grade students. In 2019, the spring administration included correlated surveys for 3rd-5th grades and 6-12 grades. Future development will include corresponding surveys for teachers and parents/guardians. Using this data will provide adults and students in schools with longitudinal data on constructs of school climate and the ability to identify key focus areas for action.

As evidenced below in the state aggregate data from the *CfL* survey given to students in 5th-12th grades in the spring of 2018, we have baseline data that emphasizes the work we have to do in creating learning environments where students feel more connected and supported.

PERFORMANCE IN CONDITIONS FOR LEARNING



As partners in this effort, we have much to learn from our students. The *CfL* survey process is only the first component. The data, while informative, becomes powerful once students and adults together review what is behind the data--not just what the student perception is, but why and what students believe can be done to improve the school climate so that all students are supported to thrive. And then, engaging students in strategies to improve identified focus areas.

It's important to note that most schools, with well-meaning intentions, are providing opportunities for students to share what they think and be involved including: surveys, advisory, student council, clubs, organizations, athletic teams, summits, forums, etc. However, the majority of the current opportunities are still adult contrived and controlled where tradition often dictates or restricts the student role. Authenticity of student voice and sustainability come and go with the adult champions or short-term funding streams rather than as part of the ongoing system.

The Solution

“There is something fundamentally amiss about building and rebuilding an entire system without consulting at any point those it is designed to serve.” Cook-Sather, 2009

The innovation proposed is to design and implement a sustainable embedding of student engagement and voice into a multi-tiered system of supports and continuous school improvement.

The definition of student voice is that, when occurring, the “students are meaningfully engaged in decision making and improvement-related processes in their schools” (Quaglia, R. & Corso, M. 2014)

There is a purposeful use of the term “engage” rather than “involve”. While wonderful opportunities are provided for students to be involved in activities and projects in schools, the difference is that in many circumstances the students are participating in an activity initiated and designed by an adult. Rarely are there opportunities for authentic student engagement and leadership to share as an equal voice about what is happening in schools.

There is also a purposeful use of the term “authentic” in reference to student engagement. As defined by the [Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative](#):

“Authentic youth engagement can best be described by focusing on the experiences of young people when they are engaged:

- They are respected, valued, and trusted and they feel appreciated, safe, and comfortable.
- They feel they are working in an environment that facilitates their engagement, and they are involved in a meaningful way as teachers as well as students.
- Their voices are being heard and treated as worthwhile.
- They are given the opportunity to be involved and make decisions, gain leadership skills, and see their ideas realized.
- They are able to participate in the social aspects of their involvement.
- They see change and progress happening as a result of their contributions.
- They are in a space where they have ownership and control in decision-making processes.

(adapted from Hoffman & Staniforth, 2007)”

There are numerous ways to engage students that fall on a continuum from adult decided/directed to student decided/directed. One way that shows the evolving opportunity to increase student engagement is seen in [Hart’s ladder of participation](#).

This plan is based on using Hart’s step six, adult-initiated, shared decisions with young people. This level of engagement allows for ongoing MTSS to fully engage students in developmentally appropriate ways and, keeping in mind the confidentiality needs, with only aggregate data at the district or building level. Students will have an active role and partnership with the adults in their district/building in constructing their own success.

This plan calls for districts/schools to thoughtfully consider how to ensure inclusivity in active student engagement and voice. Leadership opportunities are usually filled with traditional student leaders rather than providing safe opportunities for students from all backgrounds and lived experiences to build their skills for voice, choice, action, and leadership. Rarely is the entire student body represented, including students of color, students served by the foster system, LGBTQ students, as well as students with intellectual and physical disabilities. Even when student surveys are used, the results are rarely shared back with the students for discussion so the students do not readily see the value of their input or how it influences change. Sharing back and digging deeper are key elements of the process for student/adult partnerships around CfL. Ideally, knowing that the survey results are being shared and used to initiate positive change will help students in taking the survey more seriously.

Resources provided with this effort will include best practices from positive youth development and universal instruction research to encourage the recognition and adoption of policies and practices that encourage, empower, and authentically engage a broad diversity of students.

Toolkits, mentioned previously, will be provided for each construct in CfL and aligned with the Healthy Indicators assessment process. The Toolkits will assist district and building teams with suggested processes for reviewing, analyzing, and acting on needs side-by-side with their students. Additional resources will help them build student engagement in this process as a sustained part of their multi-tiered system of supports. These resources will provide a strategy for districts/schools to develop a partnership team of adults along with a representative group of students who will assist in developing and leading processes for the ongoing communication by and between the work of the student/adult partnership team and the rest of the student body.

With any rollout that needs to be done statewide with consistency, IDOE works within the Collaborating for Iowa's Kids (C4K) process. The Collaboration for Iowa's Kids (C4K) is a partnership among the Area Education Agencies (AEA), the Iowa Department of Education (DE) and local school districts. The intent of C4K is to work more effectively and efficiently as a full educational system to accomplish a few agreed upon priorities. To this end, each month the over 100 members of C4K come together to discuss, guide and enact strategies that support Iowa's educational system.

The processes include work group development, stakeholder input and feedback, C4K leadership vetting, and piloting/refinement of each strategy. The process is both comprehensive and sequential and is purposefully deliberate resulting in lengthy timelines. The design and subsequent materials of this plan will be vetted and shared through the C4K process. This will include a pre-pilot with one revised toolkit in June 2019 with a small group of school teams identified through ESSA as needing comprehensive supports. Following that, additional refinements may be made as well as refining the other four toolkits. Piloting of the toolkits and training will then take place with a small number of districts/buildings.

Subsequently the Toolkits and training will be made available to all schools across the state.

Sequence of Implementation:

The sequence of implementation includes:

- All students in 3rd through 12th grades completing the CfL survey annually in the spring
- Internal IDOE team work with contracted consultant to update the Toolkits aligned with the CfL constructs and the Healthy Indicators' assessments
- IDOE ESSA and School Improvement teams coordinate schools for training in June
- First Toolkit for Emotional Safety is completed and training resources completed
- School teams attending the June ESSA Summer Institute have the option to receive training in the Toolkit for Emotional Safety as a pre-pilot to gain feedback on alignment
- Refinement is made on the Emotional Safety toolkit and the four other toolkits based on the constructs are completed

- Revised toolkits and training process are piloted in a small number of districts/buildings
- Any additional revisions are made resulting from feedback through the pilot
- Toolkit training and student-adult partnership training are made available through the C4K training cadre
- Training cadre and AEA staff provide support and coaching to local school districts
- Districts/schools review existing policies and procedures that may restrict engagement of students and refine to provide demographically representative participation of students
- Schools engage adults/students in reviewing data and prioritizing a specific construct for focus
- Schools engage adults/students in developing a communication plan to ensure the involvement and input from across the district/building
- Schools engage adults/students in digging deeper into the selected construct, developing action plans, implementing strategies, and progress monitoring outcomes
- Districts/schools develop system plan for ongoing engagement of students with a focus on sustainability
- IDOE provides ongoing resources via Google Site on evidence-based positive youth development and instructional practices to address constructs
- IDOE hosts annual Student Forum for Schools/students to share their focused construct and subsequent action as well as sharing with IDOE and AEAs a collective voice on important issues to Iowa students
- State, district, and local review and analysis of annual data including attendance, behavior, class/course completion, graduation rates as well as CfL data to determine needed areas of focus

Anticipated Outcomes:

The priority is to engage student voice in processes for school improvement to not only positively impact school climate, but to increase students' sense of safety and belonging while developing student efficacy, civic engagement, and leadership skills while reducing risky behavior. IDOE anticipates that in the coming years, the state, district, and individual school building data from CfL will demonstrate students in grades 3-12 reporting increased adult/student relationships, emotional safety, expectations/boundaries, physical safety, and student/student relationships.

As indicated previously, IDOE has implemented a similar process with a small number of schools that demonstrated positive outcomes in student choices, climate of the school, and achievement. IDOE anticipates similar results through this initiative.

The procedural outcome is to create a sustainable model where student engagement and voice is an expected and supported part of a multi-tiered system of supports for Iowa schools. Ongoing advocacy, training, and coaching will be needed to secure systems that purposefully rotate the adults and students in a district/building so that each year there remain experienced students and adults to provide the foundation for new students and adults to join in the effort.

Measuring outcomes of the initiative will be ongoing using the annual review of CfL, watching for trends across the longitudinal data, and monitoring changes in data schools already collect such as attendance, behavior, and academics as well as data on alcohol and drug use, bullying, and violence.

Over time, the outcome includes solidifying a replicable model that can be shared not only across Iowa but with other states as well. Our hope is to provide leadership, encouragement, and a model for engaging student voice to other states focusing on school climate within ESSA and/or school improvement. In addition, IDOE hopes to encourage national, state, and local student-serving organizations and agencies to increase the opportunities for authentic student engagement in decisions and strategies that address the concerns and needs of students.

Part 2: Implementation Plan

Vision for Impact

- Elevating student agency and social capital not only for their time in school but as preparation for success in life, career, family, and community
- Increasing student motivation, engagement, and investment in their education
- Increased positive school climate as evidenced by increased attendance, decreased behavior incidents, increased scores on the constructs of CfL, sustained and/or increased graduation rates
- Increasing students' sense of belonging and attachment
- Increased academic achievement
- Increased awareness and strategies for educators to positively impact school climate

Ideal Conditions

Schools in Iowa are still learning about and developing their leadership and infrastructure to implement a comprehensive MTSS. Ideally, schools will have a district-level team and building-level teams already formed and be accustomed to utilizing data-based decision making. The Department and our regional Area Education Agencies are actively working with districts on this process.

Through numerous conversations with the consultants at the Department and AEAs, national and international experts on youth engagement, positive youth development leaders, and with diverse Iowa youth, we will build on the following considerations for foundational beliefs and ideal readiness considerations for authentic and systemic engagement of student voice. These will be compiled into a resource piece to assist schools in thoughtfully considering the process of embedding student engagement and voice within MTSS. In addition, this resource will identify numerous written and "hidden rules" that include unwritten policy and practice considerations that potentially limit diverse and authentic student engagement.

Examples of this include:

Foundational beliefs and readiness:

- District, Building, and School Board leadership who are authentic in their desire and advocacy for a culture of partnership between students and the adults
- Districts, Buildings, School Boards, Parents, and Community who understand just survey results are not enough and execute a variety of opportunities to add depth, breadth, and scale for dialogues with students of all ages
- District/School models inclusive student engagement (demographics of students engaged mirror the demographics of the district/school)
- Existing district and building team data-based decision making infrastructure is in place
- Data collection and monitoring system in place
- Timely reporting on survey data and strategy decisions back to all students (ideally student to student) and families
- Adult readiness to listen and take action with students is evident or in progress—structures of discussions do not tokenize or overshadow students.
- Student-led engagement opportunities and spaces are developed with students
- Student facilitators are provided training on skills and tools to lead sessions with their peers to share results and garner ideas to take back to district/building team
- Students are provided with guarantees through word and action that they can disclose safely/honestly without negative consequences
- Supportive Parents including parent consent process for participation
- Existing or created time in schedule for student-to-student discussion and gathering input to take back to district/building team

Policies/procedures that allow for engagement of all students are in place (watch for written or “hidden rules” that are procedurally limiting inclusion)

- Authentic opportunities for students to express their perspective on existing or new policies to better reflect diversity: cultural, racial, economic and social
- Transporting students (ex. to bring them together across the district)
- Convening outside of school hours (ex. liability & transportation access)
- Convening inside school hours—(ex. out-of-class time considerations to be inclusive of all current levels of student achievement to participate)
- Inclusive criteria for selection—(ex. not to exclude students who may not meet criteria for co- and/or extra-curricular participation)
- Inclusive opportunities for students and/or teachers to submit recommendations for participation
- Support flexibility needed for existing staff to serve as adult partners (ex. assign coordinating student voice as a “duty”, provide additional pay if outside contract hours)
- Supportive Union for existing staff to support student engagement
- Attainable recognition of students is available for all (ex. silver cord hours, eligibility for letter)
- Coordination with community organizations, faith communities, and businesses to support students in the community and assist the district in reaching out inclusively to students and families

In addition, gleaned from positive youth development research and practice we will develop resources for schools to consider additional best practices such as:

- helping schools understand the difference between tokenism (1 student representative with no voting) and authentic engagement (a minimum of 2 youth on existing teams with co-decision making in a student/adult partnership)
- providing student/adult partnership training to build understanding and community that provides comfort, safety, and support for honest exchanges of thoughts and ideas
- providing training for both youth and adults in how to clarify roles and parameters when it comes to decision-making
- providing training for students on using data

Focus Area

This plan is for a statewide focus. The initial schools for the pre-pilot will be those identified through our ESSA index that are “comprehensive” support schools. They are required to attend all training provided and will have supports to sustain strategic implementation. The “targeted” schools identified through ESSA have the option to attend and we anticipate a large number of these schools will take advantage of the opportunities provided either as a large group at a state facilitated training (summer 2019) or through regional Area Education Agencies.

The pilot phase will involve a small number of sites along with their AEA support personnel. These may or may not be comprehensive or targeted sites. The purpose is to field test the Toolkits and training for final revision.

We will also continue to convene with youth for their ideas for how to provide feedback as well as garner their ideas for technology-based supplemental training and supports for students participating in the process.

Timeline

[see timeline document](#)

Budget

This is the budget for moving forward following the securing of funding through P2T. Prior to receipt of these dollars there will be both School Climate Transformation dollars and other funding used to offset the refinements of the toolkits and supporting the June 2019 Institute for ESSA schools. [Anticipated use of P2T funds](#) In addition, School Climate Transformation dollars will be used to support additional expenses for the first student event.

Communication

A short- and long-term communication plan will be developed for connecting with sites that are using the process. Plans will be made to determine how IDOE will capture what district/schools are doing and to highlight their efforts.

Additional possible opportunities may be provided through a web-based Community of Practice that networks both district/building representatives sharing their efforts to embed the process in MTSS and/or with the adults and youth who have participated in the process.

There is currently no formalized plan so this will be considered as the process unfolds.

Formal communications--press releases and interviews will go through Staci Hupp, Communications Director at IDOE.

This opportunity and plan was coordinated by Kay A. Augustine, Ed.D.