



Students on Board

A
Conversation
Between
School Board
Members and
Students





“When educators foster relationships and genuinely get to know students, there is a mutual benefit – students feel more encouraged and capable of achievement, and educators better learn how to inspire their students.” From the Million Voices Web site, www.millionvoice.org.

In the pressure of budget cuts and student test scores, it can be hard to focus on something as seemingly secondary as school climate. But we all know that what's important is not always urgent. School climate is important.

We know this because of the work done by NSBA's Center for Public Education. In their analysis of the research, they've found ample evidence that feeling welcomed and connected to school can have a huge impact on student achievement. For instance, it's one of the most important factors in preventing dropouts. So finding out what would make students feel safe and engaged in school can be one of the best things you do as a school board.

That's why our Council of Urban Boards of Education (CUBE) conducted extensive surveys on school climate, and why we identified school climate as a fundamental component of *The Key Work of School Boards*.

And now we're excited to partner with Pearson Foundation on their excellent Million Voices project, which you'll see described inside. To support the project, we've developed *Students on Board: A Conversation Between School Board Members and Students* to get board members talking with students about school climate. You'll find practical, straightforward guidance on how to truly gauge the school environment from one of the best sources available: the students.

When NSBA went to the White House Conference on Bullying Prevention, we spent two days listening to students and adults speak about bullying—and the students truly were the ones who said the most sensible things the whole time. You really should listen to them.

Our current president and school board member, Mary Broderick, said, "If we are going to stem the tide in student bullying, it will not be because of mandates from above, but rather because local school board members have drawn out students' voices, creating conditions for them to analyze root causes and generate solutions that work." That sums it up perfectly. We're glad to provide this resource from Pearson Foundation to you to help you do your daily work.

Sincerely, 
Anne L. Bryant, Executive Director, National School Boards Association

Students on Board **A Conversation Between School Board** **Members and Students**

Gauging school climate is one of the most important things you can do as a school board. NSBA's *The Key Work of School Boards* emphasizes: "Students cannot learn in chaos, fear, or embarrassment." It also says, "If you really want to know what people feel about their schools, ask them." Together with Pearson Foundation, we have put together this toolkit to guide you through one of the best ways to gauge school climate: talking to students. Honest conversations with students can be the quickest way you can move toward practical steps to sustain or improve school climate.

These are just guidelines you can adapt to the needs of your district. For instance, you may want to hold a series of conversations instead of just one. But these do represent our best guidance on connecting with students in a meaningful way so that you support your schools and the students who learn there.

Overall Guidelines

- Ask the superintendent to select students in whatever manner best suits your district. Ask for the group to be a true cross-section of your school's culture, involvement and interests.
- Invite six to 10 students so that everyone can easily participate in the conversation.
- If possible, instead of the entire school board, have students meet with just two or three board members.
- Have students invite another caring adult to come along with them—for instance, a teacher, coach, or other adult they all know.
- Have the meeting in a comfortable location selected by the students.
- Schedule the meeting to run 60 to 90 minutes.
- Ask students to write up their reflections on the conversation afterward, and ask for at least one student to volunteer to share those reflections. They could be read at a board meeting, a student assembly, or published in a school publication. We would request that they be sent to NSBA at studentsonboard@nsba.org, as well.
- Encourage as many students as possible to get involved in Pearson Foundation's Million Voices survey, which can be found at www.millionvoice.org.



Key Questions

Before beginning, ask if it's OK to take notes. Have one board member open the meeting by stating your purpose. Keep it short, just two or three minutes. If you're introducing the meeting, you might cover:

- Who you are.
- Why this meeting is important.
- Why it could lead to something else.
- Why the meeting is personally important to you. A personal story about the topic might break the ice.

After that introduction, you might ask the students the following questions:

- Tell us who you are: name, grade, and one interesting thing about yourself.
- What is school like for you?
- Do you feel safe at school? Have you seen or heard about incidents where students were hurt, verbally or physically? Is this common or rare?
- Have you seen someone bullied? Did another student or a teacher try to stop it? Tell us about it. Is this common or rare?
- Do you feel respected by teachers and staff? Can you give us some examples? Do students respect each other at this school? What are some examples?
- Do your teachers care whether you are successful? Can you give us some examples?
- If you were the school board, what would be one thing you would do to improve the school? (Even if you haven't taken notes for the rest of the meeting, ask for permission to do so at this point and during the final question.)
- Ask for any closing comments or advice the students would like to give.

After the Meeting

Before you end the meeting, be sure to let the students know what actions you will take as a result of their information. If at all possible, send participants some tangible evidence of those actions in order to honor the trust they've shown by talking honestly with you. Think about extending the conversation through the Million Voices Survey (www.millionvoice.org) and other activities. You can find other helpful resources at www.nsba.org/studentsonboard.

School boards do best when they have the Students on Board.