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“Time and again, research has shown that the more educators give their students choice, control, challenge, and opportunities for collaboration, the more their motivation and engagement are likely to rise. It is particularly important for adolescents, who are developing their sense of identity and their ability for complex thinking, to have the chance to affect decision making.”— *Toshalis and Nakkula, [Motivation, Engagement, And Student Voice](#), April 2012*

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This guide curates insights from educators at [Florence Nightingale Elementary](#) (Nightingale), who launched a Student Voice Committee (SVC) during the 2020-2021 school year. The guide aims to share what educators at Nightingale learned throughout the process.

Nightingale is a K-8 elementary school located in the Gage Park neighborhood on the southwest side of Chicago. Of the approximately 1,000 students enrolled, 98.3% are Hispanic and 42.1% are English language learners.

Nightingale is one of six schools that are part of the [To&Through Middle Grades Network](#) (MGN), a cohort of Chicago Public Schools dedicated to creating more equitable and supportive educational environments where middle grades students thrive. As part of their work in the MGN, Nightingale identified the following problem of practice: “developing a strong sense of student belonging by strengthening student-educator relationships through an established system of tiered supports.” Nightingale launched a SVC to address this challenge. (You can read more about their process [here](#).)

1

Starting a Student Voice Committee is easier than you think.

When Nightingale kicked off their SVC in the fall of 2020, staff were concerned about how many students would apply, when to meet, and how many students would show up to an optional Zoom meeting during a pandemic.

The team quickly discovered that many of these concerns were unfounded: students were really excited to be involved, willing to work around other conflicts, and eager to jump into conversations about how to make their school experience better. Below are responses from students interested in joining the SVC.

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“I am interested in the Student Voice Committee to make a change for the school community and trying to make the world a better place.” — *8th grade student*

“I hope I am able to get into the program to help make change and create a continued positive feeling and morale for our peers.” — *7th grade student*

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2

School leadership must commit to listening to and incorporating student feedback.

When a school authentically commits to listening to and incorporating student feedback, a SVC can contribute to fostering stronger developmental relationships.

For that to happen, school leadership needs to set the tone by both supporting and valuing a diverse set of student voices. Without administrator support to incorporate student feedback, students may become discouraged if they don't feel that their voices are being valued. At Nightingale, Principal Adriana Arias and Assistant Principal Michelle Soto were an integral part of the SVC team. They made student voice a priority during the 2020-2021 school year by attending and giving feedback in team meetings and sharing relevant information in newsletters to staff and on the school website. Adriana and Michelle also scheduled time during all-staff and team level meetings to share information and recommendations from the SVC. Additionally, they gathered insights from staff to understand how to implement students' recommendations.



“Student voice is now as important in education as literacy.” — *Adriana Arias, Principal*

“Participating in the SVC allows me to work with middle grades students in a small group setting and keep an open mindset on how we can incorporate their visions and ideas to make our school more welcoming and engaging for all of our students.”



— *Michelle Soto, Assistant Principal*

3

Intentionally include voices that may not always be heard.

SVCs that include voices that may not always be heard benefit the whole school. Making sure that a SVC is representative of the student population can be difficult but is essential.

Unlike student government where students are elected, Nightingale wanted a committee that represented all four of their middle grades (5-8) and had a mix of the demographics represented in their school. Staff leaders Meaghan, Anne, and Jackie visited all the classrooms to [share](#) what the committee would do and created a [brief interest survey](#). Then they analyzed the results to see what student groups were not represented and reached out to them directly about joining. They also decided to meet during the school day to ensure that the SVC was accessible to all students.



“We really want to make sure we reached out to every student in the building, especially the ones that don't typically join in. Sometimes the ones who say little in class have a lot to say when actually asked about something. They just sometimes need that little push.”

— *Meaghan Esposito, Dean*

4

Designate time for SVC staff to plan for and debrief meetings.

Dean Meaghan Esposito, counselor Anne Rohan, and fifth-grade teacher Jackie Sanchez supported and facilitated the Nightingale SVC. They met regularly to plan how to maximize their time with students.

They built [loose agendas](#) for each SVC meeting while remaining open to changes based on what students said. Together, the leads found ways to make the SVC meetings engaging for students without being too prescriptive.

5

Students thrive when they know what to expect.

SVCs thrive when staff set clear expectations and promote consistent meeting structures. The Nightingale team has done an exceptional job of upholding consistent expectations about meeting norms, while still making the meetings fun.

Students know that they will have the opportunity to analyze data; plan surveys, presentations, and new events; and share their findings with their teachers and classmates. In turn, they understand that they need to be engaged, show up to the weekly meetings, and use their voices to make a difference.



“I don’t love virtual school, but SVC and reading class keep me motivated.”
— *6th grade student*

“Our SVC members are always positive and happy to come to a meeting or offer up ideas on whatever we are working on in the future. They constantly remind me of the simple joys of adolescence and set an example for constant positivity and unlimited energy.”



— *Anne Rohan, School Counselor*

6

Help students understand how to use data to make decisions.

Nightingale gave students on the SVC multiple opportunities to analyze and use data to make decisions. Students analyzed results from both general student experience surveys to more specific surveys regarding aspects of remote and hybrid learning.

Through student surveys and various feedback loops, the SVC decided which data and insights to present to teachers and made recommendations about how to make lessons more engaging and interesting for their peers. Teachers developed action plans based on the data SVC students shared, which led to changes at both the classroom and the school level. For example, teachers incorporated new platforms into their teaching that students identified as being most supportive of their learning.

7

Identify small wins to show students how their voices influence decisions.

Students often need to see success in order to understand that they have the ability to make real change. For Nightingale, that meant starting with and celebrating the small wins, especially during the 2020-2021 school year when so much was unknown.

One small win that impacted school culture was students identifying the need to build connections between the students and staff who were in school and those who were still at home during the transition to hybrid learning. Students decided to implement “Fun Fridays” where students could maintain connections through a choice of activities with their homeroom class. SVC members recorded videos explaining what would happen during Fun Fridays and created activity ideas for all grade levels. A survey given to students after three Fun Fridays showed that 90% of them agreed that Fun Fridays are indeed fun!



“Planning Fun Fridays has been really fun. We look forward to them whenever Ms. Arias allows the teachers to stop teaching early so we can hang out doing Fun Friday activities with our friends.” — *7th grade student*

8

Maintain regular feedback loops between the SVC, their peers, and school staff.

For an SVC to impact school culture and become embedded in school structures, a regular feedback loop must exist between the SVC and other stakeholders in the building.

To this end, Nightingale uses part of their school wide social emotional learning (SEL) time to allow the SVC to share survey results and action plans with their peers. Time has also been set aside for the SVC to [share insights](#) with teachers during full staff professional development (PD) time.



“The events the SVC have worked on have been successful and fun for our entire grade level.” — *Vanessa Hoff, 6th grade teacher*

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Engage in ongoing leadership development to increase student ownership.

Many middle grades students did not have formal leadership opportunities prior to joining the SVC, and some students were unsure how to use their voice or what to share.

Through data protocols such as [Data Driven Dialogue](#) and [What Is the Data Saying?](#) and more structured conversations using brainstorming tools like Jamboard, the Nightingale students have come into their own and see the SVC as *their* committee. Leadership opportunities like an SVC help students recognize their strengths and set them on a path to becoming true partners in designing their school experiences.

As the 2020-21 school year comes to an end, staff leaders are thinking about next year and how to develop the current leaders, recruit new members, and say goodbye to those who are graduating. This type of planning helps to ensure that the SVC remains a part of the school culture.



“I have seen leadership qualities and characteristics grow in the 5th grade SVC students.” — *Julie Cook, 5th grade teacher*

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Listen! Kids have a lot to say!

One thing that Nightingale has found this year is how important it is to truly listen to their students.

Adults often assume that students only want to talk about vending machines, school dances, or changing the food in the cafeteria. In reality, students are the experts in their own experience and will tell you what they need and how to support them.

For more information about starting a Student Voice Committee (SVC), please contact the CPS Department of Social Science and Civic Engagement at ssce@cps.edu or visit the CPS [website](#).