



IRISVMP

**RAISING STUDENT VOICE
& PARTICIPATION
EXECUTIVE OVERVIEW**





RSVP Executive Overview

A core purpose of a student council is to be the catalyst and conduit for student voice on campus and to support broader school efforts that foster a culture where student voice is valued. National Student Council (NatStuCo) champions student voice as one of its four tenets and has promoted student voice as an essential responsibility of student council leaders since its early beginnings. Realizing that purpose to its fullest, however, is not an easy task.

Transforming a school into one that values and maintains strong student voice is seldom accomplished without facing hurdles that can dilute or derail efforts. Building a culture of voice can be challenged by the various implicit definitions found in educational and lay circles. The inability to articulate what student voice is and what it looks like has allowed school and student leaders alike to form definitions suited to their preferences and agendas, thereby limiting the scope and effectiveness of efforts to create a culture that values and promotes authentic student voice.

What is Student Voice?

The Quaglia Institute for School Voice and Aspirations defines student voice as:

1. Students sharing genuine thoughts, ideas, and opinions in an environment underpinned by trust and respect
2. Students offering realistic suggestions and expectations for the good of the whole
3. Students accepting responsibility not only for what they say, but also for what needs to be done

NatStuCo and the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) have long recognized the impact of authentic student voice on school culture, and the centerpiece for this support is the Raising Student Voice & Participation (RSVP) program. RSVP is anchored by its student-led process that encourages students to move through a logical progression of sharing their thoughts and listening to peers in meaningful dialogue, proposing realistic solutions, and supporting efforts to bring about positive change through civic-based, volunteer action.

WHY RSVP?

“Students who believe they have a voice in school are seven times more likely to be academically motivated than students who do not believe they have a voice.”

– Quaglia Institute 2016 voice research report

Traditionally, student councils and school staff have relied on surveys and open forums to be their student voice “projects.” Student voice, however, is not a one-and-done event. The foundation of any effort to infuse student voice into a school’s culture must aim to give voice to and continually engage all members of the student population.

The RSVP Process



ENGAGES

the largest percentages of the student body

PROMPTS

meaningful discussions and student-led action

INCLUSIVE

of underrepresented, fringe, and marginalized populations

How Does RSVP Work?

A series of three student-led summits held in classrooms and conducted schoolwide lies at the heart of RSVP.

The summits systematically move students from identifying school and community issues and concerns to proposing actions the students might take to address priority issues. RSVP is thick with the elements of service-learning as students must research and consider existing resources as well as coordinate with and make presentations to school administration, civic organizations, government officials, and other groups. The flexibility of RSVP permits easy adaptation of the summit process to also address larger societal issues that are well-documented and affect all communities (e.g., bullying).

The First Summit: Voice

Summit One stimulates discussion in a positive, non-threatening environment. Students are asked to consider what they perceive to be going well in their school and what they like about their community. Students are then asked to think about and share what positive changes they envision being made to improve or enhance the school or the “student experience,” and what community issue they would like to see addressed. The summit begins with students setting ground rules for their group to establish the respectful and orderly environment necessary for meaningful dialogue to occur. The summit concludes when each summit group prioritizes its list and hands it off to the RSVP student leadership team where it is combined with results from all other groups into a prioritized master list for the school. From that list, the RSVP leadership team will determine the top issues to be shared with the principal and become the focus of the next summit.

The Second Summit: Recommendations for Action

In Summit Two, students are presented with three of the issues that were identified as top concerns by multiple groups in the first summit. Students are charged to discuss each issue and then recommend actions that address them. Students in each summit group then prioritize the recommendations they believe to be realistic and most effective to act upon. Top recommendations are again shared with the leadership team. In consideration of all Summit Two results, the student leadership team determines which recommendations will be the subjects of a future Civic Action Plan. Before drafting the plan, all recommendations under consideration are reviewed with the principal to determine feasibility and garner approval.

The Third Summit: Response and Implementation

Summit Three has a dual purpose. During the summit, students are presented with a draft of the Civic Action Plan and asked to react with suggestions for additions and changes that would strengthen it. Students also consider how they will be engaged with the plans as volunteers or in other roles. The student leadership team uses the summit outcomes to apply edits and create the final version of the Civic Action Plan.

From Plan to Action

With the Civic Action Plan finalized at the third summit, the student leadership team performs a community mapping exercise to identify potential obstacles, community allies, key stakeholders, and school and community support people.

Community mapping is followed by establishing contacts and meeting with various community leaders or stakeholders to secure commitments, forming subcommittees to lead project tasks, securing necessary resources, building a coalition, and engaging the student volunteers.

Upon completion of the plan or at the end of the school year, the leadership team, student council, and all volunteers celebrate success.



Keys To RSVP Success

RSVP and student voice as a whole are possible when the following three stipulations are in practice:

- **Principal support:** Principals must value and support student voice by giving students input on issues impacting their school and learning, and they must commit time and resources to the RSVP process as a part of building student voice in the school. The support of the principal is critical to all school-based initiatives, and RSVP is no exception.
- **Faculty and staff support:** School faculty, staff, and council advisers must support student leaders and value student voice in the classroom and on campus, because student voice must be recurring and can grow from the RSVP process. Student council members benefit from their council adviser's guidance as they become familiar with RSVP and work to manage the process and resulting action plans.
- **Dialogue with the student body:** Student leaders must be willing to genuinely listen to the voices of the student body and share leadership roles existing within and generating out of the RSVP process and action plans. Student voice is about respectful listening and dialogue, and student leaders must always be role models who demonstrate respectful interactions.

Outcomes

The projects and activities within completed Civic Action Plans have reflected student concerns ranging from seemingly minor inconveniences—like replacing latches on bathroom stalls—to significant safety issues such as getting a traffic signal installed at the entrance to a school parking lot. Some plans included projects that extended beyond school walls, an example being the creation of a community awareness campaign on teen pregnancy.

The RSVP process gives all students a voice at school and provides students with the opportunity to take responsibility for making positive change.

“ In the school environment, students may feel like they are not being heard. RSVP is able to listen to the entire student body's opinions on issues and problems that are important to them. Through RSVP, the administrators and adults are able to see things through the students' perspective. ”

– Attleboro High School in Attleboro, MA

About National Student Council

National Student Council (NatStuCo) provides and promotes professional development and leadership training to student council advisers who, in turn, teach leadership skills to student council members. NatStuCo is dedicated to preparing and empowering student leaders to better serve their schools and communities. For more information, visit www.NatStuCo.org.

About NASSP

The National Association of Secondary School Principals is the leading organization of and voice for principals and other school leaders across the United States. NASSP seeks to transform education through school leadership, recognizing that the fulfillment of each student's potential relies on great leaders in every school committed to the success of each student. Reflecting its long-standing commitment to student leadership development, NASSP administers the National Honor Society, National Junior Honor Society, National Elementary Honor Society, and National Student Council. For more information about NASSP, located in Reston, VA, visit www.nassp.org.



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NATSTUCO.ORG/RSVP



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National Student Council
is a program of NASSP.