

Students as Change Agents

By Kristi Blakeway, Surrey Schools

Michael Fullan notes that children, even very young ones, can be our greatest change agents.¹ In Surrey Schools, we have expanded our student voice framework so that our educators can continually find ways to lean in and listen to our learners. We believe that one of the most powerful ways to strengthen the connection between students and our schools, is to learn from our students' experiences. When we amplify student voice, especially marginalized voices, we are able to gain new perspectives and create compassionate classrooms where all students feel they belong.

In the Surrey school district, we have partnered with Peter Senge and Mette Boell, from the Center for Systems Awareness, to expand our understanding of compassionate systems leadership. This aligns with the British Columbia Mental Health in Schools Strategy that supports the use of compassionate systems within British Columbian classrooms. Compassionate Systems Awareness provides a repertoire of tools to guide transformative change. The mandala for system

change involves four steps: research, capacity building, practice, and community building (Figure 1, page 13). In Surrey, we have adapted the compassionate systems mandala to amplify student voice and get to know our learners. In the outer wheel, you can see how this model also aligns with Indigenous perspectives. Styres notes that the pathway for remembering and recognizing Indigenous thought in education includes vision, relationship, knowledge, and wisdom.²

Our Student Voice Mandala begins in the east with our vision for change. We are guided by our grounding question of 'How might we amplify student voice?' Not only do we want every child to feel seen and heard – we also want to create an environment where educators can continually learn from our students' experiences. While we were all students at one time, we did not grow up in today's context. The only way to really understand what it is like to be a student today is to get curious and ask our students to share their first-hand knowledge.

Surrey Schools serve over 80,000 students across 103 elementary schools, 21 secondary schools, and five learning centers. While student voice has historically been a secondary based initiative, we have expanded it to include elementary schools so that we can learn from students of all ages. Expanding to elementary schools creates opportunities for our schools to work together, supporting transitions and strengthened relationships within families of schools.

The southern quadrant of our Student Voice Mandala focusses on relationships and community building. To guide our process, we formed a steering committee of students. Our steering committee includes 45 student leaders representing all our secondary schools. This team meets together monthly, in person or remotely, to discuss our vision, share ideas, discuss hot topics, build connections, and plan student voice events including student meetings, student forums, and workshops on issues that matter. For the 2023/2024 school year, students identified mental health and racial equity as their top

two priorities. These themes are intentionally woven into all student voice events and forums.

In the 2023/2024 school year, to build community and hear from students across our district, we are hosting 18 student forums. This includes elementary forums, secondary forums, learning center forums, and a sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) student forum. Our Indigenous Education department also hosted a forum where Indigenous students spoke to principals and vice principals to share their stories, experiences, and ideas for supporting Indigenous student success.

Our student forums are designed with the guiding words from the southern quadrant of our mandala: 'Lean in and listen with curiosity.' As educators, our role is to listen, relate to what we are hearing, and understand what matters to our students. With each forum, schools are asked to select a range of students that reflect their learning community. Principals are encouraged to invite students with diverse voices and opinions, and to pay particular attention to those whose voices may not always be heard. With each student forum, leaders from the student voice steering committee facilitate three activities using compassionate systems tools.

In the first activity, leaders build connections by checking in with students and listening to their stories. Through a series of play-based activities, students use appreciative inquiry to recall their favorite moments and share memories of times when they felt a strong sense of belonging at school. They reflect on their richest learning experiences and share the conditions that helped them thrive.

In the second activity, the 'creative tension' tool is used to help students articulate the difference between their current reality and their aspirations. Students share any areas of school life that cause them stress. Using the guiding question of 'What keeps you up at night?' students brainstorm factors that negatively impact



Students think to the future and provide their input for transformative change. Photos courtesy of Kristi Blakeway.



With each student forum, leaders from the student voice steering committee facilitate three activities using compassionate systems tools, including this creative tension tool, pictured.

their sense of wellbeing. Some responses are academic in nature, while others relate to peer issues, safety, or basic needs such as food and shelter. With the help of student voice steering committee facilitators, students describe what the perfect school day would look like and provide ideas as to how the school or district could reduce the 'creative tension' between their current reality and their aspirations.

Students think to the future and provide their input for transformative change. Our

youngest learners write their ideas on paper airplanes and launch their ideas into the future, while our secondary students take time to write letters to their principal or the superintendent with their ideas for change.

While leaning in and listening guides our inquiry, we also hold a responsibility of representation. If we are going to ask our students to share, we must also be intentional about how we will use the data collected to inform our system and infuse

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change. Our students can serve as change agents when we create space for their voices to be heard.

The western quadrant of our change model is where we gather the stories of our students and find ways to share our learning with our educators. After each student forum, participating schools receive photos, video clips, student quotes and summarized data to share with their staff. Themes are also shared with trustees, principals and vice-principals, and our educational leadership team. In the spring, student representatives from each of our student forums will come together as a student panel and share their key ideas, stories, and insights with trustees and school leaders. Our hope is that the stories of our students, will guide our work continually shifting our practice, and transforming education to meet the needs of our students.

The final northern quadrant of our Student Voice Mandala speaks to the capacity building in educators that comes from leaning in and listening. In a recent meeting on Indigenous student success, our secondary principals came together to listen to the lyrics of a song written by one of our Indigenous students. After being invited to sit with our superintendent and assistant superintendent at a student forum, he returned to his school and let his principal know "it was the first time in his life he had sat with important people and was made to feel like their equal." While Javantay was moved by his experience, our school leaders were equally moved by his words, his courage, and his creativity. The student forums have provided space for teachers, principals, and our educational leadership team to get to know students on a deeper level and shift their practice to meet the needs of our learners.

While participating in a secondary student forum, I was particularly moved by a Grade 11 student with autism who took time to educate me about British



Students participating in a creative tension tool to describe what keeps them up at night.

Columbia's history of mistreatment towards people living with disabilities. While students in British Columbia are no longer segregated, she provided a series of examples where she felt excluded in elementary and secondary school. Despite our efforts towards inclusion, the social aspects of school are still quite difficult for some students. Her words linger with me, as she posed the question "Why do we have accessibility ramps for students

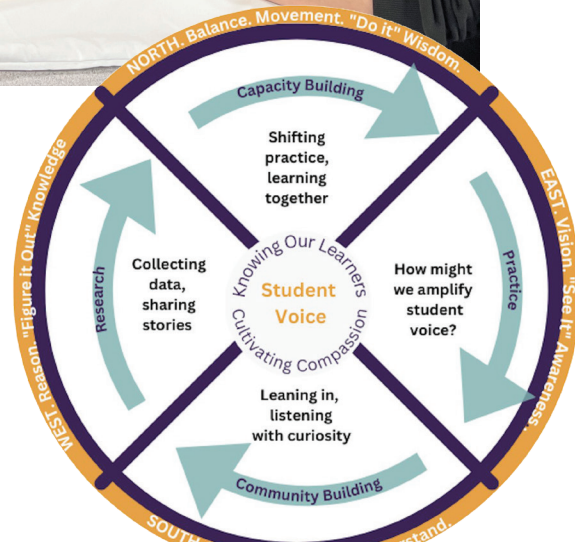


Figure 1: The Student Voice Mandala.

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in wheelchairs, but we don't have social ramps for all neurodiverse children?" Despite the heartfelt work of the educators at her school, she has yet to conquer the social anxiety that prevents her from forming friendships. She wants to help shift

our system to support others with similar struggles to her own. I think of her words often and am grateful she had the courage to share her experience. Our students serve as our greatest teachers helping us to continually improve the student experience.

Our mandala is intentionally designed as a circular change model, indicating that our work will never be done. The mandala is aspirational by design, to remind us that every child has a story worth hearing. When we lean in with curiosity, rather than judgment, we can cultivate compassion within our schools and our districts. Our students have the potential to be our greatest agents of change. 🌈

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has worked as an educator for 25 years in Coquitlam, Maple Ridge, and Surrey School Districts. She recently graduated from Western University where her Ed.D. focuses on cultivating compassion. Kristi is also a proud member of the Métis Nation of BC.

References:

1. Fullan, M. (2021). The right drivers for whole system success. *Centre for Strategic Education*. <https://michaelfullan.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Fullan-CSE-Leading-Education-Series-01-2021R2-compressed.pdf>.
2. Styres, S. D. (2017). *Pathways for remembering and recognizing indigenous thought in education: Philosophies of lethi'nihténha Ohwentsia'kékha (land)*. University of Toronto Press.



Students participating in a creative tension tool to describe what keeps them up at night.

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