



# Incorporating Student Voice in Key Decisions at the School, Program, Department, and Student Levels

*How do you ensure that student voice is incorporated in key decisions at the school, program, department, and student levels?*



## SCHOOL FACT BOX



Springfield High School, located in Springfield, Oregon, serves more than 1,200 students, with 57% participating in the free and reduced-price meal program, 20% in programming for English Learners, and 15% students with disabilities. The demographic profile reflects that 55% of the students are White; 31% Hispanic/Latino; 9% multiracial; 2% Asian; 1% American Indian or Alaska Native; and 1% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander.

## What was the Need?

When Carmen Gelman—*Ms. G* to her students—arrived at Springfield High School as the new assistant principal, racial tension filled the campus and fights were at an all-time high. Although Springfield was the most diverse school in Lane County, students of color were not represented in AP/Honors courses, athletics, clubs, leadership, or other activities, which led to many of these students feeling marginalized, not accepted, and therefore disengaged. *Ms. G* needed to find a way to address these issues and she knew she could not do it herself. She needed help but, most importantly, she needed to hear other voices—and who better to share their voices about school and change than the students.

## What did they Do to Address the Need?

*Ms. G* assembled a group of students from diverse backgrounds, and together they began brainstorming ways to tackle these problems. Careful consideration went into creating this first group of students; they needed to be truly representative of the student body. The group had to include voices from Associated Student Body (ASB), leadership, theatre, band, athletics, special education, and ESL, as well as students who were traditionally not included in anything. The group needed to

span race/ethnicity, gender, academic performance, religion, reputation, and all social groups—and it did—to create an extremely diverse group of students.

Ms. G facilitated a training with the students to help them think about how they would represent all students at Springfield, including those who have been traditionally underrepresented. Thus came the *Unpacking All* exercise—Ms. G led a protocol where students analyzed which of their peers participated in events, who did the teachers represent, which students got to work in the office or as teacher assistants, who was featured in the yearbook, who participated in sports and clubs, and so on. Through this training, the students also looked at white privilege and power structures in schools. The students quickly began to realize and acknowledge that the school was not for ALL students, but predominantly for students who were white, academically successful, and popular. They were outraged by this discovery and decided to form the Student Advisory Group, focused on changing the culture at Springfield from one of exclusion to one of inclusion.

## How's it Working?

One day during an after-school meeting, Joey began telling of a situation he had faced in math class. He told the group that a student was upset and called his pencil “gay”. Joey was tired of hearing this word thrown around so loosely in class and in the hallways, so he asked the student to “use another word.” Other students in the class chimed in and said, “Yes, use another word.” The group decided to do some research around hurtful, exclusive, and offensive language that was being used in the hallways. After gathering and analyzing the data, the *Use Another Word* campaign was born, created by the students, to help change language that might lead to students feeling unwelcomed or unheard at Springfield.

The *Use Another Word* campaign was very successful. Fights at Springfield dropped from an average of 40 a year to less than 10. Students of all races, programs, and abilities were featured in the student newspaper and yearbook. More students wanted to be a part of the school, by trying out for sports and theatre, joining clubs, working in the office, and so forth. And, when students worked in the office, it provided a different experience for the adults, which created a shift in their thinking and advocacy. Springfield found that when you put people next to people, relationships form—regardless of age, social roles, or social groups. In addition, students were able to gain skills in research, analysis, and planning, all through learning how to use their voice to create change.

The *Use Another Word* campaign was so successful that district leadership chose to take it districtwide. Elementary and middle school leadership teams worked with students from their schools to create campaigns that were more age appropriate. They implemented the campaigns using videos, posters, and even buttons worn by the teachers. Joey and Ms. G were also interviewed by a Colorado radio station, where the local school district was looking to implement the Use Another Word campaign. Use Another Word was also featured in *Rethinking Schools*, a nationally recognized educational publication, which led to a variety of schools across the country implementing a mirrored curriculum to help battle harassment and discrimination.

### Resources

- *Use Another Word Campaign*  
Find at: <http://www.safeschoolscoalition.org/UseAnotherWord.pdf>
- *Video: Use Another Word – High School by Springfield Public Schools*  
Find at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GM-nWXz1YHo>