

“We Are the Ones in the Classrooms— Ask Us!” Student Voice in Teacher Evaluations

BOSTON STUDENT ADVISORY COUNCIL¹

In the heated national debate over teacher evaluation, the voices of students—those most affected by education policy and practice—are rarely included. In this article, youth from the Boston Student Advisory Council speak back to this trend, recounting their successful campaign to include student feedback in teacher evaluations in Boston and across Massachusetts. They argue for the importance of including students in evaluation reform and demonstrate practical methods for students, teachers, parents, and administrators to work together to support and improve classroom teaching.

As students, we are the ones in the classroom, and our futures are affected by what happens there every day. Despite this fact, we are rarely provided with the opportunity to give our teachers feedback on classroom management and instruction. Why is it that student voice has been conspicuously absent from the classroom? As people across the country discuss supporting and evaluating teachers, why are they not involving those with the most intimate knowledge of the classroom? What will it take to effectively incorporate youth voice into school decision making? In this article, we begin to answer these questions through the story of a successful youth-led campaign to include student voice in teacher evaluations in Boston.

We are the Boston Student Advisory Council (BSAC), a citywide group of student leaders who strive to increase student voice and engagement in education policy at the school, district, and national levels. BSAC was founded in the 1970s as a result of student-led organizing around the issue of desegregation. It remained relatively inactive until 2001, when former Boston School Committee member Susan Neimark asked Youth on Board, an organization focused on increasing youth voice in policy, advocacy, and decision making, both locally and nationally, to help revive the council.

Today, BSAC is run through a unique inside-outside partnership between the Boston Public Schools Office of Family and Student Engagement and Youth on Board. Students create change within the district through policy work, while the Youth on Board partnership allows them to organize and garner support in the community.

The council has successfully worked on campaigns such as changing the Boston Public School's punctuality policy to end the practice of refusing entry to tardy students; enacting a student government mandate, which states that each high school must have a student leadership group to promote student voice in decision making; and devising the cell phone policy, which allows students the right to use their cell phones in designated areas of the school building after school and during lunch if there is an emergency. At BSAC, we advocate for and protect the voices of students, empower the student body to express its opinions regarding educational policy changes, and ensure that students are included in decision and policy making that affect our lives and educational experiences.

BSAC is a student-led, adult-supported program. Adults help facilitate conversations, while BSAC students determine the direction of the program and carry out the work required for each project and policy change. We have student representatives from more than thirty Boston public high schools. A majority of the students serving on BSAC are from low-income families. Our students are all strong leaders, with varying academic achievement levels, and we are all passionate about creating change in our education system.

In remaining true to our youth-led, adult-supported structure, this article was written by a group of twenty young people who are either current BSAC members or alumni. A staff member, Caroline Lau, played the role of collecting information in one central place and editing the final piece, while the students developed the content of the article.

BSAC works tirelessly to break down the obstacles that prevent youth voices from being heard. As young people, we have learned from many of our teachers that they appreciate honest feedback from us so they can use it to improve instruction. And just as teachers seek quality in their teaching, students seek quality in their learning. We want teachers who are creative, engaging, inspirational, and challenging. BSAC wants to ensure that students have the space to contribute to their education. We also want to ensure that teachers have the proper support they need to continue doing one of the most difficult jobs in the world.

Students and teachers should share the responsibility for our education by working as equal contributors in the classroom. There must be avenues not only for students to provide their teachers with constructive feedback to help them perform better but also for students to recognize the teachers who are delivering challenging and engaging lessons. Being the primary consumers of education and spending so much time in the classroom make students

prime candidates to be evaluators of their learning experiences. Our education determines our future; let us have a say in our futures!

Origins of the Teacher Evaluation Campaign

In August 2006, BSAC suggested the idea of student involvement in teacher evaluations to Michael Contompasis, interim superintendent of the Boston Public Schools (BPS), and Richard Stutman, president of the Boston Teachers Union. The suggestion of youth voice in official teacher evaluations was bold, as it had never been done in the BPS district before. After consulting with representatives from both the school district and the teacher union, major stakeholders in this project, BSAC students decided to pilot a student survey called the Friendly Feedback Form (FFF) in two subjects randomly selected by Office of Family and Student Engagement (OFSE) staff. The FFF allowed students to anonymously provide some teachers with feedback on classroom management and instruction.

The form was piloted and supported in the Community Academy of Science and Health (CASH), a Boston public high school, in the 2007–2008 school year. CASH was asked to pilot this process because BSAC co-coordinator, Maria I. Ortiz, had been working closely with the school in developing its student leadership structure for approximately three years prior to the pilot. The CASH Student Leadership Team presented the initial proposal to the school's Instructional Leadership Team, which quickly approved the pilot. The headmaster at that time, Dr. Linda Cabral, then presented the FFF to the department facilitators and all teachers at the school. There was a time frame for teachers to review the tool and provide feedback on improving both the tool and the proposed implementation process. The staff and administrators of CASH largely supported the pilot, and aside from minor logistical glitches, no other problems arose during the implementation process.

Approximately four hundred students in grades 9 through 12 at CASH filled out their FFFs for science and math teachers during an advisory period on a designated school day. The forms were returned to a key contact person at the school (in this case, a Student Leadership Team adviser), who then passed along the forms to an OFSE staff member to help compile schoolwide, subject, and individual teacher reports. Individual teacher reports with summaries of the feedback, to protect student anonymity, were returned to teachers in sealed envelopes.

CASH students analyzed the results of the FFF and presented their findings at a schoolwide professional development session. Teachers and administrators heard firsthand from students about their evaluation process. Because students led the professional development session, they were able to ask follow-up questions and understand their teachers' interpretation of the responses. This presentation in itself generated dialogue around identifying methods for

teacher improvement and highlighted the best practices that currently existed in the school. In addition to learning valuable facts and figures from this session, this discussion allowed students and teachers to improve their relationships and promote a more positive school culture.

Another school located in the same complex, The Engineering School (TES), took a different approach to soliciting feedback from students. Due to some teachers' concerns about students' abilities to evaluate them fairly and effectively, TES administrators stepped up and volunteered to have students evaluate them. As a result, BSAC suggested edits to the FFF so that it would be more appropriate for administrator evaluations. TES incorporated these suggestions and developed the Administrator Constructive Feedback Form, which focused on adult relationships, school culture and pride, and student engagement. Similar to CASH, there was a professional development session where administrators were able to discuss and reflect on the results of this particular survey. The results were also presented to the school's Executive Team. Administrators wanted to slowly introduce the concept of receiving feedback from students. The TES administration accomplished this by setting an example for its own teachers as well as other teachers in the district.

Expanding to the District

The success of the Friendly Feedback Form at CASH and the Administrator Constructive Feedback Form at TES set the foundation for BSAC to develop our Student to Teacher Constructive Feedback Policy proposal. This proposal would require every high school student to fill out a constructive feedback form for each teacher. The form would allow students to provide valuable and necessary feedback directly to the teachers; school administrators would not be allowed to read the content of the form. A form had already been created prior to the pilot at CASH, so we just needed to edit the tool so that it could be used across the entire school district.

We had many discussions during BSAC's weekly membership meetings on creating a user-friendly tool that did not take too much time to fill out. At the same time, we were clear that this tool had to be useful. With pages of questions we could potentially include on the Constructive Feedback (CF) form, we eventually grouped questions with similar themes and created overarching categories that became the major sections of the form. After careful consideration, months of deliberation, and multiple meetings with staff from the superintendent's office, the BPS Office of Research, Assessment, and Evaluation, and the Boston Teachers Union, students put together a two-page form that could be filled out in less than fifteen minutes. It was comprised of two major sections: Student Learning and Classroom Management and Instruction.

In designing the CF form, we wanted to make sure there was a section for students to reflect on their own learning practices in that particular class before moving on to review the teaching methods of their instructors. This

self-reflection would help students take more ownership of their education and also reduce the potential for “teacher bashing.” Favoring easy teachers and penalizing demanding teachers was a huge concern from many of the people with whom we met. In order to alleviate this concern, we decided it was important to evaluate ourselves too. If we could not honestly and openly respond to questions about our own learning, then perhaps we could not honestly provide feedback to our instructors. But, if we could first think about our own contributions to our learning, then there would be a greater likelihood of us also being able to give open and honest feedback to our teachers. Learning and teaching go hand in hand, and one should not be evaluated without the other. We were intentional in phrasing questions in a checklist format and clearly stating that any open-ended questions would be optional in case students had fear of teacher retaliation after recognizing a student’s handwriting.

The carefully crafted CF form was presented along with an implementation proposal to the Boston School Committee in May 2010. Members of the School Committee unanimously voted in favor of this Student to Teacher Constructive Feedback Policy, with implementation of the policy beginning in the 2010–2011 school year. The OFSE, with the support of many BSAC members, oversaw the implementation of CF in the Boston school district during the first year.

Twenty-nine high schools implemented the CF process, and there was an overwhelmingly positive response from both teachers and administrators. Teachers who filled out a follow-up questionnaire reported having a better understanding of how their students were learning and wrote that they were working toward adjusting certain teaching practices to better meet the needs of their students.

With such positive responses from teachers and administrators, we knew it was the right time to transition from our student-to-teacher constructive feedback campaign to incorporating student feedback as a part of official teacher evaluation. We were bolstered by a survey we conducted of BPS high school headmasters, which indicated that 86 percent of these headmasters were in support of including students as a part of the teacher evaluation process. Integrating student voice into formal teacher evaluation would assist administrators in their teacher evaluation responsibilities, emphasize the importance of student voice, and bring BPS one step closer to implementing a more comprehensive evaluation system.

Massachusetts: Leaders of Education Reform

Due to timely Race to the Top funds, Massachusetts is one of many states revamping its educator evaluation systems. The Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education and Commissioner of Education Mitchell Chester convened a task force to research best practices and develop rec-

ommendations that can later be used to inform the new educator evaluation regulations. This task force was charged with looking at both educator and administrator evaluations. BSAC students reached out to each task force member in order to share the CF policy and its successful implementation in the BPS high schools. We asked that they include student involvement in teacher evaluations as a part of their recommendations to the commissioner and the state board of education. We received high praise on the design of the CF from many members of this task force. Members particularly liked the student reflection section of the tool, as they were also looking into a similar self-reflection process for teachers.

Around the same time, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (2010) published the initial findings from its Measures of Effective Teaching (MET) project. As part of this project, three thousand teachers from seven school districts across the nation volunteered to have their classrooms open to observation. The goal of MET was to “help build fair and reliable systems for teacher observation and feedback to help teachers improve and administrators make better personnel decisions” (Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 2010, p. 1). Researchers found that students recognize effective teaching when they experience it. Their perceptions of teacher effectiveness are accurate and valid indicators of whether teachers are doing their jobs well. The findings from the MET project further strengthened BSAC’s campaign to include students in the teacher evaluation process. Several BSAC students had the opportunity to meet with one of the key researchers behind the MET project, Ron Ferguson, who also presented his findings to the task force.

As part of its final recommendations, the task force proposed to include student and parent feedback as a required part of educator evaluations. After the task force presented these recommendations to the Massachusetts Board of Education and the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, it then became the responsibility of the department to draft a set of regulations for the commissioner and the board of education to vote on in June. While reaching out to the task force was a step in the right direction, we also knew that there would be much more we needed to do in order to ensure that these recommendations made it into the actual Educator Evaluation Regulations.

Campaigning at the State Level

“Students are the ones in the classroom, ASK US!” became the slogan driving our campaign and lobbying efforts. Our targets were now the Massachusetts Board of Education and the Department of Education. In May 2011, we organized a rally to build public will for including students in teacher evaluations and to show the state that this is an issue many people care about. The “Mission: Evaluate” rally, held on City Hall Plaza in Boston, attracted more than three hundred attendees, including students, teachers, administrators, and

politicians. We collected more than 650 petition signatures of individuals in support of having students involved in teacher evaluations.

BSAC met with individual state board of education members and, at their monthly meetings, testified about the CF tool we had developed and voiced our support on this topic. We worked with the State Student Advisory Council (SSAC) to ensure that there was a wide representation of voices. The SSAC is a group similar to BSAC that functions at the state level; it has representatives from all over Massachusetts and advises the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education. The student elected chair of the SSAC is a voting member of the board of education. We were able to collaborate with the SSAC chairperson from the 2010–2011 school year, Michael D’Ortenzio, who relayed the Boston project to the rest of his council. Furthermore, as the student member of the Board of Education, he was able to advocate for student feedback internally while BSAC continued to push externally.

After a long year of research and deliberation, the Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education voted on June 28, 2011, in favor of an evaluation framework that includes student feedback as evidence to be used in teacher evaluations beginning in the 2013–2014 school year. Beginning that year, every student in the state of Massachusetts K–12 will contribute to their teachers’ performance evaluations. The Department of Elementary and Secondary Education will spend the next two years analyzing best practices and developing a model tool to guide schools in the implementation process.² OFSE is currently asking BPS high schools to pilot student feedback in teacher evaluations on a voluntary basis. The passing of these new regulations marks a huge milestone for not only the students of Massachusetts but students across the entire country.

Expanding the Conversation to the National Level

As part of his educational goals for the youth of the country, President Barack Obama is hoping the United States will have the highest rate of college completion in the world by 2020 (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). In order to assess the needs of students across the country and to identify supports needed to help students meet his goal, the U.S. Department of Education organized a series of local listening tours, during which staff members from Obama’s administration, in partnership with local organizations like Youth on Board, the Young People’s Project, and BSAC, were able to establish focus groups to talk about specific tools and resources students need to complete high school and move onto a path of higher education.

In October 2010, Boston was one of nine cities in the country to host a Local Youth Listening Tour. BSAC played a major role in organizing and recruiting for the event. One hundred fifty young people attended the Boston tour to help define what a quality education looks like and to identify tools and strate-

gies needed to create a college-bound culture. One of the top five themes that emerged from the local youth listening tours (across all tour stops) was effective teaching. Students said they wanted more motivating teachers, adults they could trust, and role models with whom they could build lasting relationships.

The following February, young people all over the country, including those who participated in the local listening tours, were invited to Washington, D.C., to take part in the Voices in Action National Youth Listening Tour. BSAC convened with students across the country to learn about the findings from the other cities. As part of this daylong conference, young people were given the opportunity to vote on issues they felt were the most important for them to tackle. The issues voted on were narrowed down from a list of themes identified during the local listening tours. Not surprisingly, student involvement in teacher evaluations was voted the second most important, just behind college readiness. According to the U.S. Department of Education, almost 94 percent of the students who attended the summit agreed with including student voice in teacher evaluations (Brenchley, 2011). These results provided us with even further motivation to expand our project to the national level.

In addressing participants of Voices in Action, Secretary of Education Arne Duncan said, “I am a big believer in 360 degree evaluation of teachers. Teachers need the voice of students, of parents, of the community . . . we all need to be part of the solution. One of the most untapped talents is the voice of youth” (2011). Including students in the evaluation process is one step closer to this 360-degree evaluation, a model in which there are multiple evaluators. In the case of teacher evaluation, these evaluators can be headmasters, other administrators, teachers, students, and parents. The more perspectives there are in the evaluation process, the more comprehensive the evaluations will be, with a higher likelihood of teachers benefiting from them.

Over the past year, the conversation around student involvement in teacher evaluations has expanded to other cities and states. In Massachusetts, Brookline Public Schools now highly encourages its teachers to solicit student feedback as part of their evaluations.³ Youth in Providence, Rhode Island, are beginning to establish a similar campaign. Alaska seeks formal feedback from both students and parents,⁴ while in the San Francisco Unified School District, middle school and high school students can provide formal feedback on teacher performance and classroom environment (San Francisco Youth Commission, 2009). BSAC is also in conversations with Project VOYCE in Denver to figure out ways of collaborating on this topic.

Our Vision for the Future

Slowly, we are seeing more and more cities and states adopt some form of student involvement in teacher evaluations. This movement is growing in popularity; more districts would like to see student feedback happen in some way, but there is still much work to be done. Although we have had a huge win in

our campaign in Massachusetts, we must continue to refine the details of how this is going to be implemented. We plan to continue working with the state’s Department of Elementary and Secondary Education to ensure the best model tool is developed to effectively collect feedback from students. Once students become part of the official teacher evaluation process, we hope administrators will allow the valuable feedback to affect their decisions about which teachers are awarded tenure.

We are currently in the process of developing a campaign that would educate and persuade teachers to support student feedback. After all, the messaging of the importance of student voice in teacher evaluations will be much more powerful coming from teachers and students together. We need to continue improving the teacher evaluation system as a cohesive unit. Teachers and students are both heavily invested in the education system—we have to work together.

Furthermore, we envision a national convention/conference for students, community organizers, teachers, administrators, and anyone who is interested in learning more about student involvement in teacher evaluations and increasing student voice in other aspects of educational policy and decision making. We hope to create opportunities for various districts to share promising practices and to use such a convention as a foundation for the creation of a larger network.

Young people are not often asked to be real decision makers in their education. But we are the primary consumers of the education system and should be treated as such. Including student voice in teacher evaluations is just one example of how we as young people can use our voices to create change in education. **When we feel invested in our education, we become more engaged in the classroom, resulting in higher achievement.** Let us all work together on creating systems and tools to help both teachers and students achieve their fullest potential.

We are seeking school districts that have policies set in place regarding student involvement in teacher evaluations and individuals or organizations that want to share this work with their networks. If you are interested in partnering to develop this national movement or simply voice your support as educators, contact BSAC at bsac@bostonpublicschools.org

Notes

1. The following individuals were involved in the writing of this article. BSAC Youth: Abibatu Bayoh, Dan M. Chu, Adam Fischer, Cheria Funches, Ayan Hassan, Teena-Marie Johnson, Damien Leach, Xin Jian (Peter) Li, Esteniolla Maitre, Steve Marcelin, Will Poff-Webster, Carlos Rojas, Christina Moriah Smith, Colin Smith, Dennis Tan, Rosanna Velasquez, Mengning (Melinda) Wang, Rachel Wingert. Adult Staff: Rachel Gunther, Caroline Lau, Maria I. Ortiz, Jenny Sazama.

2. Massachusetts General Laws, Chapter 71, Section 38, 603 CMR 35.00. Retrieved from <http://www.doe.mass.edu/lawsregs/603cmr35.html?section=all>
3. Contract between the Brookline School Committee and the Brookline Educators Union (2009—2011), article 6, section 1: *Evaluation and Supervision*. Retrieved from http://www.brookline.k12.ma.us/index.php?option=com_docman&task=doc_download&gid=591
4. Alaska Statute Title 14, Chapter 20, Section 149, Employee Evaluation. Retrieved from <http://www.legis.state.ak.us/basis/statutes.asp?title=14>

Resources

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