We’re the Ones in the Classroom… Ask Us!
Student Voice in Teacher Feedback and Evaluations

When students and teachers have constructive dialogue and students are empowered to provide feedback to their teachers on classroom practice and instruction, they learn better and teachers improve their craft. Clear evidence exists that student feedback improves classroom culture by promoting positive relationships and that student perception data is a better indicator of teacher quality than standardized test scores.²

Our goal is to ensure that every student in BPS and across the Commonwealth has the ability to provide their teachers with constructive feedback, build positive relationships and stay committed to the classroom and their own learning. To that end, BSAC:

• Passed a district-wide “Student-to-Teacher Constructive Feedback” policy which allows students to give their teachers constructive feedback on their strengths and weaknesses;
• Developed the BSAC constructive feedback form that allows students to provide feedback in a uniform and consistent way;
• Lobbied the Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) to include student perception data (feedback) as a mandated component of educator evaluations;
• Lead the Student Feedback Working Group from 2012 to 2015 with the BPS Office of Human Capital to monitor the survey tool and process used to collect student feedback in educator evaluations
• Advised DESE in the development of a model survey tool and best practices guide for implementation;
• Created a promotional video for student feedback, which you can watch at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5nH6Pq93C1e
• Launched a national campaign to promote student voice: http://www.studentvoicematters.org

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¹ https://drive.google.com/file/d/1LxITxeyiCzigsAOMGC-0JucWrSRDb-z5/view
² https://docs.gatesfoundation.org/documents/preliminary-findings-research-paper.pdf
Campaign Timeline

2007-08 Initial research, small pilot at Community Academy of Science & Health (CASH)
2008-10 BSAC collects feedback from students and educators on draft policy and presents research findings to Boston School Committee
2010 BSAC passes district-wide policy that mandates implementation of BSAC’s Constructive Feedback form in high schools and recommends its implementation in middle schools
2011-2012 Successful implementation of policy out of BSAC/Office of Family Engagement
2012 BSAC co-founds the Student Feedback Working Group with BPS, BTU and other stakeholders to monitor implementation of policy
2013 BSAC begins working with DESE to draft regulations for the inclusion of student perception data in educator evaluations
2015 DESE is ready to pilot a statewide form, which BPS adopts.
2017-2018 BPS partners with Panorama Education to pilot a revised student feedback survey in six BPS schools. (Perkins Elementary, Haley K-8, Frederick Pilot MS, McCormack MS, Snowden HS, Mary Lyons HS)
2018-2019 BPS plans to resume implementation of an updated feedback survey districtwide
The Boston Student Advisory Council (BSAC) first contemplated the idea of student involvement in the evaluation of teachers in the spring of 2006. Although the initiative was bold and controversial, BSAC utilized its signature relationship-building skills to consult with key stakeholders in the BPS district and the BTU to ultimately develop a student survey, named the “Constructive Feedback Form.” The form, which was carefully developed by BSAC students with input from teachers and researchers, including Dana L. Mitre of Pennsylvania State University, gave students an opportunity to give their teachers feedback on classroom management, individual learning styles, subject instruction, school culture and student engagement. That tool was developed to provide teachers with helpful, constructive information— that is, not to punish teachers, but to help them see what their strengths are and where they can improve. Initially BSAC sought to implement the Constructive Feedback Form as a mandatory part of teacher evaluations, but it quickly met resistance. BSAC adopted a two-pronged approach: implement the form initially as constructive feedback and then push for its mandatory inclusion in a teacher’s formal evaluation. The constructive feedback policy stipulated that only teachers would have access to the feedback and would have the freedom to do what they liked with it. It was made clear that the feedback would not be reviewed by administrators or used as part of formal evaluations. The policy was first piloted at the Community Academy of Science and Health (CASH) during the 2007-2008 school-year after the Student Leadership Team at that school presented the proposal to the headmaster and teachers, who enthusiastically supported the pilot. BSAC finally found its footing.

The pilot turned out to be a success, garnering buy-in from teachers and administrators who had initial concerns about the partiality of students, which was one of their concerns. This success set the stage for a district-wide proposal to implement Student to Teacher Constructive Feedback in every BPS high school. In developing the proposal, BSAC aimed to create a modified version of the pilot form that would be easy to complete, capture critical information and could be applied in each BPS high school. The final form included two sections: 1) Student Learning, which provided students with an opportunity for self-reflection, and 2) Classroom Management and Instruction. After years of deliberations and revisions, the newly revised form, along with a proposal for its implementation, was unanimously voted into policy by the Boston School Committee in May 2010. The Office of Family and Student Engagement oversaw the implementation in the following school year, with 29 schools participating. BSAC surveyed the BTU on student involvement in the evaluation of teachers and was thrilled to find that responses were overwhelmingly positive.

With the support of teachers and administrators, it felt like the right time to transition from student-to-teacher constructive feedback to fully incorporating student feedback as a part of official teacher evaluations. BSAC’s mission was bolstered by a survey it conducted of BPS high school headmasters, which indicated that 86% 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 responsibility to conduct accurate and constructive teacher evaluations and emphasize the importance of student voice in decision-making, bringing BPS one step closer to a more comprehensive and balanced evaluation system and putting it ahead of districts across the country in education reform.
On the national front, an overhaul of educator evaluations was being touted as a centerpiece of school reform efforts. Most significantly, states were charged with revamping their teacher evaluation systems in order to qualify for federal “Race to the Top” funds. When BSAC learned that the Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education had convened a Task Force to develop recommendations for reforming teacher evaluations in the state BSAC sprang into action, reaching out to each Task Force member to share the success of the BPS Constructive Feedback policy and lobbying for the inclusion of student voice in the Task Force’s recommendations to the Massachusetts Board of Education on teacher evaluations. BSAC eventually won over the Task Force, which recommended to the board that student and parent feedback be included as a required component of educator evaluations. With growing support, BSAC initiated its statewide campaign – “We Are the Ones in the Classroom: Ask Us!”

While the campaign drew widespread public support, its primary target—The Massachusetts Board of Education—remained silent. BSAC developed a communications strategy to spread the word about their innovative initiative and worked tirelessly to convince community members to get on board. BSAC organized a massive rally to build public will around student involvement in the evaluation of teachers, which drew over 300 attendees including students, teacher, parents and administrators and resulted in over 650 signatures collected in support of the project. BSAC lobbied individual members of the Board of Education extensively, testified at its monthly meetings and worked with a the Massachusetts Student Advisory Council, a connection we formed through the co-chair, Michael D’Ortenzio, who was the student member on the Board of Education. One particularly useful tactic was garnering the support of the student representative on the Board of Education and then partnering with him to win over the rest of the Board.

In June of 2011, BSAC won a huge advocacy victory when the Massachusetts Board of Education voted in favor of mandatory student involvement in teacher evaluations for all public high schools across the state. The Board’s regulations stipulated that, beginning in the 2013-2014 school-year, districts across the state would have to collect student feedback as evidence informing educator performance. As thrilling as this victory was, BSAC knew that in order to maintain the momentum of their success, it would have to return to Boston to ensure that the movement to bring student voice to teacher evaluations continued despite the mandate not going into effect until 2013. BSAC is currently working with BPS schools to introduce student feedback into official evaluations on a voluntary basis while working through logistical issues and determining best practices for implementation.

BSAC's statewide policy victory situated it in a perfect position to bring its initiative to the national stage. Capitalizing on the attention teacher evaluations had already been receiving in education reform debates, BSAC began participating in a national Youth Listening Tour in which young people organized “listening projects” in 13 cities across the country to elicit student opinion on educational issues. The project coalesced perfectly with the “We Are the Ones in the Classroom: Ask Us!” message and, indeed, one of the primary themes that emerged was effective teaching. BSAC, along with youth organizers from around the country, convened in Washington D.C. to take part in a national conversation on youth issues in which student evaluation of teachers emerged as the second most important issue for young people. In the keynote address to participants at the convening Secretary of Education Arne Duncan stated, “I am a strong believer in 360° evaluation of teachers. Teachers need the voice students, of parents, of the community…we all need to be

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part of the solution” This statement and the general zeitgeist of the conference confirmed what BSAC already knew – that it was definitely time to expand the project to a national level.

The conversation around student involvement in teacher evaluations over the past year has expanded to other districts and states that are interested in BSAC’s work in Massachusetts. While the movement is growing in popularity and support, there is still much work to be done. We are committed to ensuring that the local work in BPS continues to serve as a model for districts around the country, even while expanding the campaign nationally. Most recently BSAC partnered with the BPS Department of Teacher & Leadership to convene a working group of students, parents, teachers and administrators to develop a universally applicable model for implementing student evaluation of teachers.

We are incredibly excited to push forward this powerful work on a local, regional and national level and we recognize that 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.

Watch the video of the story here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5nH6Pq93C1c

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