

# Student Agency & Engagement

**How can schools motivate and empower young people to take responsibility for their own learning?**

**2**  
EDITION



**Young people  
have important  
insights about  
their own learning.  
They also have  
the most to  
gain when they  
succeed in school.**

**Students must play an active role in charting their own learning journeys. When they do, they gain agency and a sense of responsibility for their own futures.**

**Schools need  
to challenge  
students to set  
ambitious goals  
for themselves  
and inspire them  
to work hard to  
get there.**

# THINGS TO THINK ABOUT



## 01

How much time do students spend learning in ways that are deeply engaging and truly challenging?



## 02

Learning involves risk. How can schools create an environment that supports and encourages learning through mistakes? How do we reach students who have struggled in the past and don't want to risk failing again?



## 03

What can schools do to help students recognize the importance of hard work and persistence, so they can develop the knowledge and skills they need for college and adult life?



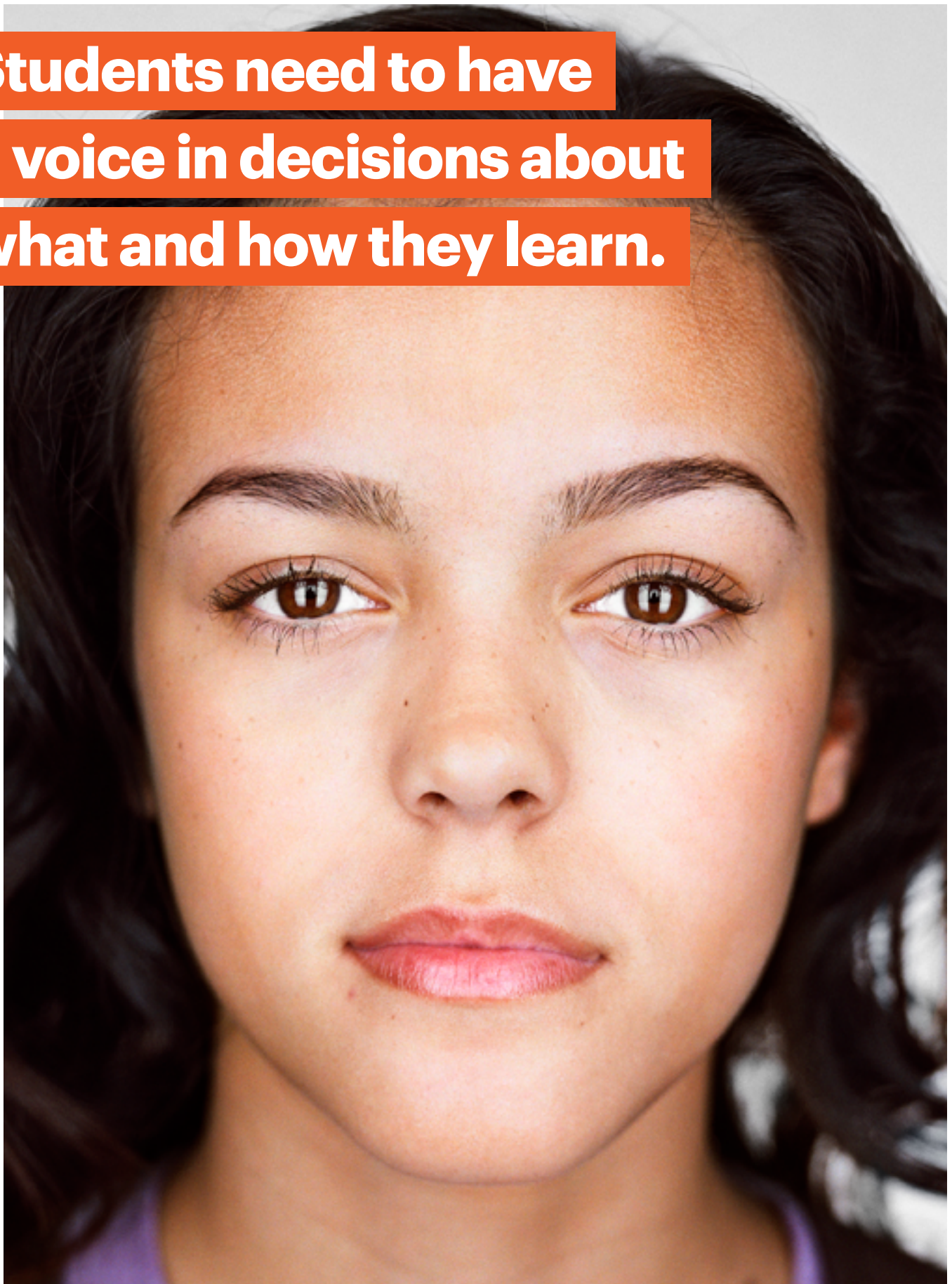
## 04

How do we provide the right amount of autonomy, while also establishing boundaries that support students' development?

**CO-  
CREATING  
EDUCATION  
WITH  
STUDENTS**

## **FACT 16**

**Students need to have  
a voice in decisions about  
what and how they learn.**



# Young people are the most important judges of successful schools.

Imagine if someone told you what to do all day, every day. Historically, society has leaned toward telling adolescents what they need and how to get it, rather than giving them a chance to provide input and articulate their needs. In order to prepare themselves for adult life, young people need to play an active role in co-creating their learning journeys.

To help young people feel genuinely involved in their own learning, as well as in ongoing decisions about their school, we need to consider some difficult questions.

- + How can a school invite honest input from students?
- + How should a school respond to students' input?
- + What does it mean to truly listen to young people?
- + How can their contributions have a real influence on decisions and outcomes?
- + When is it appropriate to let students lead?

Schools are increasingly using student surveys to collect feedback to improve the way they respond to student needs. Timothy Daly, former president of The New Teacher Project, says student feedback in teacher evaluations is “among the most significant developments for education reform in the last decade.”

## Think About →

How do you make a school environment conducive to open and honest feedback from students?

**“Young people feel that who they are and what they want to become doesn’t [sic] matter to teachers and schools. While students are required to fit into a restrictive school structure, culture, and curriculum, schools do little to fit themselves to their students.”**

**ELLIOT WASHOR &  
CHARLES MOJKOWSKI**  
*Authors, Student Disengagement:  
It’s Deeper than You Think, by  
Phi Delta Kappa*

## Ladder of Participation for Youth Engagement

What are students' dreams for the future, and how can they act on them? The Future Project's specially trained Dream Directors work closely with students to help them find out for themselves. →

## Why Students Should Grade Their Teachers

A decade ago, Ronald Ferguson's idea that students should grade their teachers was considered revolutionary. Check out the surprisingly consistent results that came in from many types of students and schools in this *Atlantic* magazine article. →

## How Much Agency?

In this thoughtful essay, Springpoint's JoEllen Lynch reflects on the age-old tension between encouraging students' independence and challenging them to do their very best. →

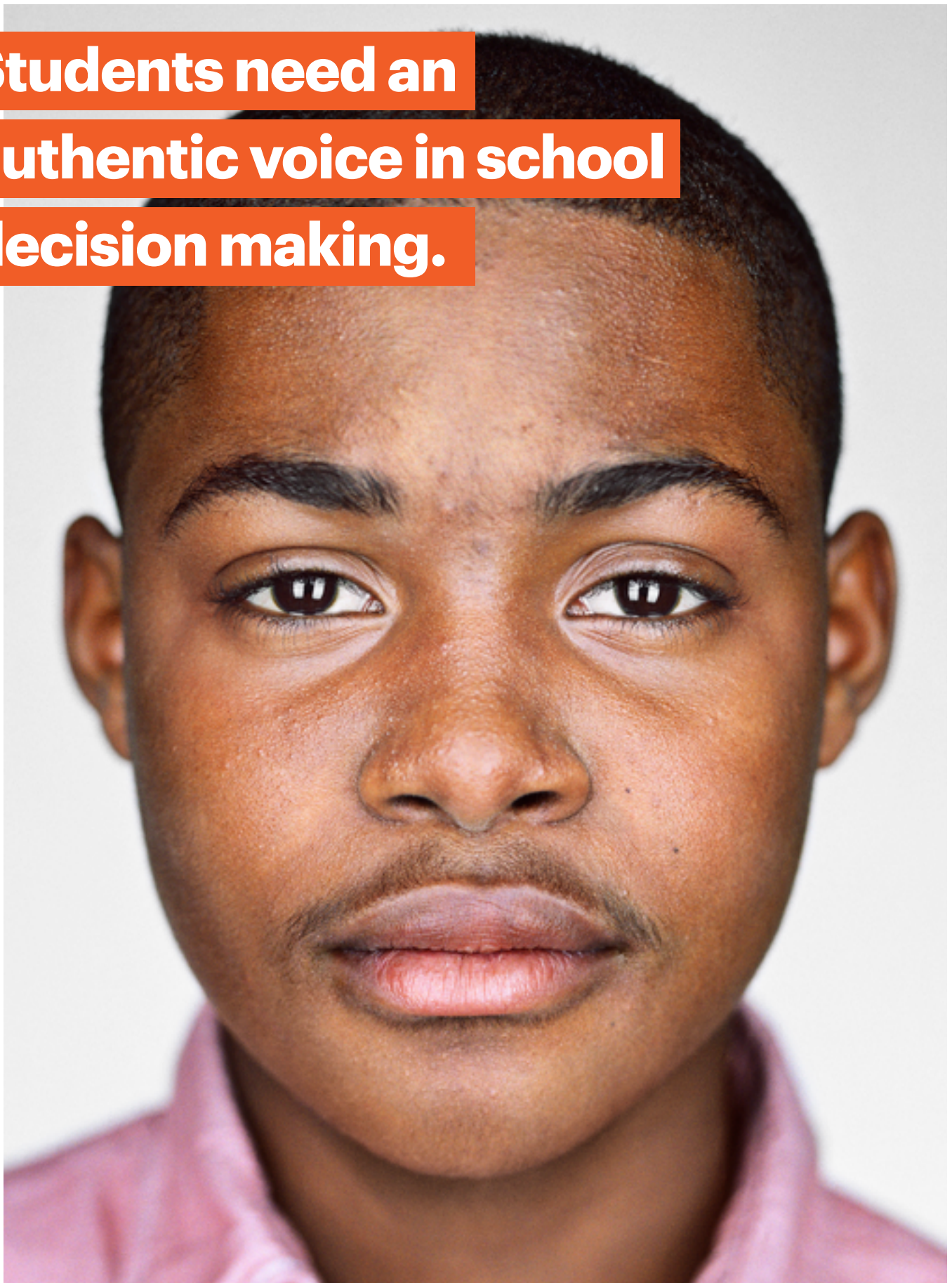
## How to Survey Students

This report from the Measures of Effective Teaching (MET) project discusses the use of student surveys for teacher evaluation and the challenges practitioners and policy makers face when turning survey data into action. →



## **FACT 17**

**Students need an authentic voice in school decision making.**



# Students should be involved in shaping their school experience.

High school is a collaboration between young people and adults—and everyone should have a seat at the table. Students need to be included regularly in key conversations and decisions about their school. They have a stake in issues at every level of decision making, from hallway decorations to social activities, from schoolwide projects to disciplinary policies. Students often have great ideas to contribute, and they deserve a chance to do so. It is particularly important that they understand their school policies and have a voice in decisions that affect their futures, such as equitable access to courses that meet college requirements.

Educators are responsible for helping students develop the skills needed to have agency. These skills—like any other learning experience—need to be developed gradually and intentionally, with students playing increasingly larger roles in making choices about what, when, and how they learn. This process doesn't just improve school design, it is essential to becoming an independent, self-directed, lifelong learner.

Think About →

What roles do students play, right now, in defining and structuring their learning experiences? What have been the most successful student-led school initiatives?



**“When I became a professor at the University of Maine, I kept on hearing that the kids were the problem, and we needed to fix them. I just got tired of hearing it. I wasn’t a great student, but I wasn’t broken! I flipped the whole thing on its head, and started looking at students as potential and not the problem.”**

**RUSSELL QUAGLIA**

*The Quaglia Institute for School Voice and Aspirations*

*Check out engaged student voices on social media. Search for the #StuVoice hashtag to see what students are saying.*

## Student-Driven Seating

Observe how this skillful teacher guides students in deciding where to sit in the classroom, depending on their personal preferences and learning goals for the day.



## The Student Voice Rubric

Student voice is especially important in certain aspects of school design. This actionable rubric from the Student Voice Collaborative in New York City lays out key areas where students can have a positive impact on their schools' decision making.



## Digital Badges for Lifelong Learning

Why are digital badges emerging as a new way for students to pursue their passions and earn recognition for their accomplishments? Hear from the movement's leading voices in this video from HASTAC.



## Student Perspectives Toolkit

This toolkit from the Regional Educational Laboratory West at WestEd provides you with three tools that will help you to listen deeply to students and address challenges in your school.





## FACT 18

**Young people want to  
create meaningful change  
in their own communities.**



# Motivation in the classroom is interconnected with community engagement.

Motivated students are more likely to be engaged in the community. Positive community experiences, in turn, improve academic engagement and performance. Adults also benefit by seeing what young people are capable of achieving. Providing opportunities for students to meaningfully contribute to the community can transform the way young people participate—inside and outside the classroom.

Service learning involves integrating classroom studies with meaningful community service. This goes beyond cleaning up local parks and handing out fliers. Meaningful involvement means managing projects, designing solutions, and leading teams. Through projects like these, adolescents can make a difference in their own lives and the lives of others.

Research suggests that students' sense of agency in the world correlates with higher academic performance. Surveys of 6th to 12th graders by the Quaglia Institute for School Voice and Aspirations have found that students who feel a strong sense of purpose are far more likely than others to say they are highly motivated academically. Seeing that their ideas, opinions, and attitudes can make a difference in the world, beginning with their own school and locality, can be a powerful driving force in young people's learning experience.

Think About →

What purposeful community activities are students you know involved in now? What are their thoughts and feelings about these experiences? Can these experiences be incorporated into classroom learning?



**The Student Voice Collaborative of New York City is a successful youth-led initiative in which youth leaders are elected in their schools and meet biweekly with other elected youth leaders from across the City to discuss school problems and potential solutions. These meetings lead to meaningful change. The school district took an important first step by creating a department focused on youth empowerment, and then identified key factors in school climate and culture to create a rubric that young people can use to assess their schools.**

## Youth Voice in Action

Collaboration for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) provides a clear definition of youth voice and some great examples of how this movement is making its mark on education.



## Kids Designing Solutions to Homelessness

This Edutopia video highlights students working with designers and educators to make a difference in a Minneapolis homeless shelter.



## Service Learning

This database of tools and resources provided by the NYC Department of Education will help you integrate service-learning into your curriculum.



## Research for Girls, by Girls

Check out this guide, developed by the Girl Effect, on how to create a Girl Research Unit and equip girls and young women with qualitative research skills.



**Students  
need to  
be deeply  
engaged in  
the process of  
designing and  
continuously  
improving  
their schools—  
when young  
people get  
a chance to  
contribute to  
something  
they really  
care about,  
they learn  
and grow**

**Bringing student voices to the forefront of decision making—as informed, committed stakeholders—will improve our schools. At the same time, it will enable students to deepen their relationships with trusted adults. Youth participation builds essential, real-world skills and knowledge.**

Stronger, more substantive collaboration with students raises important questions:

- + How can students be involved when planning a new school or rethinking an existing one?
- + How can students provide meaningful feedback on a regular basis about their own learning and their school?
- + How can students consistently engage in the development and implementation of school policies?
- + How can a school weigh the validity of different opinions and reach consensus?

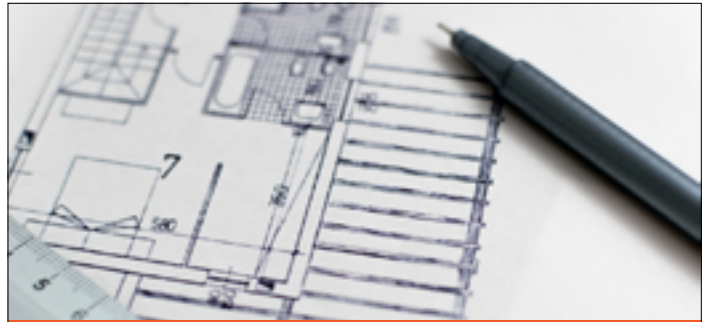


# GET INSPIRED



## Recasting At-Risk Students as Leaders

This article from *Education Week* tells the inspiring story of transforming a struggling dropout program at a Florida high school into a thriving leadership movement.



## Discover Design for Students

The Chicago Architecture Foundation offers a digital portal wherein students can tackle design challenges and get feedback from a network of designers.



## The Gay-Straight Alliance Network

Since 1998, this youth-driven group has been making schools and communities safer for LGBTQ students. Their website contains extensive resources, from tips on how to build inclusive communities to movies that help raise awareness.



## Young People in Local Government

The Multnomah Youth Commission selects a representative group of students from across the city to impact local policy in the mayor's office.



## School Voice Reports

The Quaglia Institute shares the results of its 2016 student and teacher voice surveys.



**INVOLVE**  
**STUDENTS**  
**IN REAL**  
**DECISIONS**