

“You’re too young to understand:” Oregon students reframing our view of students

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New clothes, freshly sharpened pencils, color-coded binders, and the smell of too much cologne all signify the start of a new school year. In parallel, Oregon Student Voice (OSV) is dressed with a new energy and an imperishable motivation to ensure all students have equal opportunities and access to achieve their full potential in and out of schools. OSV is a student-led organization that recognizes the power of a student’s voice.

During the summer of 2016, a diverse group of high schoolers came together and discussed how we could improve our public schools. We conversed and debated our thoughts and ideas ranging from time spent on standardized tests to mental health resources for students. One thing we all agreed on is the importance of student voice and that students need to be part of the decisions that affect our daily lives and those of our peers.

Students have first-hand experience with our school systems and can not only recognize problems in their schools, but also offer solutions to solve them. When students are involved in school decision-making processes, they develop deep partnerships with school administrators and teachers as they work together to improve the school environment. In turn, students become increasingly more invested in their school and motivated to be a part of the community, which can lead to lower absences and higher graduation rates.

Unfortunately, the current case is that a lot of students don’t even know they have a voice in schools, and for those that do, their voice is often disregarded. OSV is a space for students to express their voices and be heard, realize their individual and collective power, and lead meaningful change in Oregon’s K-12 education system. We equip students with the skills and confidence to be authentic partners in education decision making. We hope to empower a new generation of students to use their voices to be understanding and aware of the systemic barriers and inequities facing students as well as work together to collectively alter Oregon’s education landscape.

Throughout our first year as an organization, we have been thinking about how we can best elevate student voices in Oregon. Our thoughts slowly transformed into words, and our words are now becoming actions. We recently launched a statewide survey and listening tour to better understand a broader view of high school students’ academic and cultural experiences in Oregon’s K-12 schools. Currently, there is limited statewide data gathered on the student experience and we encourage all educators to promote [our survey](#) to their high school students so we can together create the best possible learning environment. In the spring, we are working on initiating a second project to empower students to speak up

about challenges they face and provide them with tools to work with others to solve those challenges.

As OSV grows, we continue to discuss and debate challenges facing our schools. One issue that we unanimously agree needs change is student councils. Student councils are supposed to represent the entire student body, yet, the fact is, not all voices are present at the table. Further, there is a lack of communication between student governments and their student populations. Another issue we have been exploring, that also has to do with an absence of communication, is the lack of understanding about how school governance works, such as what is the role of administrators and school boards. We believe that it is important that students understand the school system from which they are receiving a formal education.

We are a group of passionate students working to positively impact Oregon's K-12 education system. We are not "just a bunch of high schoolers." Our age does not define our capability or capacity. We are a group of independent thinkers working together to change the communities in which we learn. We encourage all of Oregon's K-12 students to join our efforts and raise their voices, and we welcome all support from educators and future partners as we funnel our passion into making the present and the future a better place.

To learn more about our organization, visit <https://www.oregonstudentvoice.org/>.

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