

# ELEVATING OUR VOICES

A GUIDEBOOK FOR SCHOOL-LEVEL  
TEACHER ADVOCACY



NATIONAL ALLIANCE FOR  
**PUBLIC  
CHARTER  
SCHOOLS**



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## INTRODUCTION: THE MOST TRUSTED VOICES IN EDUCATION

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Teachers are the linchpin of school communities. Students turn to them. School leaders rely on them. Parents trust them.<sup>1</sup>

Given this unique positioning, teachers are often the key to influencing student outcomes, fostering family engagement, and making a positive impact on overall school morale. With the right tools and meaningful opportunities to exercise their voices, teachers can help shape key decisions in their school communities. Research shows that teachers are more likely to stay in their jobs when they feel heard; [teacher retention rises with teacher satisfaction](#).<sup>2</sup> There is also evidence that fostering authentic teacher engagement can improve instruction. Teachers who have a voice in decision-making are more likely to value goal-setting and work hard to achieve those goals. They're also more likely to encourage students to make decisions for themselves.<sup>3</sup>

In other words, the extent to which teacher voice is cultivated, listened to, and acted upon can ultimately determine the culture of a staff and the success of a school.

Unfortunately, in our work with teachers across the country, many say they don't have a voice in what happens at their school. We believe this input from teachers is essential to help create school environments where they are authentic partners with opportunities to shape the experiences they and their students have in school.

This toolkit is intended as a resource for teachers, complete with concrete strategies and tools. It includes techniques teachers can employ to share their perspective with their school administrators and increase their chances of having their feedback incorporated into their school community.

This resource is a companion to the [Teacher Voice Toolkit for school leaders](#), which outlines practices school leaders can use to authentically engage teachers and encourage their full participation in building a positive school culture.

The strategies in this guidebook come directly from teachers across the country who participated in focus groups, interviews, and surveys—teachers across races, in all school types – district, charter, private, parochial—from schools in rural, suburban, and urban areas. We asked them what advocacy looks like when

working on behalf of their own needs and the needs of students and colleagues at their schools. We wanted to know what barriers they have faced and what has worked for them. Ultimately, our outreach surfaced some clear trends in effective strategies. The teachers we spoke with have experienced setbacks and successes, and we are grateful they shared their lessons with us.

We also spoke with school administrators to find out how they hope to see teachers contribute to decision making and how successful collaboration looks on their campuses.

Finally, it's important to acknowledge that the 2020-21 school year has been unlike any other. We spoke to teachers and leaders during this time of unprecedented change in schools. We heard examples from during the pandemic and from before the pandemic. We heard that organizations with strong teacher engagement before the pandemic were better able to create conditions for students and teachers to thrive despite challenging circumstances. In schools where teachers felt unengaged, challenges that existed before the pandemic were exacerbated. Overall, we feel confident that the tools and recommendations that follow are applicable to most teachers in most schools.

# BEST PRACTICES: PREPARING TO ELEVATE YOUR VOICE

Through focus groups, interviews, and surveys, we asked teachers which strategies were most effective for engaging in school-level decision making and sharing ideas with administrators.

This section highlights three trends and provides tips for successfully executing each one. Quotes from teachers who participated in our research also provide additional context and illustrative examples.

## 1. Be strategic about upward feedback.

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The likelihood of achieving a desired outcome is higher with intentional decision-making at the outset. Two of the most important decisions to make involve *what* and *who*—what issue is most worth prioritizing, and who is the right person to engage about this issue?

### ► Identify the right issue(s).

Choosing just one or two issues can be hard. Schools are complex places, with hundreds of stakeholders. Teachers may want to engage about several different aspects of their experience, and all their feedback may be completely valid—but this is about quality, not quantity. Offering a laundry list of suggestions is unlikely to be received well.

Instead, pick and choose the issue(s) you want to tackle at this moment. Consider which items are most likely to have the biggest impact on students and are related to your school's goals. Focus on those issues, but don't lose sight of the others, as there may be a good time down the road to share them as well.

### ► Identify the right person(s).

The other strategic decision to make from the outset is exactly who you should share your perspective with. Ask yourself if there is someone more familiar with the issue you're referencing, or someone who may be more likely to understand your position. It's rare that every matter needs to go directly to the principal; it's often best to start with the administrator closest to you, such as the grade-level leader or department chair.



Your school's specific structures are another consideration. Before you dash off an email to an administrator, take a step back. Reflect on how decisions are made at your school and who makes them. Observe your school's culture and existing systems and try to operate within those systems as much as possible. For example, in unionized environments, teachers may need to start with their union representative. In other settings, the most senior teachers could call on their experience to suggest a path forward.

“Pay attention to who is successful in those conversations,” said a teacher. “Who are the leaders? It’s not necessarily those assigned as ‘leaders,’ but who is creating positive change? Use them as a resource.”

### ► Find the right time.

Once you have picked the right issue to engage on and the right person to engage with, the next step is finding the right time. Setting up a time to connect about the issue can signal that it's important to you. In other settings, asking the individual if it's a good time to share feedback can set a positive tone.

Make sure it's a good time for you, too, and that you're in an emotional place where you can engage in constructive dialogue. It's okay to be upset, of course, and it's important to share those feelings, but if you're in a heated moment, pause and consider whether you need to wait to have a conversation that is more likely to be productive and collaborative.

“Being selective is very important,” said a teacher. “You have to respect everybody’s time. As teachers, we ask administrators to respect our planning and instructional time, and that needs to go both ways. Ask yourself, is this the thing that we want to use the limited time we have to talk about?”

## 2. Plan ahead.

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### ► Start at the end.

Once you have decided upon an issue and who to take it to, it's time to prepare for the conversation. Call on a skill you know well and try backwards planning. What is your objective? What outcome would feel like a success or compromise?

- ✚ *Based on your goal(s), it will be valuable to brainstorm what questions you want to ask. Consider using this [“Opportunity” Conversation Planning Template](#) to help you prepare for a conversation where you want to raise a challenge or give constructive feedback to an administrator.*



As you think of questions you want to ask during your conversation, consider asking yourself questions too. Questions could include:

- ✓ What are the values of the school and the leadership team?
- ✓ How does this change align to the value and student learning?
- ✓ Which other teachers feel the same way as you? Can you present your ideas together?
- ✓ Who or what will benefit from this change?
- ✓ How will caregivers and other school community members react to this idea?

► **Gather data.**

Another part of preparing for a conversation is gathering data that supports your perspective. Being able to show the impact a situation is having on students — rather than focusing solely on how you personally feel about it — can yield a more receptive audience.

“I have been able to successfully advocate for my students at times, as long as I framed it in a way that would lead to higher academic outcomes,” said a teacher.

“Conversations are most successful when they are student-focused,” said another teacher. “Especially if you are in a building where administrators are not in classrooms frequently, be really specific about the impact something is having on student learning.”

► **Or, generate data.**

Data is not limited to student performance. Remember, school culture and staff satisfaction are important for teacher retention and student experience, so even if there isn't data to show a direct impact on students, you can still make that connection by showing that a policy change will lead to more positive feelings among teachers.

If there are opportunities to test your idea on a small scale — like within your classroom — you can create a way to gather evidence on your own. Seeing how your idea plays out in a limited setting might also help you refine it before bringing it to an administrator. It might also help your administrator see the merit of your idea for themselves.

For example, a teacher who was advocating for an educational enrichment program school-wide decided to be the change she wished to see. She started operating the program in her own classroom. Her principal saw the positive change in her students. Seeing the benefit firsthand helped convince the principal of the potential of the idea if it were applied across the entire school.

“My leader had mentioned early on that he had the desire, as a new elementary school principal, to see how our youngest students learn early literacy skills,” the teacher said. This excited me, and I was inspired to see how my classroom could be used as a model for campus-wide change.”

### 3. Be inclusive.

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#### ► Share your ideas with peers.

Teaching alone in your classroom can be isolating—as if you’re an island and your experience is specific to your own four walls. But collaborating with colleagues is an important way you can advocate for positive change. Consider finding a mentor or peer in your building, especially another teacher who is different from you, and can provide input on your ideas. Soliciting multiple perspectives often leads to stronger suggestions.

“Your collective voice carries more weight,” said a teacher. “Talk and listen to others with more and different experiences from you to gather the big picture.”

Another teacher suggested raising “questions or ideas with your grade-level team first, as a barometer check.” For example, the teacher said you could ask, “Is this an issue that just I am experiencing, or are others, too?” It’s better to take a solution to administration that will benefit 75 students rather than a solution that will benefit 25.”

#### ► Collaborate with others.

Collaborating with colleagues can also lead to better results. One teacher wanted to create individual support plans and resources for students who were frequently sent to the office for disciplinary matters. She knew they needed a concrete plan and a way to track it, and she thought about how her colleagues could contribute, based on their strengths and interests.

“I’m good at seeing the trends and the root of things, but Excel and I are not friends. Because my colleague is good at that, we worked well together.” She said that this teamwork was critical to the plan’s success.

► **Be mindful of your own identity.**

Another aspect of inclusivity involves being mindful of aspects of your own identity and how those position you within your school community. It's important to recognize that some staff have more privilege than others, which may lead to more access or greater comfort speaking out. Some teachers of color, for example, say their ideas are often [undervalued](#) and their experiences and contributions feel invisible, compared to their white peers. This lack of inclusivity is a [key driver of teacher turnover](#), which, as discussed, impacts student achievement.

This theme came up in our outreach as well. One teacher shared that as a Black woman, she feels she is perceived differently and doesn't have the privilege to walk into her leader's office and openly share her thoughts the way she sees white staff members do.

- ✦ *As you consider which voices tend to go unheard in your school community and how you can lift those up, try using this [Social Identity Mapping Tool](#) to reflect on your own identity. You can complete the activity from the perspective of mapping the position of your identities within your school community in addition to, or instead of, within the place where you live.*

*"If you have a voice, you should use it," said a teacher. "My friend could ask for any feedback she needed at the school, whereas I couldn't. I wish she would have been more aware of her privilege and access and used it."*

- ✦ *Another resource is the [Critical Practices for Anti-Bias Education: Teacher Leadership](#) learning module, which you can engage with on your own or with peers. The module includes prompts and reflection questions for teachers to increase their self-awareness, practice speaking up, explore building allies, and develop their leadership skills.*

# WHAT DO SCHOOL LEADERS FIND HELPFUL?

Having a sense of how your audience may receive your message can influence how you deliver it. That's why we asked school leaders about how they like their teachers to engage with them, and what makes a case more compelling. This section includes three recommendations from school leaders we spoke with, backed by quotes from our conversations.

## 1. Be solutions oriented.

### ► Share your ideas for next steps or solutions.

School administrators we spoke with encourage teachers to come to them not just with a challenge or problem, but also with their ideas for what to do about it.

“What made their approach effective was their ability to explicitly name the dilemma, articulate a united team message using experiential and instructional data, and create a plan. While this plan was not perfect, their receptiveness to feedback was key as they leveraged it to increase productivity.”

Teachers we spoke with also attributed many of their successes to this approach.

“We knew that bringing up a trend we were seeing wasn't enough,” said a teacher about her and her colleague. “We had to say, ‘This is what we see, these are the individuals we have in mind, and here's a game plan.’ We suggested other staff members that could be included. We came with something to look at, so leaders could see our vision. We came with a plan.”

### ► Be open to playing a role.

To be clear, it's okay if you're unsure exactly what solution to put forth. Leaders said their expectation is not that you will single-handedly solve a problem, but that you are open to being part of the solution. During your conversation, make it clear that you want to play a role in the work of figuring out the solution (and eventually helping to implement it, too). The important part is approaching the conversation with a growth mindset: things can improve, and this conversation is meant to help clarify the issue at hand and explore the path forward.



## 2. Consider your leader's perspective.

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### ► Understand all the factors.

It's worth approaching these conversations with a sense of humility. You may believe your perspective makes perfect sense, but it's important to recognize there may be additional context you are not aware of. School leaders are accountable to many stakeholders, and they may be thinking about how their supervisor will react to a change in policy, or how parents will react, or whether a state regulation would be relevant. In other words, there are dynamics at play that you might not have on your radar.

- ✦ *To best prepare for your conversation, consider using this [Emotional Intelligence Worksheet](#) to help you reflect on your leader's perspective.*

As a school leader said, "Learn what the principal cares about. Every principle has technical responsibilities that teachers usually don't know about." Teachers should ask about that."

### ► Acknowledge intent.

Asking and empathizing can help create space for understanding. For example, acknowledging the school leader's intent can create space to then share how the intent and the impact may not align. To avoid getting into a back and forth about intentions, it can be helpful at this time in the conversation to share the data you brought to the meeting (as discussed on pages 4-5).

As one teacher suggested, "Assume the best of those around you. Never attribute to malice what might be a misunderstanding."

### ► Be open to compromise.

Another aspect of humility is recognizing your proposed solution may not be the only solution. It's possible that your school leader agrees with your diagnosis but not your prescription to address it. In those cases, it's important to have an open mind and be willing to compromise on a solution that considers other factors you may not have previously been aware of.

For example, a teacher was concerned about whether her students' social-emotional needs were being met during virtual learning. She thought it would be beneficial if students could have small-group time with teachers that they knew better. It turned out that the administrators' hands were tied based on the district's scheduling requirements. However, the administrator

was sensitive to the concerns that the teacher was raising and did carve out space for students and teachers to get to know each other better, a move intended to address the social-emotional concerns.

In cases where you don't get the answer you sought, seek to understand first. Try to gather more information before you react. Seek to clarify why and how that decision was made.

“Go to your leader with a learning orientation, such as by saying ‘I only see my piece; let me hear your piece,’” said an administrator.  
“Lead with that so the leader knows where you are coming from.”

### 3. Take a team approach.

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Last but not least, school leaders suggest approaching these conversations collaboratively, not confrontationally. Make it clear that you want to work with them, not against them. Signal that you are on the same team, as a school serving its students and families.

Consider employing some of these strategies during your conversation to drive this point home:

- ✓ Praise and acknowledge past successes.
- ✓ Ask leaders to push your thinking.
- ✓ Ask for constructive feedback and invite ideas you may not have considered.
- ✓ Acknowledge that you may not have all the answers. This can be an effective strategy in reducing tension and increasing harmony.

“It should be a collaborative conversation, always,” said a teacher.  
“I wish someone had told me that when I was a first-year teacher. The principal is there as support for you, use them that way. I always ask at the end of a meeting with my leader, ‘Do you have any feedback for me?’ And it’s always well received.”

# TIPS FROM TEACHERS

We asked teachers who have done this work to share what they have learned in their efforts to advocate for their needs and students' needs. In our conversations with teachers about their experiences, three themes stood out.

## 1. Align to your school's mission and goals.

### ► Understand school priorities.

As you think through how to engage, consider the school community's big priorities. What is your school's mission? What are key stakeholders, such as students, families and your school leader most focused on? The more your advocacy is aligned to these areas, the greater the likelihood your contributions will have an impact.

Here again, it's important to plan. If you're unsure of your school's priorities or goals, try to find out. Ask about the school's strategic plan or any improvement plans on file. Consider the feedback and perspectives of students and their caregivers. Ask your leader what drives him or her and what they hope to accomplish this year. The more information you have, the easier it will be to make a connection between your ideas and your school's mission and accountability plans.

### ► Connect to those priorities.

When engaging with decision makers and other key stakeholders, make the connection to broader priorities explicit. Connect the dots between what they care most about and what you are focused on. For example, you could say, "I know that our school values X, and I think doing Y will help us achieve that goal."

**"Understand the leader's priorities and try to uncover what they are held accountable for," a teacher said. "Then think about how you can frame your ideas in a way that the leader will see it's in line with their school vision, rather than being an extra thing that distracts from the vision."**

Administrators we asked about authentic teacher engagement recalled specific instances when their teachers contextualized their suggestion within the broader school context.

“I could tell [my teachers] spent time crafting each activity with purpose and [were] committed to ensuring our incoming students were set up for long-term success,” a school leader said. “I vividly remember thinking to myself, ‘Their actions are what embodying our vision is supposed to look and sound like.’”

## 2. Build trust with leadership.

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### ► Start with relationships.

Teachers also recommend looking for opportunities to build working relationships with key stakeholders in the school community so there is a foundation of familiarity and trust from which to engage. Ideas shared as part of an ongoing dialogue with school leaders are likely to be better received than proposals shared in a vacuum. For teachers, opportunities to work alongside school leaders can also provide important information and context that can influence how you eventually share your thoughts.

### ► Take advantage of existing opportunities.

Again, consider the existing structures at your school that provide access to your school community’s key decision makers. Are there committees, or teams created around special projects, or opportunities to lead or share at professional development or staff meetings? Many of the teachers we spoke with also cited teacher-led committees as a key factor in creating opportunities to shape the experiences students and teachers have at their school.

“Volunteer to be on the committees you care about,” said a teacher. “In these contexts, you can often have a more meaningful conversation about a situation that’s more effective than a one-off email or side conversation. It’s a captive audience.”

Another teacher said, “A track record of trust is so important. If you have shown good judgment with the community and parents, you are much more likely to be able to influence people.”

- ✦ *If you have challenges communicating with your leader, do not despair. Consider using one or more of these [Managing Up](#) strategies.*

### 3. When things don't go your way, go forward in a way that's positive.

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Even if you follow all the guidance above, you still might not achieve your desired outcome. It's unfortunate, but it happens. When you disagree with a decision, assume the best. Ask for the context you need to understand the thinking behind the decision.

Then it's time to consider your next step. You might be disappointed the decision didn't go the way you hoped, but is it a dealbreaker? If you step back and look at the big picture, is there more evidence to suggest the school is moving in a positive direction? Do you still feel aligned to your school's mission and values?

In these times, it can be helpful to remember that you're on a team, and young people are watching the team members very closely. Students have a real knack for sensing when there's conflict between teachers and leadership. This dissonance can trickle down and have a negative effect on student experience. Take steps to avoid that.

“You have to be okay with the possibility of no,” said a teacher.  
“If that's the case, how will you press forward? Choose where you put your energy and know when to stop.”

It can also be important to acknowledge that schools are complicated systems, and change takes time. It might be necessary to make your case again, or to make a different case, in order to ultimately achieve the change you're seeking. Don't stop. Stay patient. Keep advocating.

“I would advise teachers to understand that change takes time and that a culture change takes many years to come to fruition,” a teacher said. “I would also advise them to be patient with their leadership and don't get discouraged from expressing their innovative ideas.”

# CONCLUSION

This toolkit is intended to serve as a resource for teachers who would like to influence positive change in their school community. Even with this guide, however, engaging in this work can be hard, even intimidating, and it's worth recognizing that. As you consider applying what you have learned in these pages, we hope you balance any feelings of apprehension with an acknowledgement of how much your voice matters and how your feedback can help improve your school community.

✦ *If this toolkit has influenced you to be more involved with school-level decision making and shaping experiences for students, but you don't yet know where to start, consider this resource, [Aspects of School Culture](#). Are there elements that resonate, or topics where you might want to employ some of the strategies shared in this guide?*

We hope this resource gives you confidence to use your voice. You, your school, and your students all stand to benefit from the ideas you share and the action you take.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 New Poll Shows What Parents Think of Current State of Public Schools, <https://www.publicschoolreview.com/blog/new-poll-shows-what-parents-think-of-current-state-of-public-schools>
- 2 School Organizational Contexts, Teacher Turnover, and Student Achievement: Evidence From Panel Data, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.3102/0002831216667478>
- 3 Teacher Voice Report 2010-2014, <https://quagliainstitute.org/dmsView/TeacherVoiceReport>



# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The recommendations in this toolkit come directly from teachers and leaders, and we are immensely grateful to them for sharing their time and experience with us. More teachers will be able to elevate their voices, more school cultures will be improved, and more students will benefit—because these teachers trusted us to help tell their story.

TNTP and the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools reached out to various schools, networks, and organizations across the country to invite teachers and leaders to contribute to this guidebook. We also used social media to attract educators outside our network.

Individuals had the opportunity to share their promising and innovative teacher engagement practices by completing a survey or attending a focus group or interview. This toolkit shares the experiences of educators from diverse backgrounds in more than 25 cities from across the nation and represents views from individuals who have taught in private, district, and charter schools.

We would like to thank all the teachers and leaders listed below (as well as those who chose to remain anonymous) who shared their experiences for this project.

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