



# Unlocking the Instructional Power of **STUDENT VOICE**

**Improving Outcomes for Students with Disabilities**

Empowering students with disabilities and creating equitable and excellent education systems where students with disabilities thrive is the urgent mission of the DC Special Education Cooperative (the Co-op). To fulfill this mission, the Co-op partnered with three Washington, DC area charter schools on a 2-year project to prove that centering student voice could improve educational outcomes for students with disabilities.

The results of this effort show what is possible when teachers intentionally create space for students to provide feedback on the quality of instruction they are receiving. Seemingly intractable low rates of academic achievement and stark disparities in outcomes for students with disabilities compared to their non-disabled peers plague DC's current system; unlocking the instructional power of student voice shines light on a path to improvement.

## Why Student Voice?

There is a growing body of evidence that students do better personally, socially, and academically when they are encouraged to take ownership of their learning.<sup>1</sup> Students who believe they have a voice in school are 7x more likely to be academically motivated than students who do not believe they have a voice<sup>2</sup> – and academic motivation leads to greater effort and persistence – among the most important factors impacting student achievement.

Student voice has also been found to effect positive change in instructional practices, particularly when it intentionally incorporates voices of those – such as students with disabilities – who have been historically marginalized.<sup>3</sup> In other words, when teachers actively ask for input from their students about instruction, and then act on that input, instruction gets better.

Unfortunately, studies show that students with disabilities, the students who may be most in need of improved instruction, are less likely to be listened to and have their views taken into account than other students.<sup>4</sup> Thus, the very students who need it most do not receive the instructional benefits that could be derived if only the adults in schools routinely solicited and acted on student feedback.

At the Co-op's 2023 ["All In" Special Education Summit](#), a city-wide event that brought together educators, community partners, parents, and students to build a deeper understanding of how to improve educational outcomes, school leaders acknowledged that student voices have been missing from discussions about what students need; adults make decisions without consulting the very individuals impacted by those decisions.

"Some teachers say 'My Classroom, My Rules' so I don't have a voice there."

Student Summit participants emphasized that key to their ability to succeed are teachers who truly listen, care, and are responsive to their needs. Stakeholders from across DC's educational system agreed on the need to center the voices of students in classrooms and throughout schools.

1 Gordon, M. (2010), "Student Voice Key to Unlocking Inclusive Educational Practices"  
2 School Voice Report (2016), Quaglia Institute for School Voice and Aspirations, Corwin Press  
3 Bridgeland, Dilulio Jr., and Morison (2006), "The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts"  
4 Tshalis and Nakkula, (2012), "Motivation, Engagement, and Student Voice"

# CENTERING STUDENT VOICE TO IMPROVE EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

In 2023 the Co-op was awarded a two year grant from the DC Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE) to work with local charter schools to improve educational outcomes. The Co-op partnered with three schools – Washington Leadership Academy, BASIS DC, and DC Bilingual – to prove that centering student voice at all grade levels could drive high quality instruction and improve academic outcomes for students with disabilities.

At each of the 3 participating public charter schools, the Co-op provided direct coaching to an instructional leader who then supported 5 “anchor” teachers in using student voice to positively impact instruction. Coaching emphasized strategies for soliciting student feedback on lessons using a variety of means including anonymous surveys, exit tickets, weekly reflection slips, class discussions, and one to one conversations. Anchor teachers regularly adjusted instruction based on that feedback.

The Co-op also provided whole school professional development and supported schools in integrating student voice data through:

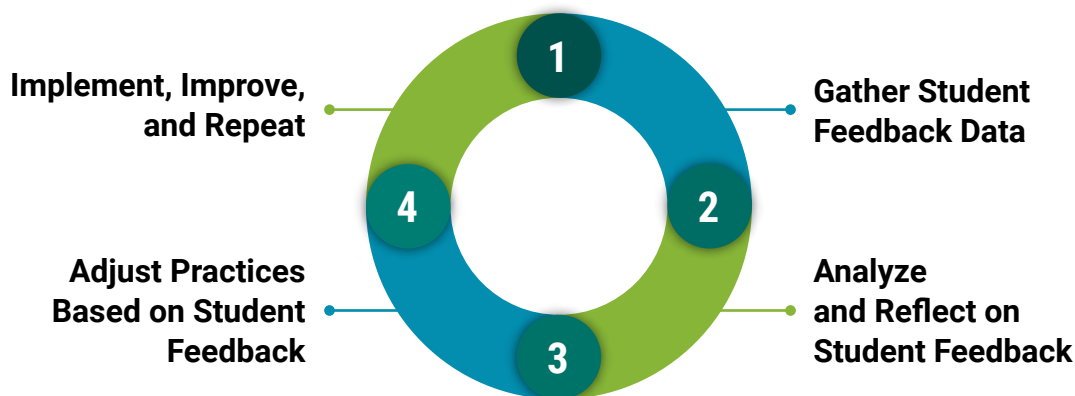
- ▶ Administering Tripod, a nationally-normed, validated student voice survey on the

effectiveness of instruction and classroom climate, with results guiding individual teacher action plans. Higher scores on Tripod are correlated with higher academic achievement for students.<sup>5</sup>

- ▶ Facilitating targeted focus groups of students with disabilities to explore student perspectives on what helps them succeed in school, with data from these groups shared with all teachers.
- ▶ Purchasing classroom materials and instructional supplies based on student feedback about what items would support their learning.
- ▶ Supporting students with disabilities in creating and delivering professional development for teachers regarding barriers to learning and how students learn best.

Anchor teachers immediately noticed increased student engagement and participation when they acted on specific student feedback. Students themselves reported greater focus, clarity, and confidence in their schoolwork. Most importantly, when teachers intentionally incorporated student feedback into their lesson planning and classroom design, students demonstrated significantly improved mastery of grade level content.

## STUDENT FEEDBACK DATA LOOP



5 “Learning about Teaching: Initial Findings from the Measures of Effective Teaching Project,” 2010

## DC BILINGUAL (DCB)

DCB is a dual-language (English and Spanish) charter school serving a diverse population of students: 45% Hispanic/Latino, 30% White, 20% Black/African-American, and 5% other races. Students with disabilities make up 18% of its population, and 45% are English Learners.

### Student Voice Participation | Grades 3-5

- ▶ **5 Anchor teachers** received coaching to incorporate student voice in their classrooms.
- ▶ **145 students** took the **Tripod Student Voice Survey**.
- ▶ **14 students** with disabilities participated in **focus groups**.
- ▶ **7 students** with disabilities **created a video** describing classroom supports they need to succeed; shown to all teachers at their end-of-year professional development.

## DCB DATA AND INSTRUCTIONAL CHANGES

DCB's student voice data showed that nearly 60% of students needed more opportunities to check their understanding and half felt overwhelmed by the amount of work. Using this data, DCB anchor teachers made changes to their instruction:

- ▶ Restructured unit plans to cover less content and focus on depth
- ▶ Modified the amount of work required
- ▶ Monitored and focused on increasing student work stamina throughout the year
- ▶ Organized a structure to support work completion, with a coach or small group of teachers pushing in to ensure that a targeted group of students finished work with support

DCB used ongoing grade-level and school-wide meetings to regularly reflect on student voice data and how these changes were impacting student achievement.

### DCB Anchor Teacher Reflections on Using Student Voice Data

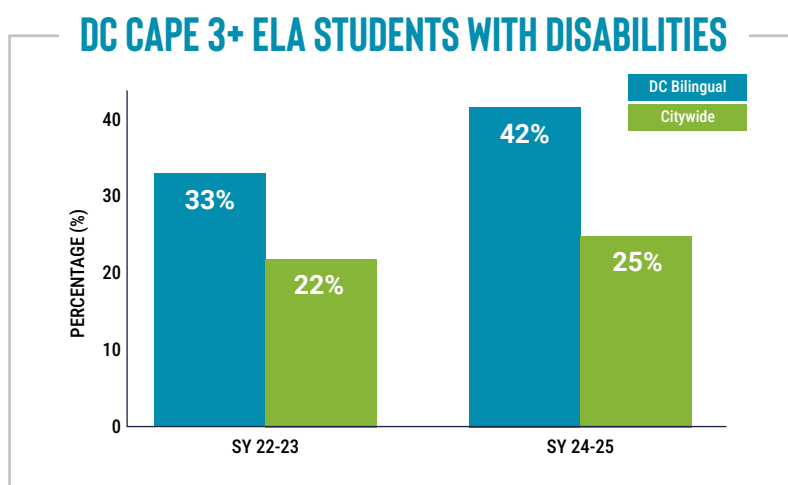
"After collecting student feedback and incorporating more group-based, hands-on activities in science, I noticed a clear impact: **the average score on our end-of-unit project went from 72% to 87%**. Additionally, in a follow-up survey, 90% of students said they felt more confident explaining scientific concepts to their peers. Their engagement during class discussions and activities also noticeably increased."

"In SY 23-24, students mastered 78% of math skills throughout the year. In SY 24-25, they mastered 90% of the math skills. This large **12% gain in mastery was aided by more student voice and feedback about their learning** throughout the year."





Three of the 5 participating anchor teachers at DCB taught English Language Arts (ELA) or literacy. DC CAPE (DC's statewide assessment) results for students with disabilities in ELA show significant improvement from the year prior to the start of the student voice project to the end; gains for DCB's students with disabilities far outpaced those for students with disabilities across DC.



## GATHERING STUDENT FEEDBACK

### Teacher-Created Post-Midterm Questionnaires for Students

#### PREPARING FOR THE MIDTERM

- ▶ What was the most helpful thing we did in class to help you prepare?
- ▶ What, if anything, do you wish I had done differently?

#### AREAS OF IMPROVEMENT

- ▶ What area do you need the most help with?
- ▶ Do you need more practice/review of the same thing, or need it taught in a different way?
- ▶ How can I help rebuild your confidence to stay motivated?

#### LOOKING AHEAD

Think about my teaching style including how I structure our time, teach lessons, review materials, and manage our class:

- ▶ What about my teaching style worked best for you and helped you feel prepared for midterms?
  - *Is there anything that didn't work well for you?*
- ▶ What assignments or activities that we did in class helped you feel prepared for midterms?
- ▶ What kinds of materials, assignments, or activities do you want to see or do more of in the second half of the year?
  - *Is there anything you want to see or do less of because it wasn't as helpful?*

Please share anything else I should know to improve my teaching and help you feel successful in class:

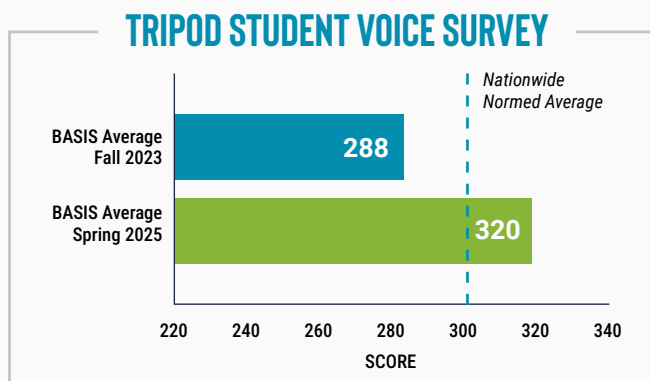
## BASIS DC

BASIS DC, a middle/high school offering a fast-paced, accelerated curriculum, consistently rates as one of the highest-performing charter schools in DC; however, students with IEPs and 504 plans, who make up 18% of its population, have historically struggled. By the end of middle school, students are expected to master curriculum normally taught in high school, and must pass challenging comprehensive final exams to pass on to the next grade. At the start of this project, only 33% of students with disabilities passed the 8th grade end of year English comprehensive exam.

### Student Voice Participation | Grades 5-8

- ▶ **5 Anchor teachers** received coaching to incorporate student voice in their classrooms.
- ▶ **714 students** took the **Tripod Student Voice Survey** and all teachers created a student voice action plan.
- ▶ **40 students** with disabilities participated in **focus groups**.
- ▶ **12 students** with disabilities **designed professional development** on their instructional needs and how they learned best, and delivered it to 29 teachers.

These types of shifts led to significant improvements in student perceptions of their teachers' instruction and classroom climate across BASIS DC, as demonstrated by gains on the Tripod student voice survey.



## BASIS DC ANCHOR TEACHER INSTRUCTIONAL SHIFTS

The use of student feedback had a marked impact on student perceptions of their experience at BASIS DC. In response to Tripod survey and student feedback data, teachers:

- ▶ Incorporated more hands-on, experiential learning.
- ▶ Revised individual practice packets designed to prepare students for their comprehensive exams to allow students to discuss questions and work on them together, and incorporated games into review materials.
- ▶ Incorporated more student-led activities, including student-created test questions and student-led clarification activities.
- ▶ Revised pacing and added more scaffolds.
- ▶ Increased the level of personal recognition, including individual check-ins and positive emails to parents.



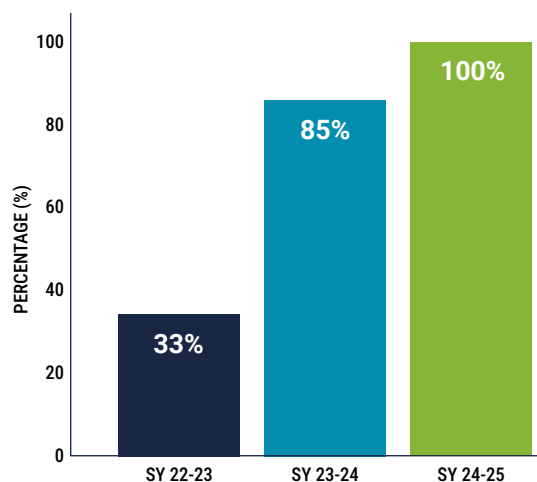
Most significantly, instructional shifts by anchor teachers at BASIS DC in response to gathering explicit student feedback led to profound improvements in academic outcomes for students with disabilities.

In 8th grade ELA, the pass rate for students with disabilities prior to the start of this project (SY 22-23) was only 33%. This low pass rate prompted BASIS DC to choose the 8th grade ELA teacher as one of the anchor teachers. Following year one of the project, the pass rate for students with disabilities improved dramatically, to 85%. By the end of year two, 100% of students with disabilities passed 8th grade ELA. This was the first time in the history of the entire BASIS nationwide network that 100% of students with disabilities passed the 8th grade ELA comprehensive exam and could thus matriculate to high school.

The 8th grade ELA teacher attributed this marked change to incorporating student feedback on his lessons into his classroom planning. Beyond the success in ELA, scores for BASIS DC's anchor teacher classrooms outperformed their national network *in every content area*.

## PASSING RATE FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

### 8th Grade ELA Comprehensive Exam



## WASHINGTON LEADERSHIP ACADEMY (WLA)

WLA provides a liberatory, tech-focused education centering academic rigor, social justice, and personal growth. Nearly 81% of students are Black, and over 15% are Latino. 56% of students are designated as economically disadvantaged, and over 25% are students with disabilities.

### Student Voice Participation | Grades 9-12

- ▶ **5 Anchor teachers** received coaching to explicitly incorporate student voice in their classrooms.
- ▶ **414 students** took the **Tripod Student Voice Survey** and all teachers created a student voice action plan.
- ▶ **20 students** with disabilities participated in **focus groups** and helped create PD focused on ensuring teachers knew more about different disabilities, including autism and specific learning disabilities, and sharing their perspectives on how teachers could better support them as learners.



## WLA Anchor Teacher Instructional Shifts

Anchor teachers created a variety of tools to solicit student feedback on their instruction, including exit tickets, monthly reflection surveys, class discussions, and 1:1 check-ins. Teachers then used student feedback to adjust instruction and make changes to the classroom environment.

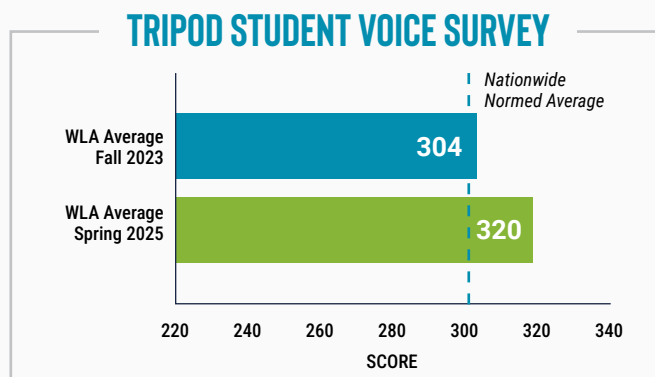
Instructional shifts included:

- ▶ Creating visual task boards, exemplars, and goal trackers for students to self-monitor their progress.
- ▶ Use of graphic organizers, visual outlines, and guided notes.
- ▶ Increased small group instruction and scaffolds for independent work.
- ▶ Structured reflection and note-taking prompts.
- ▶ Adjusting lesson pacing.
- ▶ Peer review sessions.
- ▶ Increased progress monitoring.

At times, student feedback focused on environmental factors, such as wanting more space between desks, or curtains to block out harsh afternoon sunlight that obscured the whiteboard.

Teachers spent more time developing relationships with students and their families, including phone calls home to share progress and intentionally celebrating milestones reached by struggling students. Teachers consistently noted that changing instruction and the classroom environment based on student feedback resulted in increased engagement, participation, and achievement.

Student perceptions of teachers' instruction improved from the beginning of this project to the end. In Fall 2023, WLA earned a schoolwide score of 304 on the Tripod survey, just slightly above the nationwide midpoint of 300. By Spring 2025, that score had increased to 320.



“This experience reminded me that success is not just about scores; it’s about transforming how students see themselves as learners. It also reinforced my belief that strong leadership involves aligning systems of support with a deep commitment to student relationships.”





## WLA Teacher Reflections on Using Student Voice Data

"After gathering student feedback, I learned that many students struggled with citing specific textual evidence to support their analysis. To address this, I incorporated targeted assignments requiring students to practice identifying and explaining evidence and introduced graphic organizers to help students organize their thoughts and connect evidence clearly to their claims. As a result, student engagement improved, and their ability to cite evidence became stronger. **Following the changes, students scored an average of 30 out of 31 on accuracy on this assignment.** Student voice directly influenced these instructional adjustments, leading to increased confidence and measurable progress in analyzing complex texts."

"After collecting student feedback, I modified the way the room was arranged. **Exit ticket scores went from just 40% of students achieving mastery in lessons 1 and 2 of our linear functions unit, to 70% and 80% reaching mastery on lessons 5 and 6.** It was a simple fix that helped students feel more comfortable in the classroom."

"Using student voice data significantly improved both student engagement and academic outcomes in my classroom. I found that only 54% of students felt confident in their ability to write strong argumentative essays, and many shared that they were unsure of how to structure their claims and evidence. In response, I redesigned my writing instruction to include more scaffolded modeling, peer review sessions, and visual outlines. I also provided multiple exemplar texts based on topics students selected themselves, which increased interest and investment in the assignment. After these changes, the percentage of students who reported feeling confident in their argumentative writing rose to 84%, and **average scores on the following writing assessment improved from 68% to 86%.** This shift not only showed growth in mastery but also demonstrated how listening to student feedback and making responsive adjustments can lead to higher engagement and performance."

### Gathering Student Feedback: WLA Exit Tickets

#### STUDENT SURVEY — DAILY 5 MINUTE EXIT TICKET

1. How well do you understand today's material?

Not at all

A little

Half of it

Mostly

Completely

*Optional – share any specific questions or areas you want me to review:*

2. What did I do, say, or provide that helped you understand today's lesson?  
3. Was there any time or any concept where you felt lost or left behind?  
4. How can I improve for the next lesson or when we review this concept in the future?

#### STUDENT SURVEY — DAILY 2 MINUTE EXIT TICKET

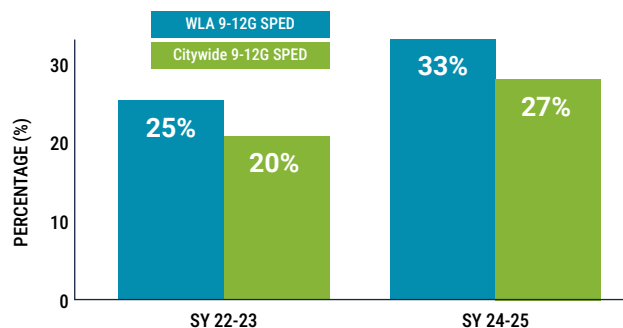
**Glow:** One thing that went well in class and helped me:

**Grow:** One thing I wish had gone differently or hope will be done differently in the future:

WLA's students with disabilities also made gains in ELA on DC CAPE that slightly outpaced their peers across the city (2 of the anchor teachers and the student voice coach taught ELA courses).

Many factors can account for changes in growth over time, however, these scores along with increased student mastery of grade-level assignments in anchor teacher classrooms point to the positive instructional impact of using student voice data.

## DC CAPE 3+ ELA STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES



## TRANSFORM POSSIBILITY INTO PRACTICE

### Student Voice and the Movement for Educational Equity

The results achieved by the Co-op's Student Voice project demonstrate that when teachers intentionally solicit feedback from students on their instruction – and then act on that feedback – students benefit. Increased academic engagement, confidence, focus, and relational trust set the foundation for improved academic performance by all students. And those who need it most, our students with disabilities, have the most to gain.

It turns out that trusting students at all grade levels – from Elementary to High School – to know what works for them and what does not, offering them multiple opportunities in various forums to provide their input, and listening to their voices **makes teachers better**. Our Student Voice project shows that the power of student voice is more than just theoretical. It can transform teaching, empower students, and ensure that our students with disabilities thrive in school.

### Now is the time to act.

Whether you are a school leader, instructional coach, or a teacher, you can:

- ▶ Assess your classroom/school practices to determine how you are using student voice to drive instructional decision-making, and to what degree students with disabilities have a proactive voice in that decision-making.
- ▶ Use our [Student Voice Resources Toolkit](#) to gather ideas for ways to incorporate student voice at the classroom and school levels.
- ▶ Partner with the Co-op for professional development, coaching, instructional walk-through tools or other support for incorporating student voice.
- ▶ Prioritize students with disabilities and commit to data-driven, equity-centered change that places student voice, not adult assumptions, at the center.

## Let's transform possibility into practice – together.

Contact [info@specialedcoop.org](mailto:info@specialedcoop.org) to work with us to create equitable and excellent educational systems where students with disabilities thrive.