

# KENTUCKY STUDENT VOICE TEAM

## the story



INSTITUTE FOR  
**CITIZENS &  
SCHOLARS**



**Kentucky  
Student  
Voice Team**





# I. INTRODUCTION

The Kentucky Student Voice Team supports students as research, policy, and advocacy partners in order to co-create more just and democratic Kentucky schools and communities. Comprising approximately 100 self-selected students from throughout the state, the KSVT targets an intergenerational audience at the grassroots (school and district levels) as well as the grass tops (policy and legislation). The team conducts roundtables, interviews, and quantitative research that harness, amplify, and elevate the voices and experiences of young people who represent the diversity of the state, and shares them across a range of platforms to inform public conversations about education. The team runs a podcast and blog; designs and delivers professional development for students, educators, and policy influencers; mobilizes intergenerational coalitions around issues and legislative initiatives; generates policy reports, social media, public testimony,

and op-eds; and facilitates and normalizes dialogue between young people and other education stakeholders and decision-makers.

But getting to this point has taken years’ worth of learning, unlearning, and relearning—reckoning with the ways in which “youth-led” spaces to mobilize young people rarely existed inside the classroom. The team was committed to drawing on the power of young people one step at a time, developing a democratic internal process that reflected and produced democratic outputs. This case study details that process.

*NOTE: ANY TEXT HIGHLIGHTED REFERS TO A LINKED RESOURCE IN THE APPENDIX.*

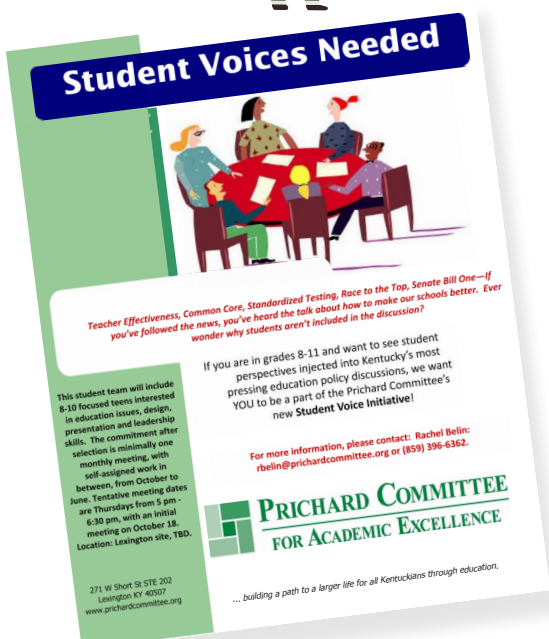
## II. BACKGROUND & TIMELINE



### 2012 to 2013: Think Tank Year—No Formalized Structure

There was no formal structure or funding during the year of the team’s conception. Students who responded to a flyer posted outside several Central Kentucky high school guidance offices spent an academic year engaged in casual conversations. The sessions were loosely structured by adult volunteers who worked for or with the Prichard Committee, a statewide nonprofit committed to mobilizing citizens to improve Kentucky schools. The primary adult initiator was a volunteer who had extensive experience in youth activism and development and a conviction that as primary stakeholders, students were an essential missing piece in the Committee’s efforts.

The Team focused broadly on exploring the merits and nature of student voice and considered the unique value-add students could bring to existing school improvement efforts in the state. Several months in, the group then specifically charged itself with conducting research and interviewing other students about the education issues that concerned them. The group finally requested 20 minutes for a presentation at the Prichard Committee’s annual meeting to make the case for students as partners in their work going forward. The result was a floor



vote to approve the students’ proposal to institutionalize their experiment in the form of an official pilot program, and the “Prichard Committee Student Voice Team” was named and launched.

## 2013 to 2014: Pilot Year—Start of Executive Leadership Circle

Designating a pilot to reflect the experimental mindset and the continued lack of funding, the first full programming year also reflected the Team’s desire to build social capital and credibility within the parent organization and integrate students into existing work. Since students themselves had to make the initial case for their value, there was a sense that they had moved a “Trojan Horse” into the more established organization and had an unusual, if fleeting, opportunity to show what they could do as partners in education improvement efforts.

The relatively rigid structure the Team created to govern themselves reflected the students’ new and uncertain status as a part of the larger organization. The group created a three-month project rotation structure that focused on a number of issues, half of which were also prioritized by the parent organization. They also established an “Adult Brain Trust,” a network of adult allies, including attorneys, academics, and activists, who had professional and social status, a special understanding of the value of youth voice, and the interest and willingness to vouch for the Student Voice Team if necessary.

The structure was exactly what helped the Team improvise and respond to opportunities as they arose. An early success came when the group considered the value-add of students in a campaign the parent organization was running to increase public awareness about inadequate school funding. The KSVT turned the Prichard Committee’s “Our Kids Can’t Wait” slogan into a first-person mantra. Students turned up at public rallies holding signs that read “We Can’t Wait ” and mobilized other young people on social media to share their own stories and images of inadequate school funding. As several students stood on a stage holding “textbooks that are older than we are ” one student **shared the stories they had** collected in a high-profile summit convened by the parent organization. The moment was a watershed in the promise of youth and adult partnership as students succeeded in shaping the narrative and the **next day’s** headlines.

A few months into the pilot year, the Team realized there was a need to have more regular conversation and activities between monthly meetings. They **proposed the creation of an executive committee** to help manage emerging categories of work involving blog and op-ed writing, policy issue research,



November 2, 2013

**KST:** Students hold old textbooks during SVT’s presentation to the Adequate Funding Summit



February 14, 2014

**KST:** Students speak at rally for education funding at a local middle school.

external engagement, and social media and marketing. The committee would come to be known as the Executive Leadership Circle, and its creation would give the team some added structure and stability, even as students figured out in **team meetings** where they wanted to focus their energy in the education policy space.

In February 2013, the group began to question their hierarchical structure. They **revisited the question of titles and more formalized structures.** Though their high schools and the traditional college admission process demanded titles as a form of currency for recognition and advancement, they very consciously decided against them. “I think our commitment and involvement is passion-driven. Titles can be the only tokenized entity on KSVT as I believe those of us that are greatly involved and that would gun for titles in the first place would not care for specific ones as long as we feel valued,” a member of the Executive Leadership Circle wrote in an argument that ultimately prevailed.



## 2014 to 2015: Initial Committee Model

Entering Year 3, the KSVT model continued much as it had the year before, with a dedicated executive leadership meeting in between the general monthly meetings. The KSVT was forced to evolve, however, as it started expanding the scope of its work from promoting the general idea of student voice to targeting ways to implement student voice in education policy making.

The group was beginning to see that amplifying student voice to frame public education narratives through opinion pieces like this was a cheap, powerful way to build on existing resources and leverage the unique and relevant perspectives students could bring to conversations about education policy. That same year, the Team produced 15 more opinion pieces that were carried in statewide newspapers targeting intergenerational audiences and reaching over a million Kentucky readers in the process.

Two events precipitated the change to a more formal structure. First, the KSVT had focused its Summer 2014 work on investigating why so many students were struggling to make the transition to college, an effort known as the “Postsecondary Project.” This project was the first to be funded by an external foundation, and the work continued into the school year as the team produced a **final report.** Second, the resignation of the Superintendent of Fayette County Public Schools in Lexington gave the Team an opportunity to push for student involvement in hiring his replacement. This effort began in late November 2014 and would quickly expand to include a full legislative campaign when the Team discovered students were excluded from participating



February 24, 2015

**KST:** SVT testifies at House Education Committee about superintendent bill with additional students supporting from the gallery.

**kystuvoiceteam**  
Rachel Maddow Show



June 6, 2015

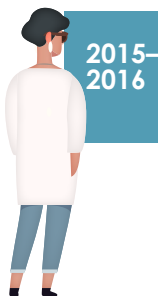
**KST:** Rachel Maddow Show segment and interview about SVT campaign and rally.

**kystuvoiceteam**  
Clark County, KY



May 15, 2015

**KST:** SVT conducts school climate audit, talking with students at a middle school



by the law governing the process. The Team drafted House Bill 236 and enlisted a legislative sponsor to amend the law.

The demands of these two projects prompted the Team to **specialize further**. In December, they **designed five committees**. Three would be issue- and project-focused: Common Core, investigating the success of the new standards in Kentucky as many politicians and leaders debated them; School Governance, leading the charge on HB 236 and related research; and Postsecondary, to continue the work of the summer project and promote what would become the College Tripwires report. Two additional committees would handle cross-cutting duties: Communications, managing social media and press relations, and State and External Affairs, focusing on legislative issues, including lobbying in Frankfort for HB 236. Each committee would have a chair or co-chairs, and the Executive Leadership Circle evolved into the Executive Committee to coordinate the work of the five other committees. Over the course of the next few months, some students who had been involved with the Team all three years and were in their first years of college started leading much of the work of the Executive Committee, and their roles evolved into Student Director and Associate Student Director.

This became the general model for the KSVT's structure during the next few years and fueled some prolific outputs, as framed in a **joint op-ed**, notably co-authored by the youth and adult co-directors.

## 2015 to 2016: Expanded Committee Model

Among the Year 4 organizational innovations were an expanded list of roles, including one dedicated to ensuring more equity; attention to regional representation; and the introduction of study groups as a means for the group to vet new issue priorities. That year also saw the launch of the Team's first student-led **"Student Voice School Climate Audit,"** an effort that would continue to evolve, position the group as qualified experts on school climate and culture, and mark the first of many more youth-led, participatory action research projects.

## 2016 to 2018: Refined Committee Model

By Year 5, the Team began to more consciously move away from the organizational structure modeled by the parent organization. The "executive committee" was replaced with a "leadership circle" to oversee the defined work and allow for more



October 17, 2017

**KST:** SVT members hold up *Ready Or Not: Stories from the Students Behind the Statistics*, after releasing the book at a postsecondary policy symposium in Frankfort



March 20, 2018

**KST:** Students and supporters discuss school safety at SVT-led Teach-In at the Capitol Annex.

self-selected participation. The more fluid and democratic model seemed to work as the next two years saw a burst of activity at the grassroots and grasstops levels alike. Major accomplishments included the release of the *Students as Partners Policy Report* and statewide listening tour to share original research about the role of Kentucky students in formal school decision-making bodies; the publication of *Ready or Not*, a book which featured survey data and stories from hundreds of Kentucky students struggling to transition to college; the launch of the Student Voice Forum, an independent blog; and the creation of the *Powerball Promise Campaign*, which lifted the stories and statistics the team had collected from students to pressure the legislature to ultimately restore \$14 million dollars that had been diverted from the state lottery to support need-based college scholarships for 8,000 additional Kentucky youth.

## 2018 to 2020: Mobilization Circle

As the KSVT entered Years 6 and 7, the organizational structure began to reflect a deepening collaborative culture. Inspired by the Providence Student Union, the Team adapted a model as seen in their *2018 Activation Levels Chart* to capture, explain, and allow for members to move in and out of activism levels throughout the school year and recognize the important role that even seemingly dormant youth and adult allies could play in building a constituency around the work. The year also produced one of the most unusual organizational flow charts yet: a *planetary model* that playfully conveyed just how many different projects were naturally emerging, how many different people were helping to coordinate them, and how they were connected to each other and supported by adult allies.

The visuals reflected yet another period of prolific outputs and the Team's ability to respond rapidly to external developments. This ability was most notably deployed in the wake of a school shooting in Marshall County, Kentucky, which claimed the lives of three high school students there and preceded the Parkland, Florida shooting by just a few weeks. As schools began lockdown drills and legislators began to clamor for a firm response to the violence, the KSVT articulated a counter narrative, based on the research they had conducted about school climate and culture, as well as their continued school climate audits involving thousands of high school students from geographically diverse schools that year. Sharing their expertise first in a series of op-eds, (including *one from March 2018* ahead of a statewide teach-in and *outdoor rally* they organized in the Capital, and then as *testimony* before state and federal legislative commissions) members advocated for solutions that included more attention to “softening” schools with more mental health and social and emotional supports rather than “hardening” them with more school resource

officers, armed teachers, and metal detectors. The Team received widespread coverage from Kentucky news outlets, and their language and emphasis on mental health appeared in [Senate Bill One, the School Safety and Resiliency Act](#), which passed with strong bipartisan support and with an amended nod to the Team that stipulated students must be part of the development of school safety plans going forward.



## 2020 to 2021: The Core Team

As COVID-19 gripped Kentucky and the rest of the country, Year 8 offered proof that the KSVT’s internal structure—one that was led by a deep bench of multiple youth mobilizers, one that valued youth initiative and agency, and one that could count on intergenerational support—was also perfectly positioned to ensure the Team could mobilize to meet the moment.

That moment arrived when Kentucky schools shut down for the pandemic in Spring 2020. Despite uncertainty about student learning under these difficult conditions, the KSVT hit its programmatic stride. Members readily transitioned to the all-virtual environment and, given the additional time that came with learning from home, were able to remain connected and lean into the work more consistently than ever.

At the time, six high school juniors and one college undergraduate—some of whom had been active with the Team since middle school and all of whom had devoted the majority of their high school careers to it—sprang into action. Sensing that the found time during the pandemic afforded them an opportunity to develop new and younger leaders in the group, grant more attention to internal climate and more collaborative work, and ensure a smooth succession when most of them would graduate the next spring, they designed yet another structure they called the Core Team.

Members of the Core 7 met regularly in both youth-only and intergenerational space, as they deemed appropriate. Having honed some specialized skills around the KSVT’s research, podcast, blog, legislative efforts, and school climate work, and having charged themselves with creating opportunities for students to collaborate across the organization, they took it upon themselves to figure out ways to develop and support emerging leaders to replace them.

Among the results was the seminal [Coping with COVID Student-to-Student Study](#). With support and guidance from the “Research Advisory Dream Team,” adult experts from the University of Kentucky and other institutions the KSVT had cobbled together over the years to assist with their research,



August 6, 2020

**KST:** SVT presents COVID study findings.

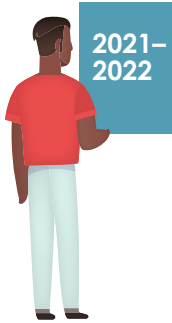


students designed a survey that adapted their school climate audits to gauge how Kentucky middle and high school students were managing learning from home. Educators, administrators, non-profit leaders, and other adults and youth in their extensive network assisted with the dissemination, and the results defied even the seasoned researchers' expectations. Nearly 10,000 students from 119 of Kentucky's 120 counties responded, offering a fount of real-time data about what students were experiencing and needing as Kentucky continued to navigate school decision-making during the pandemic.

Work on the Coping with COVID Student-to-Student Survey would only deepen in the coming months as the intergenerational research team felt a responsibility to share the student voices they had gathered with education decision-makers to inform public conversations. In response to news that a number of funders were looking to invest in youth-driven strategies to address the pandemic, the adult director enlisted the team to help develop a series of development proposals to take the research to the next level. A \$100,000 award from the Institute for Citizens & Scholars in early July 2020, in addition to a number of smaller grants from national funders, allowed the team to do just that.

The unusual funding supported the KSVT's operating expenses, further allowed it to compensate both adult research experts and the nearly two dozen students leading the work, and signaled that the program had gained some serious traction and credibility in student-led education research. The Team applied for and received retroactive approval from the University of Kentucky's Institutional Review Board for the survey and launched a second phase that would also meet the IRB requirements for rigor and include qualitative interviews with students who were underrepresented in the survey results.

Even as the KSVT continues to conduct the longitudinal interviews, it can claim some measurable success in reaching the initiative's original goal: harnessing student voice to better inform Kentucky's education decision-making process through the pandemic. Since releasing their executive summary and a series of regional reports, the KSVT shared its findings in presentations more than thirty times with key local education thought leaders, including the state Board of Education, a state legislative review subcommittee, the school superintendents' association, a number of statewide parent leadership groups, and the Kentucky Department of Education. The group presented results and the research process behind it at the national level to organizations including the Aspen Institute, the National Center for School Climate, the World Affairs Institute, and the Policy Innovators in Education Network, among others. In addition, the research team wrote several local and national articles about the work, was featured in scores of local and national news stories themselves, and even submitted an article for a peer-reviewed academic journal.



## 2021 to 2022: Unicorns, Flowers, and the Move to Independence

Year 9 marked the complete transformation of KSVT’s internal governance structure to a youth-led one as the Team spun off from its parent organization and established its own separate nonprofit. The move to independence in January 2021 was precipitated by continuing programmatic success, unprecedented and youth-generated investment, the full faith and support of adult allies, and the desire of young people leading the work to more fully realize their own agency as co-designers.

With support from the founding director and two founding members who had helped guide the organization since its inception and who were now in their mid-20s, and in preparation for the shift, the Team immediately put a number of provisions in place: They drafted a Memorandum of Understanding to protect their intellectual property and allow for the transfer of some of the funds they had raised; they found a fiscal sponsor to accept and help manage the funds as they worked through tax and other legal issues; they enlisted an attorney to guide them through the filing process for 501(c)(3) status; they communicated the story of their independence through direct conversations with their funders and longtime allies and through a rebranding campaign; they developed bylaws and a minimalist board; and they once again reorganized their internal leadership structure to reflect more practically the collectivist culture to which they had previously aspired.

The KSVT named their new governance model “unicorns.” It was meant to include not only the core team and the emerging leaders the core team had identified to replace them, but also, and crucially, any other member who wanted to take part in strategic decisions going forward. In this way, the unicorns (a name chosen to represent the unusual nature of a collaborative culture that didn’t obsess about hierarchical roles) were meant to be as self-selective as the other components of the organization. The expansive group met regularly to talk through programmatic and operational issues with adult advisors, and a number of new initiatives began to emerge. By the end of the summer, just as most of the core team prepared to begin their new lives as college students and a new crop of students were awaiting orientation, the unicorns began to add some definition to their roles as depicted in one of their most creative organizational graphics yet: [The Flower Flow Chart](#).

The ability to make faster decisions that came with their newfound independence and internal reorganization translated into prolific programmatic outputs at both the legislative and school levels.

At the grasstops, 2021 saw the [#SaveOurSeats Campaign](#), the KSVT’s rapid response to the threat legislators posed when they introduced an amendment that would remove the non-voting student and teacher representatives from the Kentucky Board of Education. Within hours of being alerted by adult allies that a Senate subcommittee would try to adopt the change the next morning, the Team

created a virtual war room and went to work through the night. By early morning, the KSVT had developed a full-blown media campaign and were ready to deploy.

As soon as the amendment to remove the student and teacher representatives from the Board of Education was introduced, a member broke the story in her high school's student newspaper. The Team then launched a petition to gather hundreds of signatures and testimonials from both adults and other young people, had quiet conversations with a number of legislators, ran an **op-ed** in newspapers across the state, and patched together a coalition with various teacher groups and other youth-led organizations they had been working with over the course of several years that brought widespread attention to the cause.

The substitution bill was ultimately removed by conference committee when the House overwhelmingly rejected the change, and the student and teacher seats were enshrined in law by the end of the session.

At the grassroots and in response to the limitations imposed by the pandemic, the Kentucky Student Voice Team expanded its student-led school climate audits and made several key innovations to further democratize the research process. Whereas the Team had previously led the audit process in person and included only those members who could find transportation to make it to the audit site, they transformed the training curriculum into a series of shorter, weekly coaching sessions. They then identified interested students and educators in four geographically diverse middle and high schools to recruit their own intergenerational research teams to meet regularly with the KSVT youth and adult facilitators, designing, conducting, and analyzing **their own climate audits** to share back with their school communities.

# III. THE ROLE OF CO-DESIGN AND CO-LEADERSHIP

The KSVT’s vision for an ideal Kentucky is one in which young people and other educational stakeholders and decision makers co-design a model for more just, democratic schools and communities. The KSVT pictures a future in which—through collaborative work and co-leading practices—all stakeholders can contribute their perspectives and expertise. Young people design and manage initiatives that engage others in developing and implementing goals and metrics, and no single person has total decision-making power over any major activity. Titles are granted as descriptors when they are necessary and often well after work has already begun, and they include an expectation that those in defined roles are centrally charged with supporting other young people to participate in the work. In this way, leadership is as self-selective as membership, with a note that extra support and encouragement to participate and take on defined roles are granted to those who need more of it.

The KSVT prides itself on its strong, impactful youth leadership; young people are at the helm of every layer of design and implementation—yet the organization is not exclusive to young people alone. Adult allies work alternately alongside or in less visible support of young people on everything from ad hoc projects and signature programs to organizational issues such as budgeting, development, membership outreach and external communications. In essence, adult allies help ensure that the KSVT is youth-led. By consciously ceding their own power to students, by providing guidance mainly when needed or requested, and by sharing connections, credibility, and social capital, adults serve as quieter but critical collaborators. And though only young people are thought of as “members” of the Kentucky Student Voice Team, adults are considered vital parts of the “Team”.



## CO-DESIGN

practice that sees young people shape the KSVT to epitomize the values and priorities of the team

## CO-LED

placing young people at the forefront of the work with adult allies helping to build their agency and leadership capacity, while creating a space where all members are heard

# IV. KSVT PRO-TIPS & IMPACT-READY RECOMMENDATIONS

## I. Engage Youth in Every Aspect of the Work

### *Redefine “Youth-Led”*

As an organization, much of the work of the Kentucky Student Voice Team centers around reimagining what “youth-led” looks like. Whereas in the KSVT, young people are themselves refining their vision, setting their priorities, and creating the strategies to accomplish their goals, young people and adults outside of the organization might point to classic school governance structures such as student councils as paragons of student-led programming. But such programs often operate under a structure created and monitored by adults and typically fail to engage young people in the type of work that drives more systemic impact. “Youth-led” does not mean “youth only,” but it does require a conscious shift in the traditional youth/adult dynamic. And so, the challenge is real: that traditional intergenerational dynamic, one in which older people wield the most power to make meaningful decisions, is exactly what is preserved and privileged in a typical high school setting. Defining “youth-led” in this way allows young people in the KSVT to thoroughly elevate and amplify the voices of Kentucky students, as they lead and pioneer the work in an accessible and collaborative manner.

While young people make up the backbone of the KSVT’s programming, much of it would not be possible without the allyship of adults operating in specific and nontraditional ways. A 2021 study of the effectiveness of adults in supporting youth driving education policy change by Holquist & Walls in SAGE Journal provides some evidence. Citing the KSVT as one of two state-based examples, the authors conclude that adults who are successful as allies in such youth-led work tend to follow three essential practices:

1. First, adults are able to provide scaffolding for students to model traditional adult roles like facilitation and interaction with other adults.
  - Successful adult allies choose to cede power when students request it or when students are ready.
2. These adults are able to assist students in overcoming learned or previous helplessness. They are conscious about helping students understand their own power.
3. Successful adult allies demonstrate an ability to help young people understand and navigate tokenism largely by creating spaces for young people to process their experiences and debrief.<sup>1</sup>

### *Sustain the Work*

Just as young people themselves are changing at rapid rates, there is recognition that the KSVT must be able to embrace and accommodate that growth. For that reason, the culture provides room for members continuously to reflect and learn together, and it allows for participants to opt in and out of the work as it progresses and as they juggle competing demands.

Within the organization, particularly over the past year, growth has involved realizing the vision of more just and democratic schools and communities in Kentucky without replicating power imbalances. There is more intentionality around shifting power to those who, because of age, income, race, or other status may otherwise have less of it. And with such strategies as targeted project-based work, more widespread student compensation, and partnerships with adult community leaders, the KSVT is also investing more dedicated

energy in drawing more historically marginalized youth into its ranks and engaging with more urgency in issues of education justice.

Within the KSVT, participants are encouraged not only to co-design the work but also to improve it. Furthermore, though members may need to build consensus and enlist support for plans they would like to implement, they do not need to await permission to address issues as they arise. In this way and because so many people own the challenges of the KSVT, many people also serve as stewards for its long-term success.

### *Practice Co-Design*

The KSVT offers a structure that ensures young people are responsive to a dynamic environment and prioritize student perspectives and needs. That is because within the KSVT, young people are co-designing all elements of operations and programming, a process that includes the practice of conceptualization, prototyping, implementation, and refinement of the work at every turn. It is precisely this co-design process that fosters the type of agency members need to include others with conviction and confidence.

When a student steps up from general membership to a more defined role, typically one that involves mobilizing others around a specific initiative, they are tasked with developing a subculture and community around it that shares their decision-making power and allows for others to exercise agency too. Project and program leads recruit others to their teams, create and facilitate a dedicated Slack channel for reliable communication, determine the balance between synchronous and asynchronous activities, and then work with their own teams to build relationships, develop goals, and create and track metrics for success.

### *Be Transparent*

In entrusting young people with so much responsibility, the Kentucky Student Voice Team requires radical transparency.

The Team promotes numerous Slack channels which anyone can join, and hosts few virtual conversations which are not widely advertised to others too. The KSVT is also open regarding all levels of internal decision-making and has designed a process allowing for all members, regardless of seniority, to self-select into leadership roles.

While in the past, sensitive conversations about such issues as compensation for adults and youth, the selection process for student speakers, and the need for young people to step back from the work could be obscured, the need for transparency at all levels increased exponentially as the organization moved to an independent youth-led one. That is at least in part because in spinning off from the parent organization, youth and older allies landed on the same steep learning curve. As the managing partner put it: “Adults like me are learning right alongside younger people. I have never before managed an entire organizational budget nor had to figure out all the related legal, governance, development and other issues around running our own nonprofit. There is an urgent need—but also great desire—to figure this all out together.”

In the last year, the student leadership Slack channel became public, enabling all members to view and to join it. And since the KSVT became its own independent organization, students have been participating in more operational discussions—work that includes board design, development, and compensation strategies for both personnel and programming.

## II. Build a Collectivist Team Culture (Deemphasize Titles!)

A solid team culture is the building block of any high functioning team. The Kentucky Student Voice Team draws upon a collectivist team culture and organizational structure that, wherever possible, centers

**Collectivist Team Culture:** a culture where the voices of all members are equitably valued and equally respected, creating an inclusive and collaborative flat organization

the interests of the group over those of individuals. Though there is an important relationship between civic virtue and the collectivist culture the Team supports, they are not one in the same.

Unlike civic virtue, a collectivist perspective pushes beyond individual responsibility and centers relationships with others. Collectivism demands non-hierarchical structures, while civic virtue alone can co-exist with more exclusivity. In the context of the KSVT, the purpose is to lower barriers and make sure activities are accessible to all students at all times. In this way, all members of the KSVT community, new and experienced youth and adults alike, can offer meaningful input on operations and programmatic activity.

The self-selected membership structure of the Team serves as a primary example of this collectivist culture. The KSVT does not require an application, particular academic or professional experience, or any dues to join. Instead, the organization integrates new members based largely on their expression of interest. Self-selection extends to different programming and operational teams as well as more defined leadership roles.

Joining the Kentucky Student Voice Team can require some courage. Most students are unfamiliar with co-designing and co-leading such deep, collaborative work, often because the Team supports a deep bench of youth mobilizing other youth around profound and meaningful work with minimal external oversight. But by providing ways for students to engage in activities at a range of entry points as they are willing and comfortable and by valuing their unique lived experience, the KSVT supports students to deepen their capacities and confidence to participate.

Consistent with one of the KSVT's core beliefs that shifting power is a prerequisite to creating more just schools and communities, decisions are made in a transparent, democratic way. The KSVT has not had or needed a strictly defined process for decision-making in most cases but rather applies the norms and values

that guide the Team across the board to decision-making processes. This means not only including as many involved parties as possible in decision-making conversations but in the process through which the norms and values that ungird these decision-making spaces are shaped. Additionally, so many of these norms are learned and unlearned in informal ways—not merely through a conversation in which team members are explicitly discussing them but through engaging in the day-to-day work, always prioritizing relationships and keeping anti-oppression at the center.

Making decisions within a collectivist team culture looks like: equitable attention toward those in the space or those relevant outside of it who are most directly impacted by the issue/s; no person's input or opinion having more weight than anyone else's (except in rare cases i.e. addressing confidential matters); transparency for the sake of record-keeping and those who are not present at the time the decision is made; open-forum decision-making in almost all cases (meaning all members are welcome and encouraged to participate as much or as little as they like).

For the KSVT in recent years, this has known few bounds. High schoolers are key decision makers even—and more accurately especially—with regards to budgeting and finances. The KSVT board meetings are open to all members and the body is deemphasized in favor of the Student Leadership Team and holds little power that the Student Leadership Team does not influence.

### III. Establish Communication System and Norms

A consistent communication platform and system is vital to mobilize members and keep track of different projects and initiatives.

In addition to communications structures, establishing organizational norms is essential to the KSVT's co-design process. By defining the organization's values

and priorities, and inviting students to help test and develop them, the KSVT acclimates new members and builds trust across the organization. Examples of norms include stating pronouns during introductions, being ready and willing to learn, and being respectful when disagreeing. Having a tangible list, or simply stating norms aloud, offers a valuable guide to the culture members are constantly co-creating and refining, and clarity about the way things run is always helpful.

The KSVT uses Slack, a virtual communication platform, which enables members to directly message each other, create group channels for projects they are involved in, and react to messages to signify that they've read them. The Kentucky Student Voice Team coordinates many projects simultaneously, making the function of "channels" in Slack particularly beneficial. The KSVT recognizes that members may not always feel comfortable sending a message to the entire group, so having some option to either create subgroups or directly message other members can help all members feel a sense of belonging. Establishing a balance between formality and informality is important beforehand because members will be deterred from encouraging and "hyping up" others if they do not feel the space allows for that behavior.

The KSVT advises its members to turn notifications on and be as expressive as possible, so that the team can make quick, collaborative decisions. But when a member is found unresponsive, the culture is not punitive. Rather, the assumption is that there must be an important reason why they are not communicating. By checking in and asking directly about a member's capacity to communicate, the team can better appreciate and respond to bandwidth issues and other needs.

In the course of communicating in this way, students also develop a sense of community. Daily and continuously, KSVT members are communicating through various online mediums like Zoom and Slack. Sometimes, these conversations are serious and structured, and sometimes too, they give way to more casual banter. The professional and relational balance fosters the

development of friendships as well as highly engaged and productive teams, which creates a competent and caring environment. This communication also creates a sense of understanding between members who are mindful of one another's work capacity and strive to accommodate their needs. The flexibility affords youth the ability to stay involved and also remain attentive to their external commitments, particularly family and school obligations. The care and attention around individual needs and capacity creates an environment that is empathetic and joyful.

While in-person meetings may work well for many groups, it is also important not to underestimate the possibilities of virtual meetings for youth-led work. Since the COVID-19 pandemic began and since its move to organizational independence, the Kentucky Student Voice Team has become fully virtual. Operating in digital space allows the Team to accommodate students across the state who face transportation and other accessibility barriers while also limiting the overhead costs that come with managing physical property. In the KSVT's case, being fully virtual has also been a tool for ensuring equity as any advantage formerly associated with the ability to show up at a single location at a certain time no longer exists. KSVT's virtual experience has further affirmed that meaningful work does not need to be done in person, and it is entirely possible to build and sustain personal relationships that undergird professional work virtually.

#### **IV. Nothing is Permanent—Adapt + Learn as You Go**

In intergenerational partnerships, adaptability is critical to success in an ever-changing environment, both internally and externally. Within the organization's structure, individuals must be able to accommodate changes involving capacity, project trajectory, leadership structure, etc., initiated by youth leaders or adult allies. It also is important for all members of an organization to be able to learn as they go, especially from one another.



Learning should go both ways because education justice is collaborative; it is vital for all involved in intergenerational partnerships to learn from and grow with each other.

KSVT meetings are rarely monotonous as they are always designed by the members participating. General meetings and events ebb and flow in regard to structure, often testing new methods and strategies. Sometimes, meetings are very organized in terms of an agenda and output goals, but at other times, meetings are more relaxed and social to allow for discussion and brainstorming and fit the needs of the Team in that moment.

Member composition is also constantly evolving, which affects the Team's workflow and dynamics. The work is entirely dependent on the Team, so it is important to accommodate members and allow for them to contribute maximally in the context of their real-time bandwidth. Because of the constant evolution of team composition and practices, the membership team itself constantly revises its recruitment and onboarding strategies to better represent Kentucky youth and ensure that the KSVT's work is reflective of their diversity. The nature of the work allows for even new members to jump in and immediately connect with various ongoing projects. There are no rigid protocols about how work must be done, as KSVT members are continually refining even the most granular details of what a project should look like and opening up the design process to others even as the work unfolds. The adaptability of the Team allows for a rapid response. Members are accustomed to change, which allows them to pivot and mobilize quickly.

Leadership roles within the KSVT are also very fluid. Members will often share responsibilities and lead different components, operating with great flexibility. As young people and as full-time students, KSVT members' availability and capacities are constantly changing, oftentimes without their complete control. As members manage competing demands such as homework, college applications, family obligations,

and other extracurricular interests, and as members graduate high school and abruptly begin new lives, there is ample space for newer people to fill in activity gaps and step up into defined leadership roles. Because of this flexibility within the KSVT organizational structure, and because adults with more agency over their daily lives also can help ensure steady work flows, innovations can bubble up quickly and greater numbers of people can help shape the group's direction.

## V. Build in Monitoring and Evaluation

Doing this work and implementing these kinds of programmatic changes are only half the battle. It is arguably even more critical for an organization to monitor and evaluate their efforts—both to track information to learn from and help improve the organization and to determine whether the organization is having its desired effects.<sup>2</sup> The consistent tracking and collection of both quantitative and qualitative data enables an organization to:

- Track progress towards and be held accountable for their intended impact and theory of change
- Ensure programs are implemented as designed
- Learn about ways to achieve even better results
- Communicate progress and successes both internally and externally to everyone from staff to funders to the broader community
- Gain insights about program effectiveness and what works to prepare for rigorous program evaluations in the long-run<sup>3</sup>

For folks who are new to monitoring and evaluation, it is helpful to start with establishing a mission statement and vision for the future. This exercise is used to develop an organization's purpose and core values. Then it is also beneficial to consider a theory of change

to identify both short and long-term organizational goals and help members decide why and how to make that change happen. After that, the organization will need to identify resources that help them know if they are moving in the right direction, including: making a plan to measure, choosing what to measure, and deciding how to measure it. The metrics they intend to measure themselves against can include:

- Growth in membership
- Number of new projects launched
- Number of youth taking on leadership roles
- Growth in fundraising/financial support from donors

Surveys are an especially valuable tool for how organizations can measure their work, particularly pre- and post-surveys at the start and end of each year.

Pre- and post-surveys are a simple tool and the quickest first step for organizations to take. This creates the opportunity to check in and hear direct feedback from team members and gives members a platform to self-report and help establish benchmarks for future organizational work.

Such surveys are an effective method for obtaining quantitative information through data which can be translated easily into infographics and shared with internal and external parties. Surveys are also a great way of gathering qualitative information through personal feedback and reflections. (This is especially beneficial when tracking the evolution and progression of intangible lessons learned and areas of improvement. For example, an organization interested in evaluating students' civic knowledge could conduct a pre- and post- attitudinal survey to track if their understanding of democratic concepts has improved over time.) Deeper reflections may also be gathered through focus groups, individual interview conversations, and other more time-intensive tools.

Between benchmark pre- and post-surveys, organizations can also send out polls to check in with members periodically throughout the year. Such methods often serve as helpful pulse checks for a group to know that they are on the right track and their efforts are making an impact. This reinforces the notion that maintaining constant communication and encouraging knowledge-sharing across the organization truly benefits all involved.

As an organization gains insights about program effectiveness and what works, it can begin to prepare for a more rigorous program evaluation. The ideal way for an organization to gauge the impact of their work is through an impact evaluation. However, this endeavor is for programs that are stable and unlikely to change in fundamental ways as it is a time-intensive and expensive undertaking that requires at least three years of data and an independent third party for analysis. An impact evaluation is a great option for established organizations who want to replicate or scale up their program and something for new organizations to work towards over time.

# ENDNOTES

- 1 Holquist SE, Walls J. Power and Adult Support in Student Voice Efforts for Policy Change. Educational Policy. July 2021. doi:10.1177/08959048211029027
- 2 Nelson 2020 (Candid Learning)
- 3 The Bridgespan Group, “Measurement, Evaluation, and Learning”, 2015

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