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TRANSFORMATION IN ACTION

Marnie Hazelton

ADVOCACY



Honoring and Empowering Student Voice

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Advocacy: Honoring and Empowering Student Voice

Dr. Marnie Hazelton, Superintendent, Englewood Public School District, New Jersey

The amplification of student's voices flourishes in spaces that provide students with safe spaces to exchange ideas. Surveys are a powerful first step in creating such spaces. A great starting point, surveys enable students to test the waters with initial anonymity. The data from surveys are then used to create student-led councils and advisory boards, with a central focus on concerns flushed out from student surveys.



In Englewood, we adopted the recommendation of a small high school cohort of students interested in starting an afterschool program for peer tutoring. They proposed to create programs where students can mentor or tutor their peers was presented to the board of education and approved.

As superintendent, I make myself available to students during morning arrival and afternoon dismissal. I ensure that administrators support student-run clubs that focus on various interests, including social issues, arts, and academic subjects, allowing students to take leadership roles. I was intentional when forming my superintendent's student advisory councils (SSAC) for high school and middle school students. When I left recruitment of students for SSAC in the hands of building administrators, they gave the applications to the high-performing students. My first meeting with those students was rewarding because the students were articulate, kind, and full of ideas. However, the group lacked diversity, and I even felt uncomfortable.



I had to do a hard reset, and I walked the campus looking for students from more diverse academic backgrounds who also had concerns about their school community. I recruited students from each subgroup, those with behavioral issues, and social-emotional challenges. Post-pandemic, I listened to students share stories about their struggles with mental health and feelings of isolation. The beauty of SSAC is that we discuss issues, but then we take actionable steps towards resolution.

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The outgrowth of our discussion on K-12 mental health challenges facing our students led to a full day of advocacy on Capitol Hill. We took a bold step and decided to research legislation addressing K-12 mental health issues. My students created a one-pager of talking points on Supporting the Mental Health of Educators and Staff Act of 2023 and S.4041 - CARE for Student Mental Health Act. I wrote a mini-grant proposal with our district’s alumni association to take 15 students to Washington, D.C. for a day of advocacy on Capitol Hill. They awarded us funding for an overnight trip to Washington, D.C., which culminated with a tour of The White House.

During our trip to Capitol Hill, young people from my district walked the halls of senate and congressional offices, requesting a few minutes with

elected officials and their support staff to articulate talking points on the importance of funding K-12 mental health initiatives. Initially, our young people spoke in halting, jarring, and passive patterns. By the time students made it to their third and fourth office, they had gained the confidence of seasoned public speakers. Providing opportunity and space for my students to amplify their voices not only on a local level but in the halls of the United States Capitol feeds my soul.

As school leaders, we can empower students to express themselves in safe spaces. We must be intentional in seeking out those students regardless of their academic or social standing within the school community. To quote Henry David Thoreau, “It’s not what you look at that matters, it’s what you see.”



Dr. Marnie Hazelton is the Superintendent of the Englewood Public School District in Englewood, New Jersey. She has received numerous awards and recognitions as a leader in education, and has been recognized as a Voice of Influence on LinkedIn. Marnie is a Worthy Educator Champion who is committed to elevating and amplifying student voice.

