for schools:
supporting student voice in disaster recovery

Student voice is about acknowledging that young people are experts in their own lives, and have the right and desire to be actively involved in the decisions that impact them. When schools engage young people as active participants in their school community, with the right to make choices and the ability to contribute to decisions affecting them, it builds a sense of empowerment and self-worth, develops leadership skills and creates a positive school environment.

Why is student voice important in disaster recovery?

Student voice is important in all aspects of the school community – including disaster recovery. Sometimes during disasters or times of crisis, children and young people can feel helpless and invisible. While this may not be done intentionally, it's important that children and young people are engaged in disaster recovery as they can offer unique experiences and perspectives.

The Children & Young People's Experience of Disaster 2020 report spoke to hundreds of children and young people about their experiences of natural disasters including drought, bushfires and floods. The report found that many children and young people were not given opportunities to participate in disaster management and response, despite repeatedly expressing a desire to do so. This report highlighted that involving children and young people in community preparation, response and recovery provides agency, reduces anxiety and nurtures a sense of community belonging and connectedness.

How can we meaningfully engage students in this work?

Student voice activities and mechanisms exist on a spectrum, from inform (where students are informed of decisions) to enable (where students develop and lead their own solutions and decisions). While these ideas and mechanisms all add value in different ways, it's crucial to consider how school leaders are listening to and engaging students meaningfully.

Before commencing student voice activities, school leaders should consider if the school community is culturally ready for student engagement, preventing student voice from becoming tokenistic. This includes ensuring teachers are ready to hear from students, that school leaders are willing to work collaboratively with students, and that students feel capable and ready to speak up.

If you are looking to embark on and embed student voice in your school community, or would like to enhance current processes, we invite you to consider the following questions:

1 Do students have the skills needed to share their voice? If not, how can we develop these skills?

2 Is the school community ready to listen to students and allow them to lead change? How could you find this out from staff? How could this be implemented into the school's action plan?

3 What structures and processes are in place to support student voice, agency and leadership in the school community?

4 What services are available in the local community to support this? For example, local headspace centre or local council?

Ensuring safety

Just like any other time we engage students; we must ensure we're doing this safely. Here are some things to keep in mind when engaging young people in student voice activities:

- Be aware that during the disaster recovery phase, many or all of the people involved in supporting student voice inclusion will have been exposed to the incident, to varying degrees. This exposure is likely to have a different impact on each individual. It is important to ensure that the management of these sessions is consistent with guidelines supporting safe recovery activities.

- Build student capacity and teach them the skills to participate and advocate for their needs. Training may be available through relevant state-based youth peak bodies or the local council.

- Ensure students are made privy to the agenda and know their role and responsibilities prior to committing to attending meetings.

- If students are attending adult-led meetings, it's best practice to have two or more young people attend so that mutual support can be provided, and one student doesn't feel responsible for representing the whole school community.

- Find ways to reduce institutionalised hierarchy. For example, use first names for everyone in the meeting, rather than Mr or Ms. For more ideas on including students in adult-led meetings, see the Student Voice Hub.

- Have a teacher who is supporting the students in their participation. This teacher may be able to brief students on the context of the engagement or be physically present to advocate and ensure that young people are given the opportunities to meaningfully contribute.

- It's important to check in with students prior to student engagement around disaster recovery, to ensure that the student is in a healthy headspace ahead of engagement. This could be done in a number of ways, either through formal and informal supports depending on what is available and the needs of the student, e.g. the schools internal student welfare team, or through another support system which is available for students to debrief with.

- Ensure there are feedback mechanisms in place to respond to students' input. Young people can become disengaged and disappointed with the process if they don't feel like they are being heard. While not all ideas young people share must be implemented, it's important to respond to the ideas and issues they raise and acknowledge what you have done with this feedback.

Ideas and suggestions:

1. Support two or more students to attend disaster recovery planning meetings with your school.

2. Support two or more students from your school to attend local community disaster recovery meetings (for more information see the Student Voice Hub).

3. Have a student suggestion box set up in the library.

4. Ask feedback from student representatives across year levels. You may already have a Student Representative Council that does this.

5. Enable students to conduct student-led surveys.

6. Connect with services such as your local headspace centre or local council to see what work they are doing and if it is appropriate for your students to be involved.

7. Get students to lead community development activities such as: community tree planting, organising or being involved in a concert in their community, hosting a sports carnival with other local schools, leading community education activities around disaster preparedness (e.g. making posters or writing editorials for local newspapers) or involvement with an external creative organisation, such as Creative Recovery.

Find out more:

- Student Voice Hub, Resource Hub
- Office of the Advocate for Children and Young People, Children & Young People's Experience of Disaster 2020 Report
- Running a Student Forum

Examples of student involvement:

- Australian Institute of Disaster Recovery – Details the long-term bushfire education partnership between Anglesea Primary School and the local CFA, and other disaster-related school projects.
- Emerging Minds – Details the Bushfire Education Partnership operating in Strathewen and Arthur's Creek.

Other resources:

- Emerging Minds – Featuring a podcast about involving children in disaster preparedness.
- VIC Department of Education – Amplify, a practice guide on empowering students through voice, agency and leadership.
- NSW Department of Education – Student leadership resources.

headspace centres and services operate across Australia, in metro, regional and rural areas, supporting young Australians and their families to be mentally healthy and engaged in their communities.

headspace is committed to embracing diversity and eliminating all forms of discrimination in the provision of health services. headspace welcomes all people irrespective of ethnicity, lifestyle choice, faith, sexual orientation and gender identity.

headspace would like to acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as Australia's First People and Traditional Custodians. We value their cultures, identities, and continuing connection to country, waters, kin and community. We pay our respects to Elders past and present and emerging and are committed to making a positive contribution to the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people, by providing services that are welcoming, safe, culturally appropriate and inclusive.