

IF I SPOKE UP

The Conditions That Shape Student Civic Voice



During the 2025-26 school year, YouthTruth asked more than 35,000 middle and high school students a simple question to better understand how they would use their voices if given the opportunity:

"Imagine students were included in important decisions—in your community, at school, or even nationally. What is the first thing you would speak up about?"



FINDING 1

A majority of students want to use their voice to advocate for concrete ways schools could better support learning and well-being.

Meanwhile, 14 percent of high school students and 10 percent of middle school students doubt their voice matters.

"I want to feel like I'm able to be with people from many different backgrounds and people of different genders and styles without it feeling weird or un-cool."

—7th grade student on Well-Being & Belonging

"Si hubiera una oportunidad, hablaría sobre la importancia de cómo cada niño tiene derecho a ser libre sobre su asiento y no tener preocupación que nuestra familia sea libre de salir sin que inmigración los lleve." | "If I had the chance, I would talk about how important it is that every child has the right to choose where they sit and not have to worry that our family might be taken away by immigration."

—12th grade student on Social & Political Issues



FINDING 2

For marginalized students, civic participation begins with feeling safe and included.

Thirty-seven percent of LGBTQIA+ students would choose to speak about well-being and belonging, compared to 30 percent of non-LGBTQIA+ students.

"Kids are casually racist and homophobic without seeing it as a big deal."

—11th grade student

"I've been talked about behind my back for being transgender. It feels really painful. I want that to stop."

—7th grade student



FINDING 3

Middle school is a critical time for developing the confidence to speak up.

The percent of students who express uncertainty or disengagement more than doubles from eight percent in eighth grade to 17 percent in ninth grade.

"I get scared talking about important things and often get embarrassed when I try, so I wouldn't say anything."

—7th grade student

"No adults really care about what the students say. They probably will just have us 'speak up' and fix minor, irrelevant issues to make us feel like we made a difference."

—Middle school student



FINDING 4

High school boys are most likely to doubt their voices can make a difference.

1 in 6 boys questioned whether adults would listen or whether they could influence decisions in their communities.

"Even if I was included, almost nobody would listen to me."

—9th grade student

"I wouldn't speak about any issues because I wouldn't know how to convey my ideas."

—11th grade student



FINDING 5

Belonging determines what students speak up about—and whether they speak up at all.

Students with a strong sense of belonging often expressed greater confidence in using their voice to improve their schools.

"There should be a course where students can find motivation to explore topics beyond academics, like starting an independent research project or a community service drive. I just think we need to make students realize that they can make a difference in the world."

—8th grade student

"A lot of students struggle with stress, anxiety, and other issues, but sometimes we don't know who to talk to or how to get help. Having more support and ways to talk about these things would really make a difference and help everyone feel safer and more understood."

—8th grade student