LEARNING OUT LOUD:
ELEVATING STUDENT VOICES IN EDUCATION

Engaging students as active partners in their own educational experiences can be a powerful lever to improve outcomes. Research has shown that when students have choice, control, and leadership opportunities, their motivation and engagement increase, which in turn is associated with better educational outcomes.[i]

Yet, schools often make decisions about instruction, discipline, and other schoolwide policies without student involvement—even though students are intended to be the main beneficiaries of these decisions. More broadly, the typical school day often leaves little time or space for students to openly voice their concerns and communicate honestly about the challenges they face as young people.

Learn more about the Expanded Success Initiative on page 13

This guide highlights the work of two New York City high schools—Brooklyn Preparatory Academy and Academy for Young Writers (AYW)—that have launched programs designed to elevate students' voices. These programs stemmed from the schools' participation in NYC's Expanded Success Initiative, an effort to improve college and career readiness for Black and Latino young men. Educators in these schools believe that promoting student voice can help foster stronger relationships, increase student engagement, and better prepare students for college and careers.

The schools featured in this guide have created programs that provide opportunities for students to practice leadership skills, advocate for their needs and social identities, and play a role in making important decisions for their school communities.

The Research Alliance for New York City Schools

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This guide outlines two programs:

- Gender Sexuality Alliance at the Academy for Young Writers: a student-led program that strives to create a safe space to talk about race, gender, and sexuality and empower students to take an active leadership role in shaping a school community free of homophobia and transphobia.
- Social Justice Panels at Brooklyn Preparatory High School: a program that allows students to decide disciplinary outcomes for their peers, while providing an alternative to traditional disciplinary options, particularly suspensions.

Along with a detailed description, we provide materials used in each program (see the "Tools for Educators" section of the guide).

We hope these resources will be useful for other schools working to provide safe spaces that nurture students' growth and critical thinking, leadership and voice.

When you see the book icon, visit the attached "Tools for Educators" document to find resources that educators and students used as part of the featured programs. Feel free to modify these as needed for your own school.

GENDER SEXUALITY ALLIANCE

ACADEMY FOR YOUNG WRITERS

THE GENDER SEXUALITY ALLIANCE AIMS TO PROVIDE A SAFE SPACE TO OPENLY ADDRESS ISSUES OF SOCIAL IDENTITY TOGETHER, WITH THE GOAL OF EMPOWERING INDIVIDUAL STUDENTS AND POSITIVELY INFLUENCING THE LARGER SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT.

Staff at the Academy for Young Writers (AYW) believe that creating an inclusive, empowering school environment allows students to perform better academically. With this goal in mind, the school provides students with opportunities to safely address issues of social identity with others.

The school's Gender Sexuality Alliance (GSA) embodies this emphasis on student voice and empowerment. GSA allows students to engage in conversations with peers and supportive adults about the intersection of race, gender, and sexuality, and about how students engage with these aspects of their identities in everyday life. GSA focuses on issues weighing on students' mind, from their personal lives as well as events in the news.

AYW staff believe that creating a formal structure for GSA, encouraging students to take on leadership roles, and holding regular meetings has allowed students to have a positive influence on the larger school community.

About Academy for Young Writers[ii]	
Neighborhood	East New York
Borough	Brooklyn
Grade levels served	6-12
Number of students	584
Admission Criteria	Limited Unscreened
Demographics	
Asian	1%
Black	74%
Latino	22%
White	1%
English language learners	1%
Students with special needs	19%
Student attendance rate	89%
Shared space	Yes

The Research Alliance for New York City Schools

The Basics

- About 15 students attend each meeting. Students can attend as often as they like.
- The group is supported by two teachers and the principal of the school.
- Students and staff meet twice a week during lunchtime in a designated classroom. Holding GSA during lunch ensures that it doesn't conflict with other programming.
- GSA is promoted through word of mouth, announcements, and flyers. At least once a year, members in grades 10-12 visit all 9th grade classes and share their experiences in the club.

Program Origins

The GSA was launched in the 2013-2014 school year by two teachers who knew that students were talking to each other about identity-related issues, and wanted to create a space for structured conversations about these topics with adult guidance. One of these teachers had worked in a school with a Gay Straight Alliance and used this as a model for the group that AYW was developing. AYW staff and students changed the name from the "Gay Straight Alliance" to the "Gender Sexuality Alliance" to ensure that students felt included even if they did not identify as gay or straight.

GSA Activities

GSA coordinates school-wide events as well as members-only activities designed to promote building an inclusive community and GSA pride. Many of these activities were designed or led by students.

Creating Inclusive Community

- **Pronoun Awareness Day:** Students passed out stickers to the school community that say "Hello my name is_____" and have a space for individuals to indicate their gender pronoun. Students and staff members were encouraged to wear the name tags all day.

- **Day of Silence:** Approximately 200 students committed to staying silent for the first four periods of the day plus lunch, both in and outside of the classroom, to represent the impact of bullying and silencing LGBTQ students. Students also placed rainbow tape over their mouths.

- **Bullying Awareness and Prevention:** Club members posted flyers around the school featuring the #StandUpAgainstBullying hashtag. Students also made pledges such as "I pledge to not be afraid to be myself/stand out [Student Name]" or "I pledge to be considerate of other people's feelings [Student Name]." Pledges were posted around the school on bulletin boards.

- **"Safe Space" Stickers:** Small square stickers with the LGBTQ rainbow flag and the words "safe space" were placed in every room in the school to remind students to reject discriminatory language against other members of the school community.

Building GSA Pride

- **Celebrating Pride:** Throughout the month of June (LGBT Pride Month), GSA members (students and staff) wore rainbow stickers to show support to LGBTQ people in the school community.

- **Field Trips:** The GSA took field trips to locations across NYC with relevance to LGBTQ history and pride. Past trips include The Stonewall Inn (considered to be the birthplace of the Gay Rights Movement); a tour of Manhattan's West Village that traces the development of the Gay Rights Movement in Manhattan; and a visit to the Hetrick-Martin Institute, a direct service and advocacy organization for LGBTQ rights.

"GSA to me means a place I can feel safe. We've always been an open community and accepting of students and/or staff **regardless of gender identity, sexuality, religion, etc.**"
-- *Academy for Young Writers Student, GSA Member*

Sample GSA Meeting	
Setup and student arrival	Before each meeting, teachers order food (using the club's budget). GSA staff leaders believe that food helps bring people together. Students set up and help distribute the food. Student leaders and staff arrange the room in a circle, with the goal of making all students feel equal and included.
Introductions	A student facilitator leads a check-in. Everyone in attendance is asked to introduce themselves with their name, preferred gender pronoun (e.g., they/them/theirs, he/him/his, she/her/hers, or their name) and how they are feeling on a scale of 1-10. Students are allowed to expand on why they feel that way, but are not required to share more than they want. Both practices have a purpose: Asking students to share their gender pronouns is designed to make their voices heard and affirm their gender identity. Checking in supports the student's presence and highlights any themes or events that are on participants' minds.
Conversation	If the check-in reveals that students want to talk about a current event or a particular topic, the student and teacher co-leaders will give the group the option of continuing that discussion. Otherwise, the session will focus on planning for an upcoming trip or school-wide GSA initiative.

How GSA Elevates Students Voices

- Students practice "one mic," which means that only one person speaks at a time. At the beginning of each meeting, a student leader is responsible for writing on a board a list of students who would like to speak. This student leader is also responsible for making sure that students who decide to speak later in the conversation are given a chance to participate without cutting off other students.

- During and between meetings, students check in with each other to see how they are feeling in general and about the GSA, and to make sure they're feeling safe and secure. Students alert a staff member if there is any concern about a peer's safety.

- Staff noted that students in the GSA are thinking more critically about their identity and the way in which the school is supporting their identity and personal growth. They also reported that schools can play an important role by offering a safe space for students who are not able to have these conversations with their families or home communities. They believe that exposing students to role models who share their identity (e.g., as people of color or LGTBQ people) can help empower students to express their own identities.

Challenge: Counteracting Bias and Discrimination

AYW staff explained that GSA has led to open conversations about tackling homophobia and transphobia, particularly as they intersect with race. While GSA staff believe that it is their job to welcome and affirm students' identities in a discrimination-free environment, they have also faced challenges. GSA staff suggested that schools consider the following issues:

- Some students in GSA have not shared aspects of their identity with their family, which means they cannot be included in GSA photos or attend certain activities in public spaces. Schools should consider developing activities that provide safety for students and staff who are not ready or comfortable with aspects of their identity being made public. Other practices emphasized by AYW staff include thanking students for sharing their identities and their stories and promptly responding to any reported bullying.
- The GSA's focus on the intersection of race, gender, and sexuality challenges biases held by staff, students and the larger community. Not all staff and student community members participate in campus-wide events or have shown support for GSA programming. Schools should consider that talking about social identity may be challenging for some students and staff, and spark potentially tense conversations about inclusion in and out of the classroom.

*"I'm the only trans-male here, and I go to GSA to connect to others who are for the LGBTQ community and who are part of the community, so **I feel like I'm not alone in this.**" - Academy for Young Writers Student, GSA Member*

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SOCIAL JUSTICE PANELS

BROOKLYN PREPARATORY HIGH SCHOOL

THE SOCIAL JUSTICE PANELS GIVE STUDENTS A ROLE IN DECIDING DISCIPLINARY OUTCOMES FOR THEIR PEERS, WHILE PROVIDING AN ALTERNATIVE TO SUSPENSIONS.

Brooklyn Preparatory High School's Social Justice Panels were born out of the school's effort to reduce its suspension rate and empower its students to play an active role in disciplinary issues. Students serve on panels called to address specific behavioral incidents. Students who are believed to have committed an infraction are brought in front of the Social Justice Panel to discuss their behaviors and the impact of that behavior on the school community. The student-led panel then has the power to decide the consequences that their peer will face, with a focus on preventing repeat infractions. The Social Justice Panel was spearheaded by an Assistant Principal who had seen it work well at a previous school.

About Brooklyn Preparatory High School[iii]	
Neighborhood	Crown Heights
Borough	Brooklyn
Grade levels served	9-12
Number of students	513
Admission Criteria	Limited Unscreened
Demographics	
Asian	2%
Black	52%
Latino	42%
White	1%
English language learners	2%
Students with special needs	16%
Student attendance rate	87%
Shared space	Yes

The Basics

*"It's like **you get a good feeling when you know that you've helped a person choose a different path in this way**—this can affect their life not only in school but outside of school." - Academy for Young Writers Student, GSA Member*

- Approximately 15-20 students serve as panelists in two different Social Justice Panel classes.

- The Social Justice Panels meet during school for a full class period, four days a week.

- Two guidance counselors facilitate the Social Justice Panels (one per class).

- Students take the Social Justice Panel class for an elective credit. The facilitators try to steer away students who are placed in the class simply because it fits into their schedule. The goal is to ensure that the class is composed of students who are genuinely interested in participating.

- Some students enroll in the Social Justice Panel class because they were previously involved in an incident that was reviewed by the panel, and found that it was a meaningful experience. Other students want to help their classmates and share advice with peers. Many students choose to enroll in the class multiple times, after having an initial positive experience.
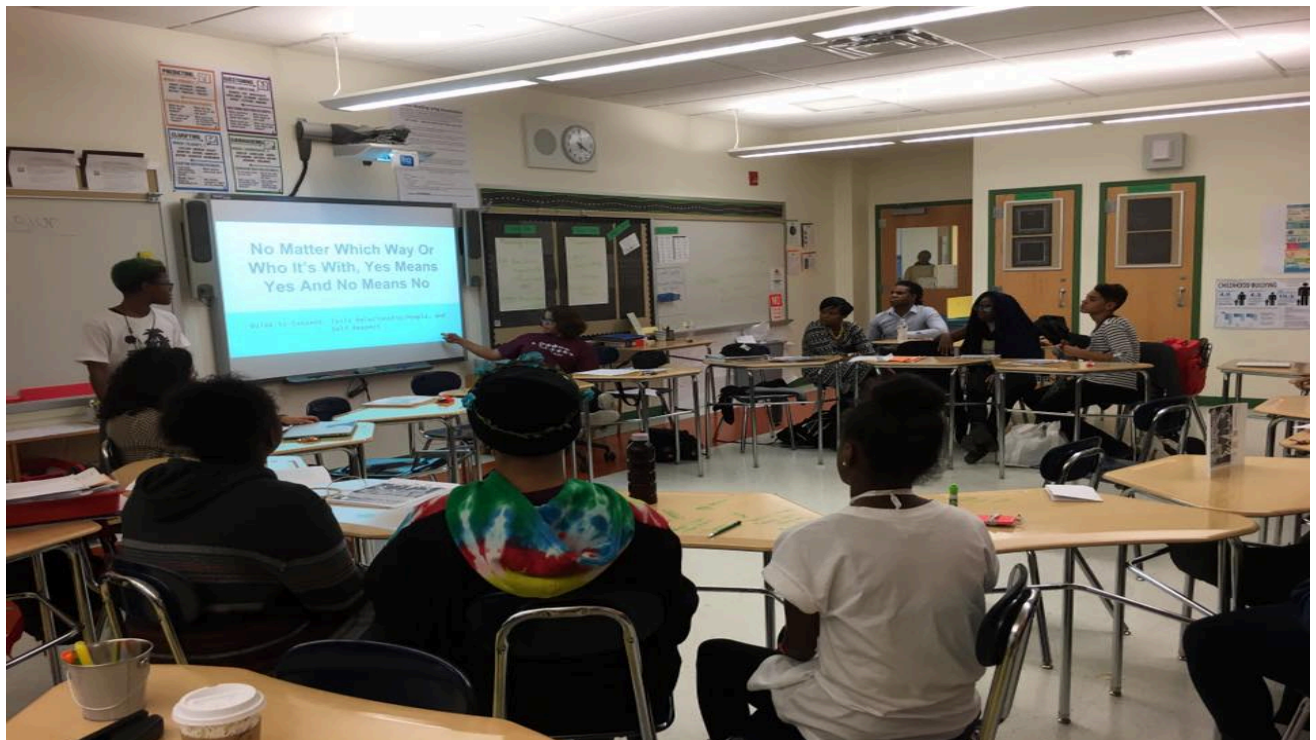
Student Training

- The first few weeks of each semester are spent preparing panelists for their role. The facilitators lead icebreakers to build rapport among the members of the group. Students also receive formal training for several weeks, including:
    - Case studies. Students discuss sample cases on topics such as student absences; students disruptively talking in class; students skipping class; students using a disruptive tone or words, etc. The case studies provide panelists with the opportunity to work as a group and think through decisions that they'll likely face in real-life cases.
    - Community contracts. Students work together to create a set of rules and expectations that members of their group are expected to uphold.
    - Conflict resolution trainings. Facilitators provide tools for addressing disagreement between the panelists.
    - General preparation, including discussion of a handout of sample questions to ask during cases and a fact sheet on Social Justice Panels (the underlying principles, how cases are referred to the panel, etc.).

The Social Justice Panel Process

- Throughout the term, when students are accused of committing an in-school infraction, they are referred to a Social Justice Panel by a teacher or administrator (some infractions, such as fighting, may not be eligible for a referral). Many students opt to have their case heard by a panel, rather than receiving discipline from an administrator. On average, each panel reviews six to eight cases per term.
- When there is no case to hear, students write and reflect on current events. Guidance counselors felt that this has led to improved attitudes towards writing.

Tools for Educators:

Community Contract

Case Study

Tools for Educators:

Justice Panel Sanction Form

Justice Panel Hearing Rubric

Justice Panel Fact Sheet

Sample Social Justice Panel Meeting	
Setup and Student Arrival	• Staff records attendance and greets panelists as they enter. • Students and the staff facilitator discuss upcoming cases. • Cases are introduced by reading a document with the name of the student involved, who brought forward the charge, and the date and time of the incident. • After panelists review the upcoming case, the student referred to the panel comes into the room. The referred student and the panelists sit in a circle.
Hearing Cases	• Student panelists ask the student sitting before them questions (e.g., whether they agree with the charge, what they would have done differently if they could change the situation, what they learned from the behavior they are being asked to correct). There is no formal protocol; student panelists have the authority to decide which questions to ask. • Members of the Social Justice Panel are designated to take notes. • After hearing from all individuals involved in a case, panelists deliberate in consultation with the guidance counselor.
Deciding and Concluding Cases	• Panelists decide how the accused students will be "restored" to good standing in the school community. Typical consequences include requiring that the student have each teacher sign an attendance sheet (to confirm they went to class) or a conduct sheet to track and document positive behavior. More importantly, the panel provides an opportunity for students to face their peers and share the impact of their actions. Through these conversations, the panel aims to restore broken trust and communication among students in the school community. • All participating students sign the Social Justice Logbook, a written log of all cases brought before the panel. • Panelists complete an in-school sanction sheet. The sheet summarizes the type of infraction and records whether the student appearing before the panel was receptive to the discussion and the suggested sanction, including obtaining the students' signatures. • Panelists also complete a self-survey to evaluate their individual contribution to each case.

How the Social Justice Panels Elevate Student Voice

The panel encourages peers to learn from each other. As one guidance counselor described, students "can see there are better ways to go about [doing] things." For high school students, peers can be a powerful motivator to reflect on and change behavior. Staff also reported that the Social Justice Panels have empowered students by giving them ownership over a process typically managed by adults.

Challenge: When Not to Use a Social Justice Panel

Students believe that some cases should be addressed by staff. One student said, "I think that in some specific cases, it's too much for us [students]. For example, there was a case where a student came back from suspension, and was attempting to bring drugs in the school. I don't think that we should've had that case because we were like that's something that should have been private with the teacher instead of letting more students know." School staff should be sensitive when deciding whether their cases are appropriate for a student-led panel.

This guide was authored by Linda Tigani, Tony Laing, and Adriana Villavicencio.

About the Expanded Success Initiative

In August 2011, New York City launched the Young Men's Initiative, a combination of new programs and policy reforms designed to address higher rates of poverty, incarceration, and unemployment among young Black and Latino men. Of the $127 million being invested in this effort, $24 million was dedicated to the Expanded Success Initiative (ESI), which aims to increase college readiness and other key outcomes for Black and Latino male students in the City. A substantial part of that funding supported the development and expansion of programming in 40 NYC high schools, with the ultimate goal of identifying and disseminating successful practices that might be scaled up to other schools across the district.

The Research Alliance for New York City Schools led a mixed-methods, longitudinal evaluation to learn about the services and supports schools provided through ESI, and to measure ESI's impact on a set of academic and social and emotional outcomes. To learn more about our evaluation, please visit our website: http://steinhardt.nyu.edu/research_alliance/research/projects/esi_evaluation

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Notes

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[ii] See: http://schools.nyc.gov/OA/SchoolReports/2015-16/School_Quality_Snapshot_2016_HS_K404.pdf
[iii] See: http://schools.nyc.gov/OA/SchoolReports/2015-16/School_Quality_Snapshot_2016_HS_K488.pdf
To learn more about our evaluation of the Expanded Success Initiative, please visit our website: http://steinhardt.nyu.edu/research_alliance/research/projects/esi_evaluation

The Research Alliance for New York City Schools

The Research Alliance for New York City Schools conducts rigorous studies on topics that matter to the City's public schools. We strive to advance equity and excellence in education by providing nonpartisan evidence about policies and practices that promote students' development and academic success.

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