

# Elevating Student Voice in School Communications

A Data-Informed Look  
at Emerging Practices  
in School PR



A joint project of

the leader in school communication  
**nspra** +  **SchoolStatus**

# Foreword



*At the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA), we believe that effective communication is at the heart of strong schools. As education evolves, so too do the ways we connect with the students we serve—not only by communicating about them, but with them.*

*Over the years, we've heard growing curiosity from our members about how to more intentionally elevate student voices. SchoolStatus, our collaborator on this project, was also curious about how the results might inform its work to connect school communities through solutions focused on student attendance, family engagement and educator development. This report is in response to that interest.*

*School communicators don't just share information. They shape perceptions, build trust and create space for voices that may otherwise go unheard. By including students directly in communications efforts—through stories, direct messaging or internships—districts can support student well-being, improve academic and behavioral outcomes and build more authentic relationships with the communities they serve.*

*While this work is still emerging, it reflects a broader shift toward more student-centered communication practices. We hope the insights and examples shared here will spark ideas, conversations and action in your own school community.*

*Barbara M. Hunter, APR*

Barbara M. Hunter, APR, Executive Director



*In my role, I see daily how the right communication tools can transform student engagement. My professional passion grew out of my personal high school experience as a chronically absent student.*

*One day, as I arrived late, the receptionist asked me to cover the front desk for her for a few minutes. What a thrill! Working that switchboard and helping people find their way gave me a sense of purpose. From that day forward, I had a daily volunteer gig covering her lunch—and suddenly I had a reason to show up every single day.*

*This experience taught me what the data confirms: when students have authentic ways to contribute and feel heard, it transforms their relationship with school.*

*At SchoolStatus, we partner with educators to make these connections possible—providing the right tools and insights to help schools reach every student with personalized, meaningful outreach.*

*The strategies outlined in this report focus on creating the conditions where every student has a reason to be in school, because, after all, that's where it all starts.*

*Kara Stern*

Dr. Kara Stern, Director of Education



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## Executive Summary

*In Spring 2025, the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA) surveyed members to explore how schools are engaging students more directly in their communications. The snapshot of responses from school PR professionals shed light on emerging strategies, common hurdles and the potential impacts of student-centered communication practices. With this data as a backdrop, NSPRA collaborated with SchoolStatus to deepen this exploration, sharing real-world examples from both NSPRA members and SchoolStatus customers. These insights highlight how districts are successfully incorporating student voices into their communication efforts, offering innovative and inclusive strategies that can foster stronger student connections and positively impact attendance and engagement.*

### Key Findings

The survey results reveal a variety of approaches and challenges districts face as they work to elevate student voices. Some districts are making significant progress, while others are just beginning to incorporate student input into their communications. The following key findings capture the most common strategies, trends and barriers identified by school PR professionals striving to engage students as active participants in communication efforts:

- ✓ Video is the most common format used to elevate student voice, followed by student-led events and first-person written stories.
- ✓ Equity efforts around student storytelling vary significantly. While some districts say they intentionally recruit students with diverse perspectives, fewer encourage multilingual storytelling or provide structured support to help students share their stories.
- ✓ Direct-to-student communication is gaining traction, with some districts using messaging tools to build trust and improve students' academic outcomes.

- ✓ Internship programs and ambassador roles are giving students real-world experience while also empowering them to contribute to their schools' communication efforts.
- ✓ Districts not yet elevating student voices cite a lack of staff capacity or not having considered it as the main reasons.

### Early Impact Stories

Open-ended responses from participants offer promising glimpses of progress:

- ✓ Districts reported increased engagement when students helped create content.
- ✓ Internship and ambassador programs have expanded significantly in some places, building leadership skills and stronger district-student relationships.
- ✓ Several districts described greater trust and authenticity in their messaging when students were included in the planning and production process.



## Why This Matters

These findings reflect a broader shift in school communication: from talking about students to communicating with them. Including students as storytellers, message recipients and collaborators isn't just a feel-good initiative—it can be a strategy that supports belonging, well-being and student success.

"Start small and be intentional. Most importantly, create space for [students'] voices to be heard and valued—they bring insights that adults often miss."

—Survey respondent

## Introduction and Background

*This report, developed by NSPRA in collaboration with SchoolStatus, explores how school districts are beginning to engage students more intentionally in their communications practices. From first-person storytelling to direct-to-student messaging to internship opportunities, the findings offer a glimpse of current strategies, perceived benefits and emerging challenges.*

*By examining how districts are using—or considering—these approaches, the report highlights a growing interest in student voice as a strategic way to build trust, foster engagement and improve outcomes.*

## Defining Student Voice in School Communications

In this report, student voice refers to the ways in which students are engaged as active participants in school and district communication efforts—not just as audiences, but as storytellers, collaborators and contributors.

The survey explored three core strategies districts are using:

- 💡 **First-person storytelling:** Inviting students to share their experiences and perspectives in their own words.
- 💡 **Direct-to-student messaging:** Treating students as a key audience for timely, relevant information.
- 💡 **Official student roles in communications:** Involving students in communication work through internships or ambassador programs.

## Who Participated

The data in this report is based on a national survey of NSPRA members conducted between April 30 and May 14, 2025. The survey was sent to 2,957 potential participants and received 185 total responses, including 128 complete and 57 partial submissions—a response rate of 6.3% with a margin of error of  $\pm 7.2\%$ .

The majority of respondents (84%) work in K–12 public school districts, with 60% serving districts under 10,000 students. Most (78%) are communications directors or hold similar leadership roles, and 77% work in communications offices with four or fewer staff members.

While the survey responses aren't fully representative of the field, the findings point to meaningful insights into how some districts are approaching student voice—and signal an opportunity for broader adoption.

## Listening to Students in Small, Strategic Ways

*Elevating student voice doesn't have to begin with a big initiative.*

Sometimes, the most meaningful steps are simple: including a student quote in a newsletter, sending information directly to students or asking them what kind of communication matters most to them.

As part of the survey, respondents were invited to share insights they had gathered from directly surveying students about their communication preferences. While only a small subset of respondents (8%) had conducted such surveys with students, their responses reveal consistent themes about what students want to know and how they prefer to receive information.

Specifically, these respondents indicated that students:

- ✓ Seek updates about how they're doing in school and what they're expected to learn.
- ✓ Want more details shared about classroom events, clubs and activities.
- ✓ Have a desire for their opinions and perspectives to be shared and valued.

Additional comments suggest that students want to feel included and informed—especially when communication is timely, clear and personally relevant. The data also highlighted preferences for communication frequency (weekly was most common) and platforms (email, in-class announcements and digital tools).

As districts look to meet these preferences, some are starting to use tools that support direct, timely communication with students. For example, tools like [SchoolStatus Connect](#) enable educators to send two-way messages via text to families and students, making it easy to share updates, answer questions and document follow-up conversations. This kind of communication can help students feel seen, supported and connected to their learning experience.

# Survey Findings: The State of Student Voice


## Sharing Students' Words and Perspectives

More than half of survey respondents (52%) report that their districts currently share student stories in students' own words, and another 16% are considering doing so. Among those who do neither, the majority (69%) said their districts simply haven't explored the idea.

Although many districts are prioritizing student voices in their communications, there is a noticeable gap in the strategic approach to these efforts. While 23% of districts began sharing first-person student stories as part of a strategic plan goal, and 55% have identified it as a strategy within their communications plan, a significant number of districts are not fully integrating these efforts into a broader strategic framework.

For instance, just 30% of districts compare the performance of student-led content to staff-created content, either formally or through informal observation, suggesting that these initiatives may not be systematically evaluated for their impacts. Among those that do assess performance, the results are promising—96% report that student-led content receives at least the same level of engagement as staff-created content, which includes the 61% who say it generates higher engagement.

More importantly, districts that have built student storytelling into their communications report improvements in



"Students lend a unique perspective on the topics that they want to celebrate and promote."

—Survey respondent

family engagement, with students gaining confidence, feeling seen and valued, and experiencing a stronger sense of school pride, as well as increased trust and more authentic messaging. Most respondents believe that students' participation in communications fosters a deeper sense of belonging and connection to their school community. However, when it comes to the impact on attendance, behavior and academic performance, the majority of school communicators are uncertain, pointing to an opportunity for broader exploration.

## How Districts Share Student Stories

Survey data shows that video storytelling dominates, with 81% of districts using this method for sharing student voices through student-created content and/or interviews. These videos typically highlight individual student experiences as they arise or focus on timely, relevant themes and topics. In most of these districts, communications staff are responsible for capturing the video content, although nearly half also involve student videographers.

Additionally, some districts are taking steps to enhance student-created content by providing access to equipment and/or studio space, with 65% making such investments.

Other methods of showcasing student voices include student-led school or community events such as panels, forums and presentations (37%) and written stories (29%). Interestingly, while students participating in first-person storytelling are most often of high school age, about one-third of respondents say they also involve elementary students and nearly half (46%) involve middle school students.

## Equity Considerations in Student Storytelling






While more districts are sharing student stories, equitable representation and participation remain uneven. When asked how their districts elevate diverse student voices, respondents most commonly cited:

- 59%** Recruiting students with a range of lived experiences
- 42%** Partnering with student organizations
- 33%** Prioritizing underrepresented voices

However, deeper equity practices are less common. Only 17% encourage multilingual storytelling, and just 5% offer workshops or structured support to help students share their stories. Districts that struggle to ensure diverse representation cite the following obstacles:

- 69%** Fear of political backlash when uplifting certain identities or experiences
- 63%** Student reluctance or discomfort
- 25%** Language barriers
- 19%** Accessibility needs

These findings point to a tension: While student storytelling is gaining traction, not all students choose to—or feel ready to—participate. Some face access barriers, while others may be hesitant or uninterested. Districts that pursue student voice with equity in mind often:

-  Prioritize student consent and agency.
-  Provide scaffolding for underrepresented students.
-  Feature a wide range of experiences, not just academic celebrations.
-  Invite identity-based student clubs or panels to review content.
-  Leverage communication tools that support multilingual access and multi-channel delivery.

Districts focused on inclusion are also thinking about how stories are shared. Today many innovative communication tools, including Smore and SchoolStatus for example, can help ensure those stories reach every family—not just those fluent in English or consistently online—by enabling auto-translated, no-login communications delivered through families' preferred channels, including emails, texts and phone calls. When student voice is shared accessibly and intentionally, it becomes a bridge for connection and understanding across the school community.



## Direct Communication with Students

While family communication remains a central focus in most districts, school leaders and communicators are also beginning to consider how students themselves receive and engage with information. According to the survey, approximately 65% of districts report that they at least sometimes inform students directly about matters that are also shared with families—such as academic updates, behavioral expectations or attendance. However, these efforts are often inconsistent, ad hoc and dependent on teacher discretion, grade level or available technology.

Among districts that engage in direct communication with students:

- 58%** | provide students with access to platforms also used for family communication
- 39%** | copy students on messages to families, often via email
- 37%** | include students in family-teacher conferences, making them active participants in conversations about their progress

Districts that use these strategies report several observed benefits. A majority (55%) said direct communication with students improves academic outcomes, and qualitative comments suggest that students who receive timely, relevant updates are more likely to:

- ✓ Take ownership of their learning.
- ✓ Follow through on behavioral expectations.
- ✓ Feel more informed/prepared for school conversations.

“Until recently, our district viewed our audiences to be only families, staff and the surrounding community. In an effort to be more strategic ... we have been working to add students as an audience in appropriate and relevant ways. If students and student outcomes are at the core of our mission and vision, then incorporating them into our messaging is critical!”

—Survey respondent

Once again, despite these perceived benefits, there’s a significant gap in how districts measure impact. Over half of respondents said they are unsure how to evaluate whether direct-to-student messaging leads to improved engagement, attendance or academic performance. Moreover, district-wide practices tend to lack coordination—with messaging often left to individual teachers or counselors, rather than embedded into district communication plans.

## Opportunities for Growth

Survey responses suggest several emerging opportunities for districts to better integrate direct-to-student messaging:

- 💡 **Personalization matters.** Messages seem to resonate more when they feel specific and supportive—not generic.
- 💡 **Technology enables, but doesn't guarantee, engagement.** Some platforms allow students to respond or interact with messages, but few districts currently track whether they do.
- 💡 **Two-way communication is underused.** Most student communication is still one-way—informational, not interactive. Creating space for students to ask questions, reflect or reply may deepen impact.

## Student Internships

Survey results indicate that 30% of respondents currently involve students as communication interns. Among the larger majority who do not, the most common reasons were lack of staff time or capacity (58%) and simply not having considered the idea (28%). Yet, for districts that have implemented intern programs, the benefits are tangible—and growing.

Among districts with interns:

- 92%** involve students in photography and/or videography
- 79%** include students in managing or creating social media content
- 55%** ask students to write stories or blog posts

Interns are most often supervised by a communications team member (87%), and nearly half are paid (47%), while 39% receive school credit for their efforts. These programs range from semester-long, for-credit placements to year-round, paid opportunities.

Districts consistently noted that student-created content resonates more authentically with peers and families. In some cases, students have increased social media engagement exponentially. Beyond engagement, intern programs have helped districts build trust, grow future communicators and center the student perspective in day-to-day messaging.

"Our student intern team grew from one student to over a dozen in just two years. They help shape our brand voice, and it's better because of them."

—Survey respondent

"Students are more likely to listen when they hear from each other. Our interns have become our most effective messengers."

—Survey respondent

## Barriers and Gaps in Elevating Student Voice

*While many districts are beginning to explore student voice strategies, they face a consistent set of challenges that can limit implementation and sustainability. Four common barriers emerged across the data:*


⚠ **Limited staff time and capacity:** Many communications teams are small—three-quarters of survey respondents work in offices of four or fewer—and shared that adding new initiatives often isn't feasible without additional support.

⚠ **Student availability and interest:** Scheduling conflicts, limited access during the school day and students' own reluctance to participate were frequently cited. In fact, 63% of respondents who struggle to elevate diverse student voices identified student reluctance as a barrier.

⚠ **Privacy and consent concerns:** While 61% of districts require media release forms, only 18% give students final approval over how their stories are shared, and just 7% allow pseudonyms or initials—indicating a gap in practices that protect students while encouraging participation.

⚠ **Hesitancy to address sensitive topics:** A large majority (69%) reported fear of political or community backlash when elevating certain student voices or perspectives, especially around identity or equity-focused content.

In addition, although some respondents reported anecdotal benefits, few districts are tracking how student voice efforts impact measurable outcomes such as attendance, engagement or academic performance. This was echoed in open-ended responses and in data pertaining to strategy alignment and



"It seems right to have student-produced messaging on district initiatives created by students for students."

—Survey respondent

evaluation. And, perhaps not surprisingly, just 16% of respondents indicated that their district has formal policies or guidelines in place regarding student storytelling or student involvement in communication efforts.

These challenges suggest that even when the desire or intention is there, districts may lack the resources, guidance or confidence to take the next step in viewing students not just as audiences but as trusted collaborators in shaping district narratives. This gap points to an important opportunity: As more districts explore student-centered communication, there is a clear need for tools and frameworks to help them evaluate effectiveness and make the case for sustained investment.

## What Happens When Students Lead: Member Examples

*While the overall response rate to this survey was limited, the open-ended comments from participating districts offer valuable insights into the real-world impact of elevating student voice. Many of these stories go beyond theory, illustrating how student engagement strategies are already creating ripple effects in school communities.*



One communications leader shared how their internship program grew from a single student into two teams of six—12 students total—within just one year. What began as a small experiment evolved into a robust, multi-layered initiative that now includes a student ambassador program, a superintendent's student cabinet and even a student representative on the school board. These students don't just produce content—they offer feedback on district decisions, speak at public events and help shape the messages being shared.

In some districts, the impact is clearly visible through analytics. One respondent noted that shifting to student-created Instagram Reels increased views from 200 to more than 3,000, demonstrating that student-generated content often resonates more deeply with their peers and the broader community. Another district observed that direct-to-student messaging built trust and boosted participation in events and surveys, reinforcing the idea that students respond when they are spoken with, not just about.

Others pointed to broader cultural shifts. One respondent said their interns helped increase the authenticity of district messaging and strengthened connections between students and district leadership. Another reflected that student-produced content led to better engagement overall—not just from students, but also from staff and families.

"Students make excellent interns! They want to do these things and be involved in their schools. They just need encouragement and solid direction."

—Survey respondent

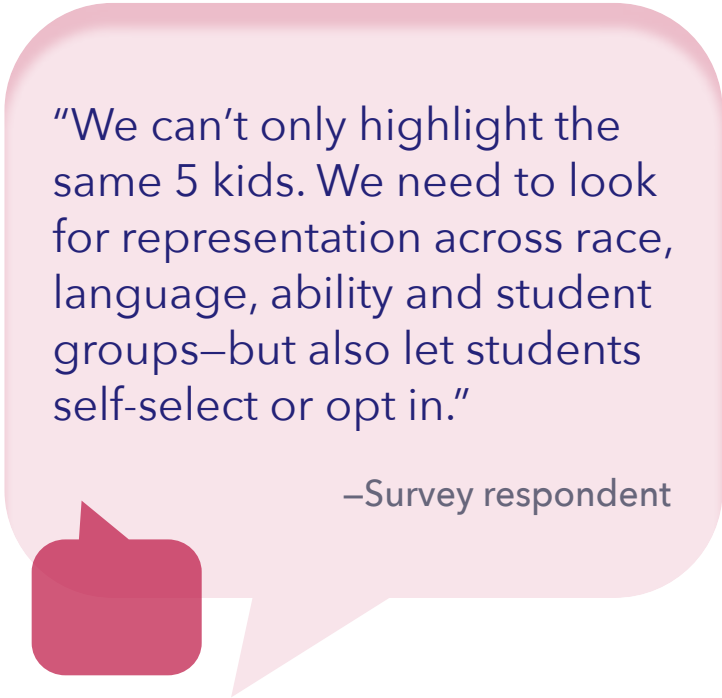


## Research Conclusions

As school districts continue to explore and refine their strategies for elevating student voice, the opportunities to strengthen community ties, improve engagement and foster a culture of trust and belonging are clear. By intentionally including students in communication efforts—not just as recipients, but as active contributors—districts can create more authentic, meaningful connections that contribute to students' well-being and success, while breathing new life into their work to spark broader community interest and support.

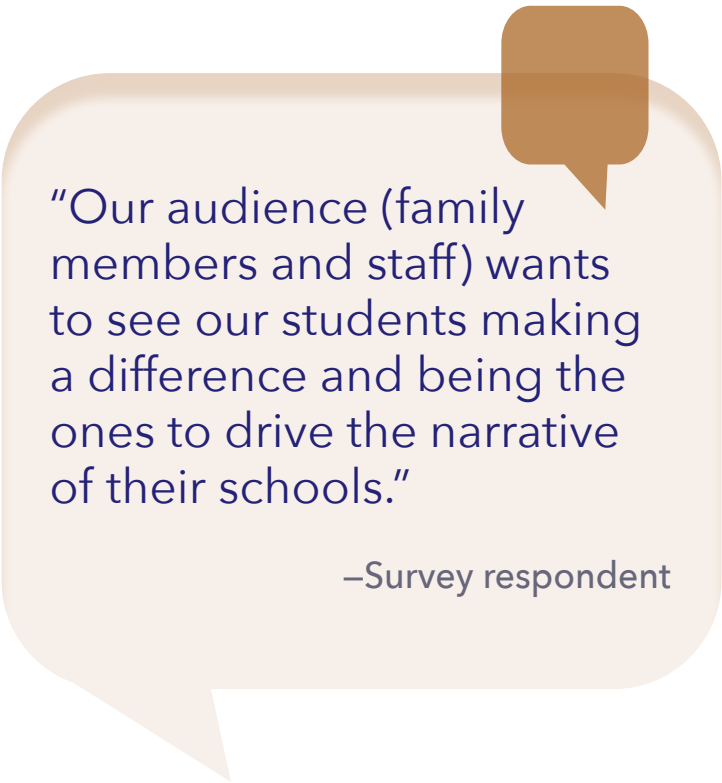
Despite the promising results seen in districts that have adopted student voice initiatives, barriers such as limited staff capacity, concerns about equity and a lack of formal frameworks for measuring impact remain. Overcoming these challenges will require ongoing collaboration, thoughtful planning and a commitment to including students in meaningful ways.

As school communicators reflect on the findings shared in this report, NSPRA and SchoolStatus encourage school leaders to explore ways to elevate student voice in their districts, whether by amplifying student perspectives, inviting student input or co-creating content that reflects the full school experience. The benefits of doing so—more inclusive storytelling and new avenues for listening, leading and building lasting trust—make it a valuable endeavor for every district to consider.



"We can't only highlight the same 5 kids. We need to look for representation across race, language, ability and student groups—but also let students self-select or opt in."

—Survey respondent



"Our audience (family members and staff) wants to see our students making a difference and being the ones to drive the narrative of their schools."

—Survey respondent

# Building a Student Voice Strategy

*The most effective student voice strategies don't start big—they start with purpose, trust and small wins that grow over time. NSPRA recommends a tiered approach informed by member practice and national survey data.*



## 1. Start with student presence.

Even one student quote or video can signal that your district values student perspectives. Focus on visibility and building trust.

- ✓ Use a quote from a student survey in a school newsletter or social post.
- ✓ Share a brief video of students explaining a classroom activity or school event.
- ✓ Highlight student artwork, writing or photography in district communications.

## 2. Develop shared ownership.

Shift from representation to collaboration by inviting students to shape your content.

- ✓ Launch a student internship or ambassador program. Currently, 30% of districts offer these opportunities, with interns contributing to photo/video (92%), social media (79%) and writing (55%).
- ✓ Use messaging tools to send students personalized, supportive updates about progress, behavior or events—something 65% of respondents say they're already doing.
- ✓ Involve students in feedback loops or communications planning.

"Start with kids who are already involved, like SGA students, and work your way out from there. Look for leaders in each of the interest areas for your school—fine arts, athletics, clubs, CTE, etc."

—Survey respondent

## 3. Build sustainable systems.

Long-term success depends on embedding student voice into your district's infrastructure, not just relying on individuals.

- ✓ Align student voice efforts with your strategic communications plan. Right now, 55% of districts report doing so.
- ✓ Develop a content calendar that includes regular, student-centered storytelling.
- ✓ Track engagement. While few currently do this, measuring reach, views or family response on student-generated content helps make the case for continuing and expanding efforts.



# Engagement in Action:

## What Inclusive Student Voice Can Look Like

*Districts that engage in student voice efforts often move beyond surface-level representation. Here's what that can look like in practice:*

### **Prioritize student consent and agency.**

- ✓ Let students choose which parts of their stories to share—and how they're shared.
- ✓ Give students final approval before publishing the words, images or videos they produce.
- ✓ Clearly explain how content will be used.

### **Provide scaffolding for underrepresented students.**

- ✓ Pair students with a trusted adult mentor to help develop their messages for communications to be used by a school or the district.
- ✓ Offer writing or video templates, question prompts or peer practice sessions.
- ✓ Provide alternatives for students who prefer to share anonymously or off-camera.

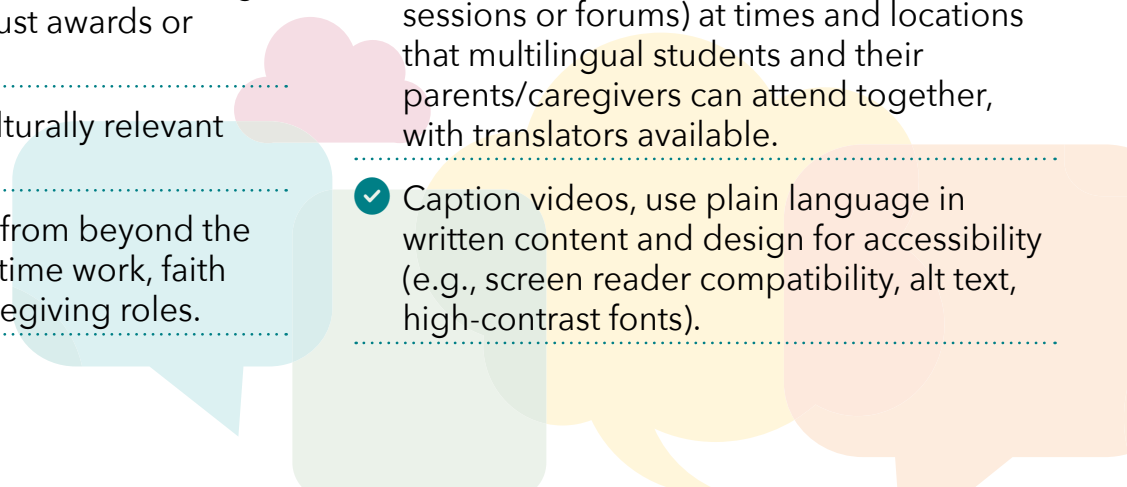
### **Feature a wide range of experiences.**

- ✓ Highlight stories of perseverance, challenge, identity and growth—not just awards or academic success.
- ✓ Include multilingual or culturally relevant storytelling formats.
- ✓ Represent student voices from beyond the classroom—athletics, part-time work, faith communities or family caregiving roles.

### **Invite student clubs or panels to review content.**

- ✓ Ask identity-based student clubs (e.g., Black Student Union, LGBTQ+ Alliance, Latinx Heritage Committee) to review draft campaigns targeted at relevant audiences.
- ✓ Use student panels to inform and guide representation choices in broader district messaging and media.
- ✓ Invite student groups to co-create content, such as video scripts, social captions or event messaging, to ensure authentic tone and relevance.

### **Leverage communication tools that support multilingual access and multi-channel delivery.**

- ✓ Translate key content into the primary languages spoken at home, using culturally appropriate phrasing and tone.
  - ✓ Share messages across multiple platforms and schedule opportunities (like listening sessions or forums) at times and locations that multilingual students and their parents/caregivers can attend together, with translators available.
  - ✓ Caption videos, use plain language in written content and design for accessibility (e.g., screen reader compatibility, alt text, high-contrast fonts).
- 

## Real-World Success Stories

# SchoolStatus

## How Communication Technology Solutions Can Support Student Voice

*While many districts are experimenting with ways to elevate student voice, this survey snapshot shows that few have systems in place to track the full impact. Districts using SchoolStatus are finding that their platform's data and communication tools can be leveraged to strengthen and evaluate student engagement efforts in ways they hadn't anticipated.*

*"Involving students increases trust and authenticity... [allowing them] to learn better how to self-advocate for issues that are important to them."*

—Survey respondent

### Tracking Direct-to-Student Communication Impact

Dr. Tameka Lewis from Grand Prairie Independent School District in Texas has seen how data visibility transforms conversations with students. "There are a lot more meaningful conversations about attendance because of this platform," she notes. SchoolStatus automatically logs every message (email, call and text) linked to a specific student alongside behavioral, academic and attendance data. This makes it possible to track whether direct-to-student messaging actually improves engagement, attendance or academic performance over time.

### Real-Time Insights for Student Engagement

For Roseville City School District in California, the ability to view live data on attendance, behavior, grades and communication history in one place has enabled more targeted student outreach. As Executive Director of Communication and Community Engagement Jessica Gully explains, "We were able to quickly see who hasn't been at school. Who has been at school? What are their attendance trends?" This real-time visibility helps districts identify disengaged students and use personalized communication to re-engage them, turning student voice from a one-way broadcast into a two-way conversation. The district has reduced chronic absenteeism by 62% and improved attendance from 91.7% to 95.4% in two years.

### Moving Beyond Anecdotal Student Voice Impact

In Grand Prairie ISD, 32% of students who were at risk of chronic absenteeism improved their attendance after receiving targeted communications, demonstrating how data-driven, personalized outreach can amplify student voice efforts. SchoolStatus helps districts go beyond anecdotal feedback about student voice initiatives. By linking communication data with performance metrics, districts can create a clearer picture of whether student-centered communication strategies—like personalized messages or involvement in content creation—actually correlate with improvements in attendance, engagement or academic outcomes.



"Students are the whole thing! They're the entire 'why' of what we do. Include them in any way you can!"

—Survey respondent

## SchoolStatus



## From Voice to Action: A Framework for Inclusive Communication

As districts think about embedding student voice into ongoing communications—not just special campaigns—it helps to have a process for reflection on the impact of those communications and follow-through with students. This can be done through texts and emails to students (as age appropriate), or by sending mailed postcards and letters to students' homes to cut through the digital noise. The process might look like this:

- LISTEN** → Gather student input on a topic through surveys, in-person check-ins or direct messages.
- LEARN** → Look for patterns in the data or narratives about student perceptions on the topic.
- ACT** → Respond through personalized outreach, support services or new opportunities.
- REFLECT** → Reconnect with students for feedback and insight through various communication channels.
- SHARE** → Highlight stories or outcomes—ensuring representation and access for all types of families.

Districts using tools like **SchoolStatus Attend, Connect or Smore** have found it easier to move through this cycle intentionally, closing the loop between what students share and how schools respond.

### Strategic Insight: Voice as a Pathway to Future Readiness

Elevating student voice isn't just about increasing engagement in the moment. It's also an opportunity to build the real-world skills students need for college, careers and beyond. By encouraging reflection, leadership and authentic expression, these efforts help students connect school to something bigger—and see themselves in the future they're working toward.

## APPENDIX:

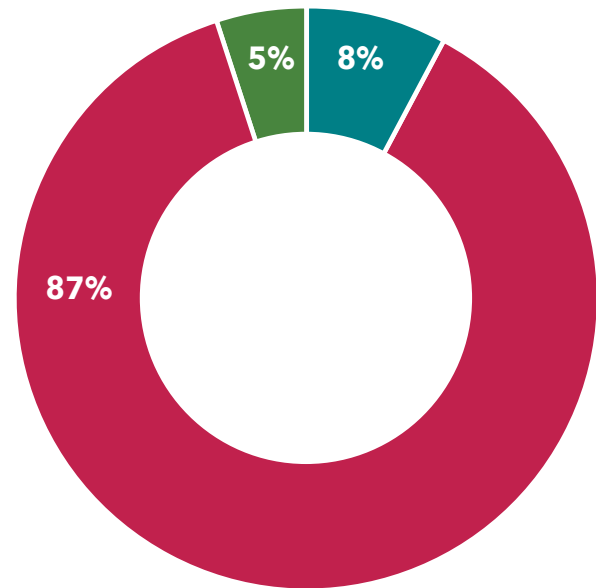
# NSPRA Survey Detailed Findings

Most school districts don't go to the source when considering how to represent students in school communications:

? Have you surveyed students about how they want to be represented in school communications?

✓ YES | 8%    ✗ NO | 87%

? I DON'T KNOW | 5%



*Eight survey respondents shared insights they gleaned from surveying their students:*

- ✓ How students prefer to be informed
- ✓ What information students want shared with them
- ✓ A desire from students to have their stories shared and their opinions and perspectives valued
- ✓ A better understanding of how students receive school information and what they respond to best
- ✓ Insights that led to the launch of a student ambassador program and student participation on district committees focused on calendar creation, rebranding and strategic planning

## Students as storytellers in K-12 education:

**52%** of respondents include first-person student stories in district communications.

**64%** of respondents who share student stories consider it a strategic district goal and/or a strategy in their communications plan.

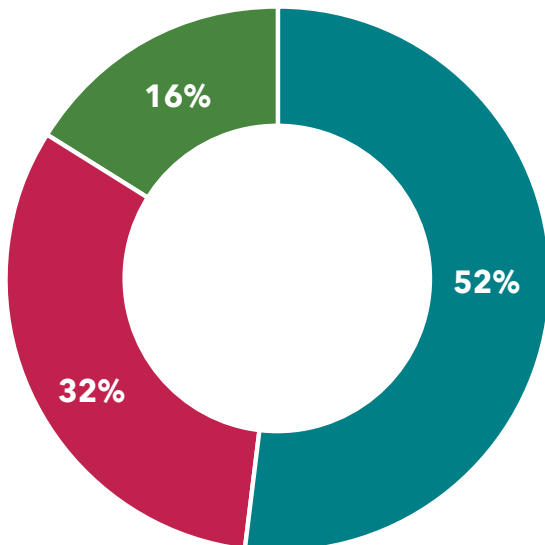
**69%** of respondents who do not share student stories say they haven't explored the idea.

**?** Does your district currently share student stories/experiences in their own words?

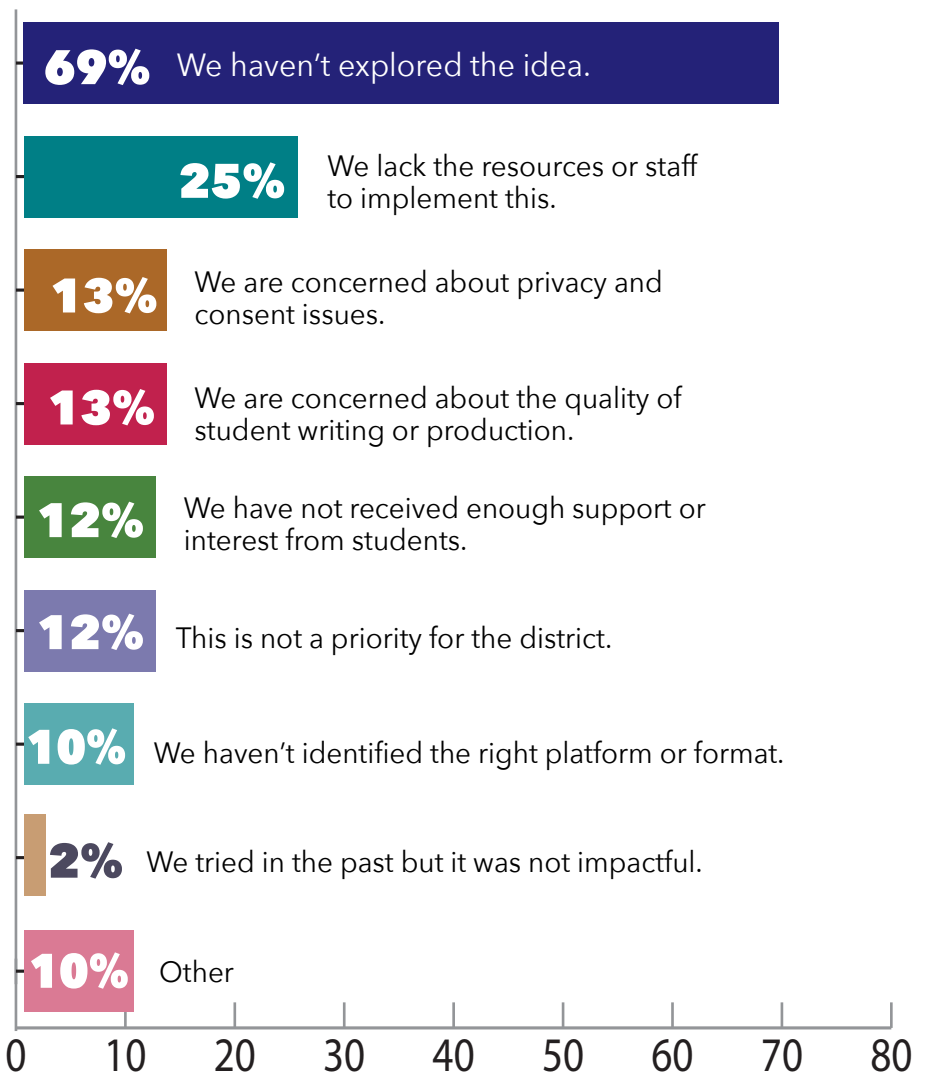
✓ YES | **52%**

✗ NO | **32%**

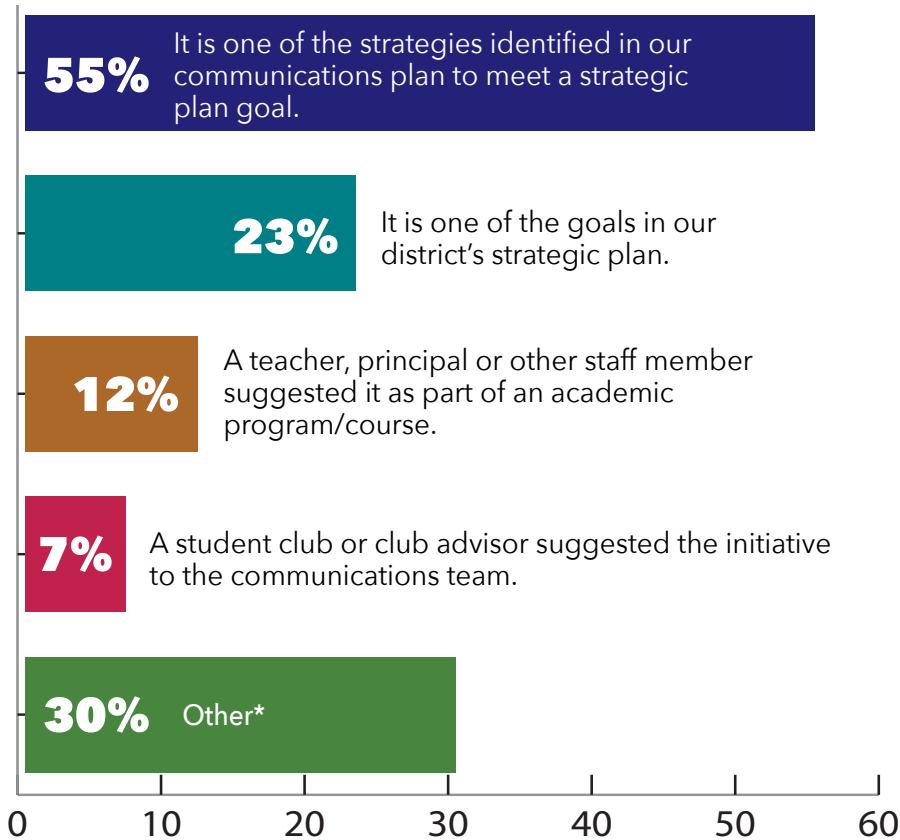
Ⓢ WE ARE CONSIDERING IT | **16%**



**?** What are the main reasons your district does not currently share student stories/experiences in their own words?



## ? What prompted your district to start sharing first-person student stories/experiences?



\*See examples of "other" responses, at right.

*Twenty-five respondents shared additional reasons for incorporating student stories. Key themes included:*

- ✓ **Content support:** Students were brought in to help cover stories when staff capacity was limited.
- ✓ **Leadership priorities:** Efforts aligned with superintendents' or boards' focus on student voice.
- ✓ **Marketing strategy:** Featuring students was seen as a way to strengthen branding and outreach.
- ✓ **Authentic storytelling:** Respondents consider hearing directly from students as best practice.
- ✓ **Staff experience:** Former teachers in communications roles wanted to stay connected to students.
- ✓ **Filling gaps:** Student voices helped compensate for limited content shared by adults.
- ✓ **Parents and community** respond best.

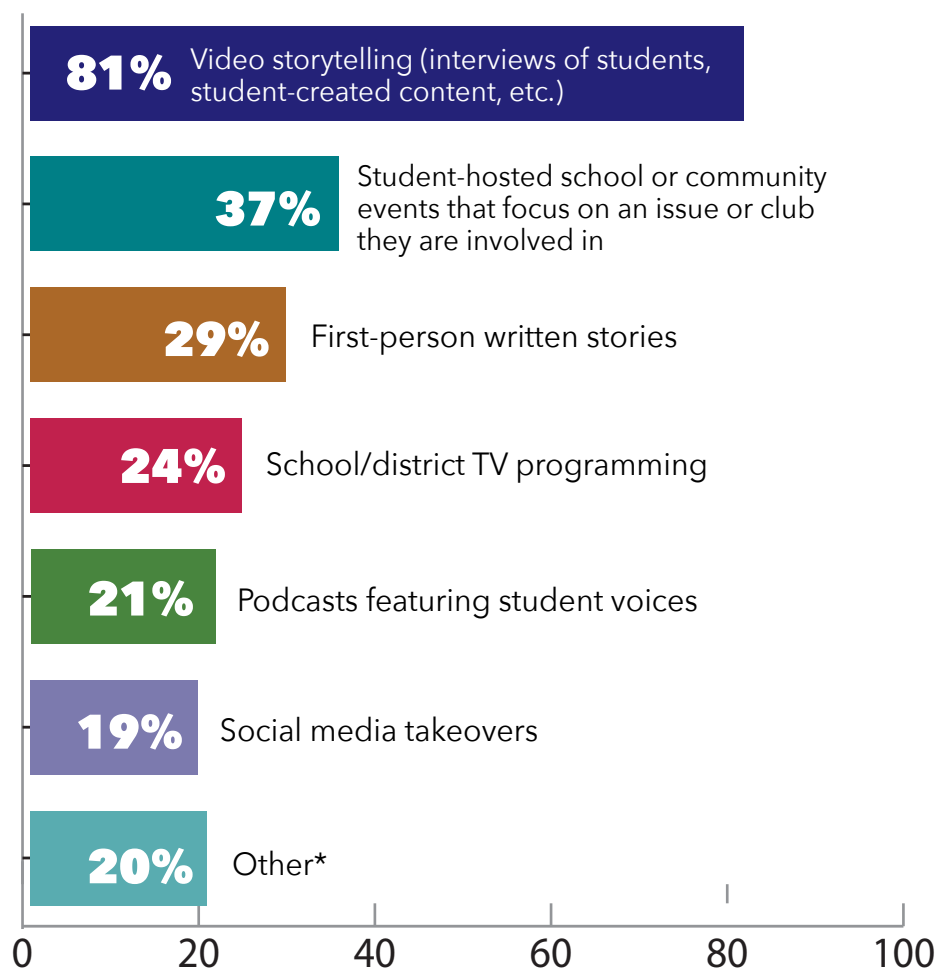


## Video dominates as the go-to platform for student storytelling:

- 81%** of respondents use video to share student stories and experiences in their own words.
- 74%** say students' videos focus on specific topics as they arise.
- 80%** say communication staff capture the video content, with 46% also involving students.
- 65%** say their districts give students access to video equipment and studio space.

**?** What tactics/methods does your district use to share student stories/experiences in their own words?

*Seventeen respondents provided other tactics they use to share student stories in their own words, including:*



\*See examples of "other" responses, at right.

- ✓ Conducting student interviews that communications staff turn into written articles
- ✓ Featuring students in media interviews
- ✓ Providing B-roll footage of students to local TV reporters
- ✓ Having students serve as keynote speakers at staff events
- ✓ Creating quote cards for social media
- ✓ Managing student-run social media accounts for clubs, teams and grade levels
- ✓ Hosting student focus groups and panels to gather feedback and perspectives on various topics, including communications

? What type of video storytelling tactics are used in first-person student storytelling?

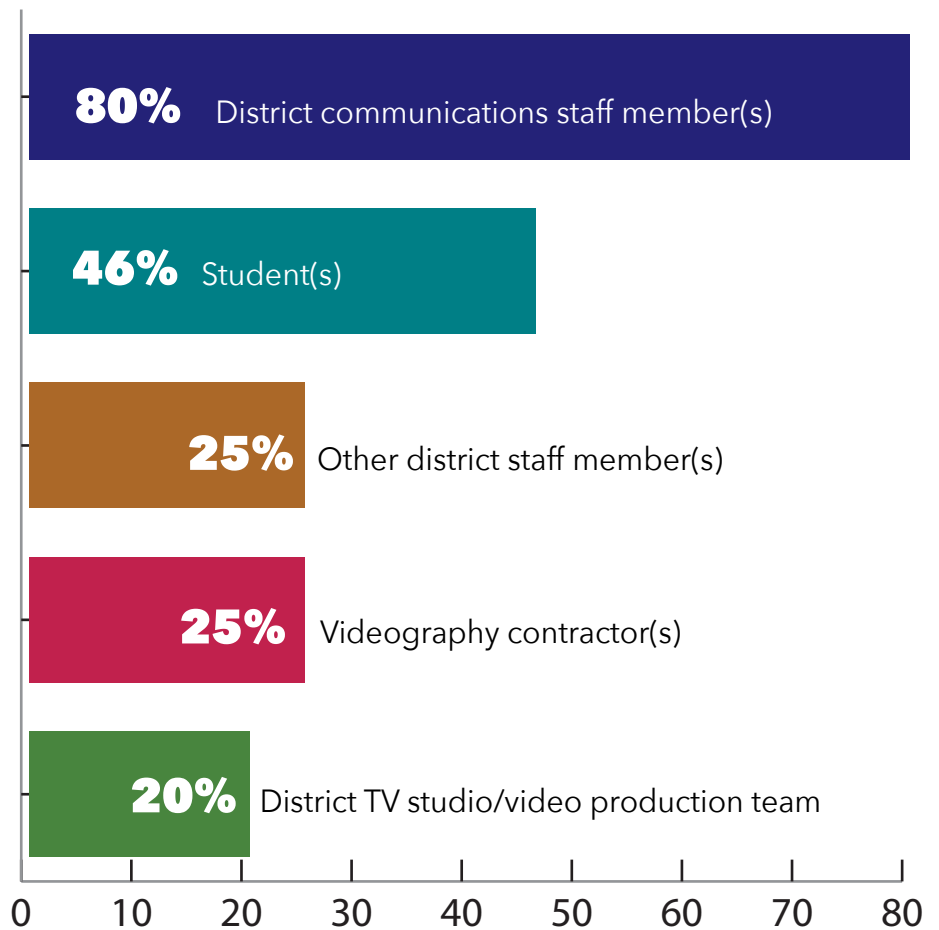
**74%**  
Individual topics as they arise

**59%**  
Video content tied to a theme/time of year

**40%**  
Episodic video content (e.g., video series or multiple related videos)

Other **3%**

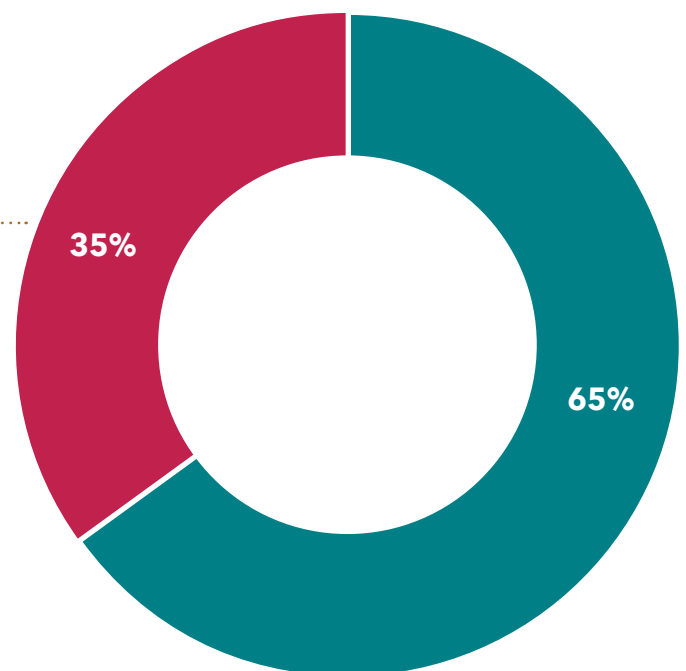
? Who captures the video content?



? Does the district (or a school) provide video equipment and/or studio space for students to use?

✓ YES | **65%**

✗ NO | **35%**

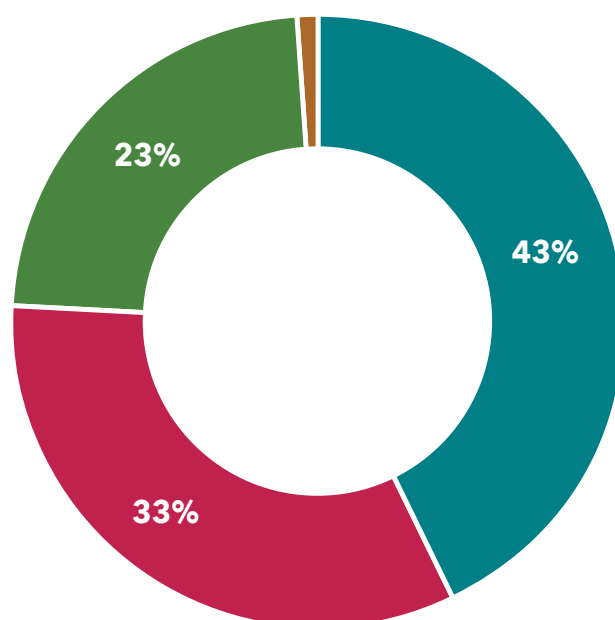


First-person student storytelling is occasional, primarily centered on high school students, and typically guided by staff oversight:

- 76%** | of respondents share student stories monthly or less.
- 96%** | of respondents involve high school students (grades 9–12) in their efforts.
- 73%** | follow standard FERPA/student directory information policy to protect student privacy.
- 69%** | say communications staff are responsible for reviewing student content.

**?** How often do you feature first-person student storytelling in your district's communication materials during the school year?

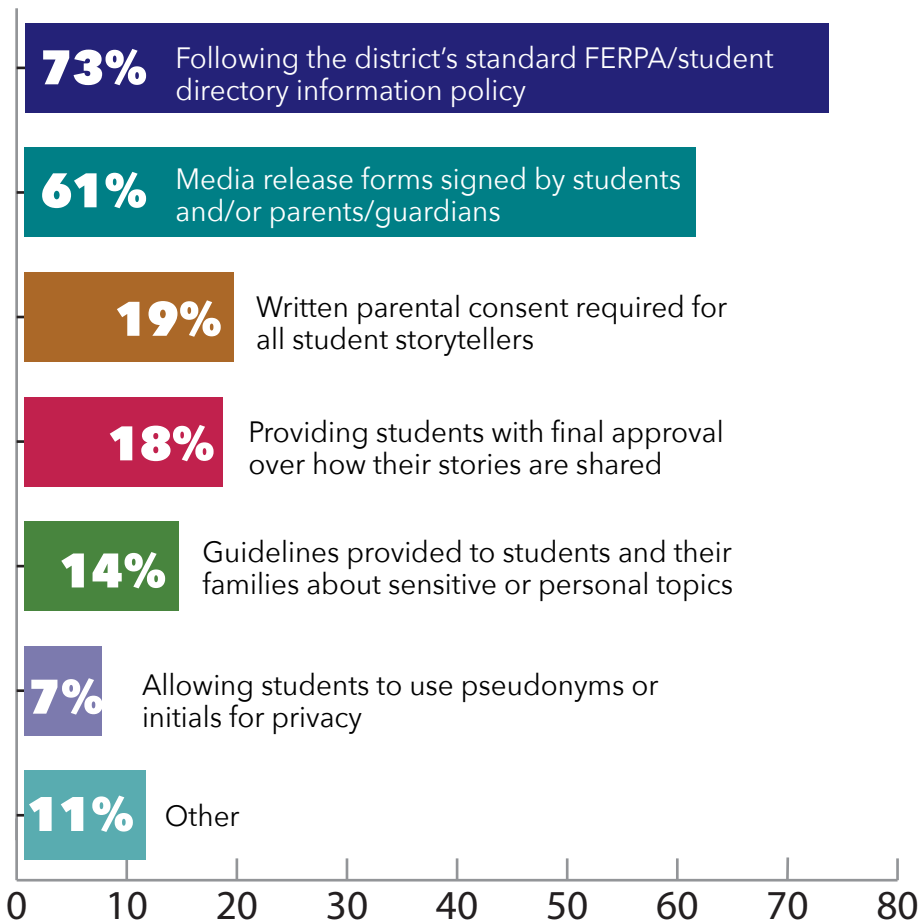
- 43%** QUARTERLY OR LESS
- 33%** MONTHLY
- 23%** WEEKLY
- 1%** DAILY



**?** Which grade levels typically participate in first-person student storytelling?

Late high school (11-12)	<b>94%</b>
Early high school (9-10)	<b>75%</b>
Middle school (6-8)	<b>46%</b>
Elementary (K-5)	<b>32%</b>
Other	<b>1%</b>

## ? What privacy practices are in place when students share personal stories/experiences?



*Sixty-four respondents shared how they select students to participate in first-person storytelling efforts. Common selection methods include:*

- ✓ Recommendations from teachers, counselors, principals or club advisors
- ✓ Selection following a notable achievement
- ✓ Involvement in video production, media arts, journalism or similar programs
- ✓ Participation in student leadership groups
- ✓ Students who express interest in contributing

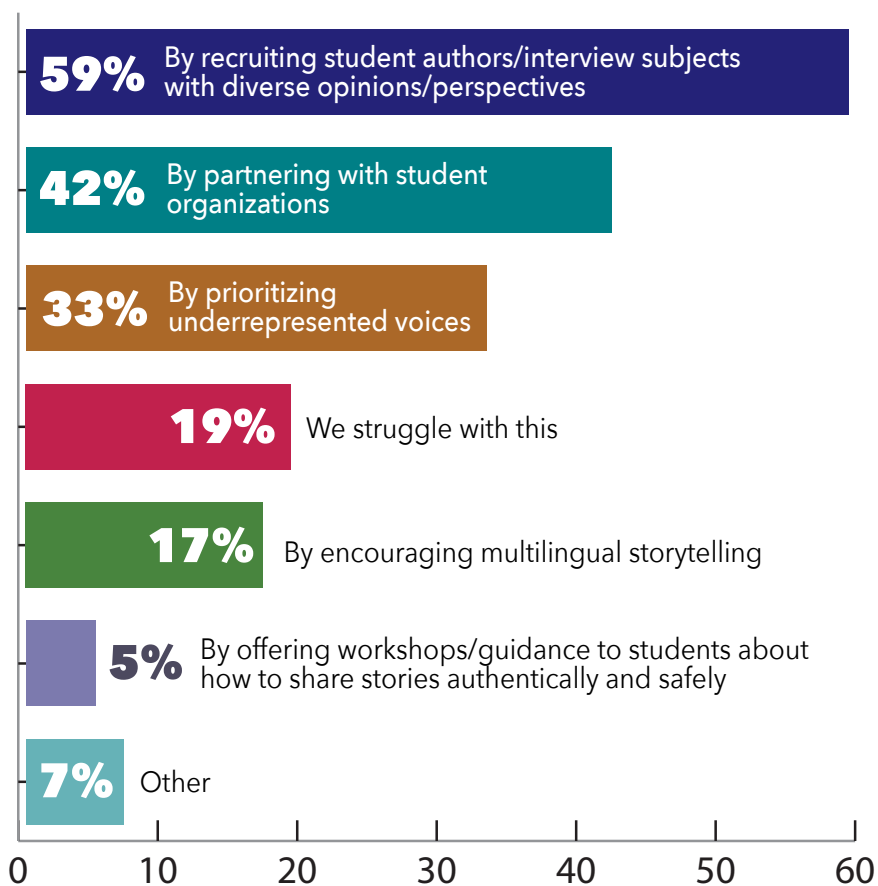
## ? How is student-generated content (e.g., stories, videos, podcasts, social media posts) reviewed before publication?

- 69%** Reviewed by a communications staff member
- 41%** Reviewed by a designated teacher, principal or other school employee
- 16%** Reviewed and approved by district leadership
- 13%** Students self-edit with minimal oversight (no formal review process in place)
- 12%** Other

School districts seek to incorporate diverse student voices, but student reluctance and fear of political backlash hamper some efforts:

- 59%** | recruit students with diverse opinions and perspectives.
- 69%** | struggle with capturing diverse voices due to political concerns.
- 63%** | say student reluctance makes it hard to elevate diverse student voices.

**?** How does your district elevate diverse student voices through first-person student storytelling?





**?** In what ways do you struggle with elevating diverse student voices through first-person student storytelling?

- 69%** Concerns about possible political backlash
- 63%** Student reluctance
- 25%** Language barriers
- 19%** Accessibility barriers
- 19%** Parental concerns
- 31%** Other\*

\*See examples of "other" responses, at right.

Five respondents shared other ways in which they struggle to elevate diverse student voices, including:

- ✓ Lack of cultural diversity in the student population
- ✓ Uncertainty about the legality of intentionally supporting diverse student voices
- ✓ Limited time to connect with students

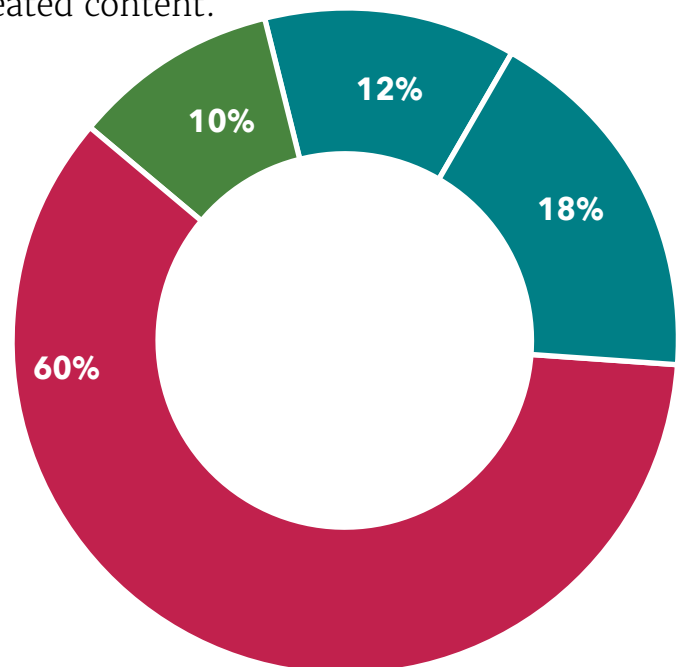
Most districts don't formally evaluate the performance of student-created content, but those who do find that it tends to outperform staff-created content:

**70%** | don't compare the performance of student-created content against staff-created content.

**61%** | of those who do make comparisons say student content gets higher engagement than staff-created content.

**?** Do you compare the performance of student-led content vs. staff-created content?

- ✗ NO, WE DON'T COMPARE THEM | **60%**
- ✓ YES, INFORMALLY THROUGH OBSERVATION | **18%**
- ✓ YES, FORMALLY WITH ANALYTICS TOOLS | **12%**
- i WE DON'T CURRENTLY MEASURE CONTENT PERFORMANCE | **10%**



## ? How does student-led content typically perform compared to staff-created content?

**13%** Significantly higher engagement

**48%** Somewhat higher engagement

**35%** About the same engagement

**4%** Somewhat lower engagement

**0%** Significantly lower engagement

Districts see positive impacts from student storytelling, but there is more to explore:

**70%** of respondents believe it helps a little or a lot in strengthening students' sense of belonging and connection to school.

**57%** or more do not know the impacts it has on student attendance, academic performance or student behaviors.

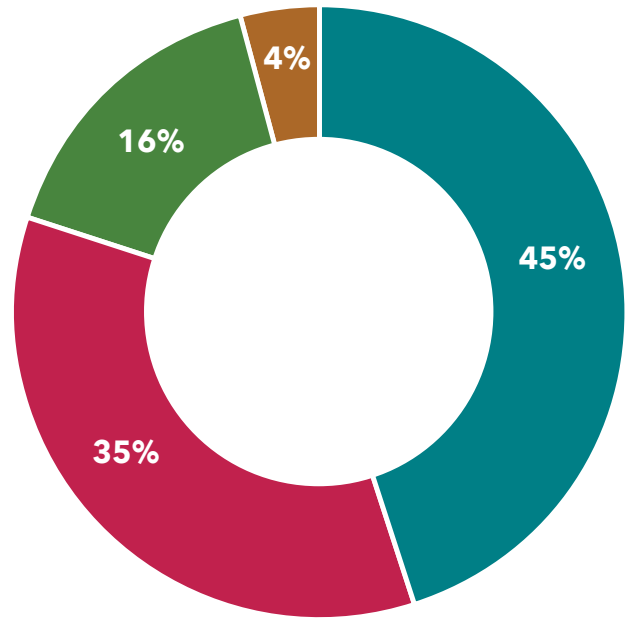
**80%** believe it helps a little or a lot with improving parent and family engagement.

## ? Based on what you've seen or experienced, how does student participation in communications seem to affect the following areas?

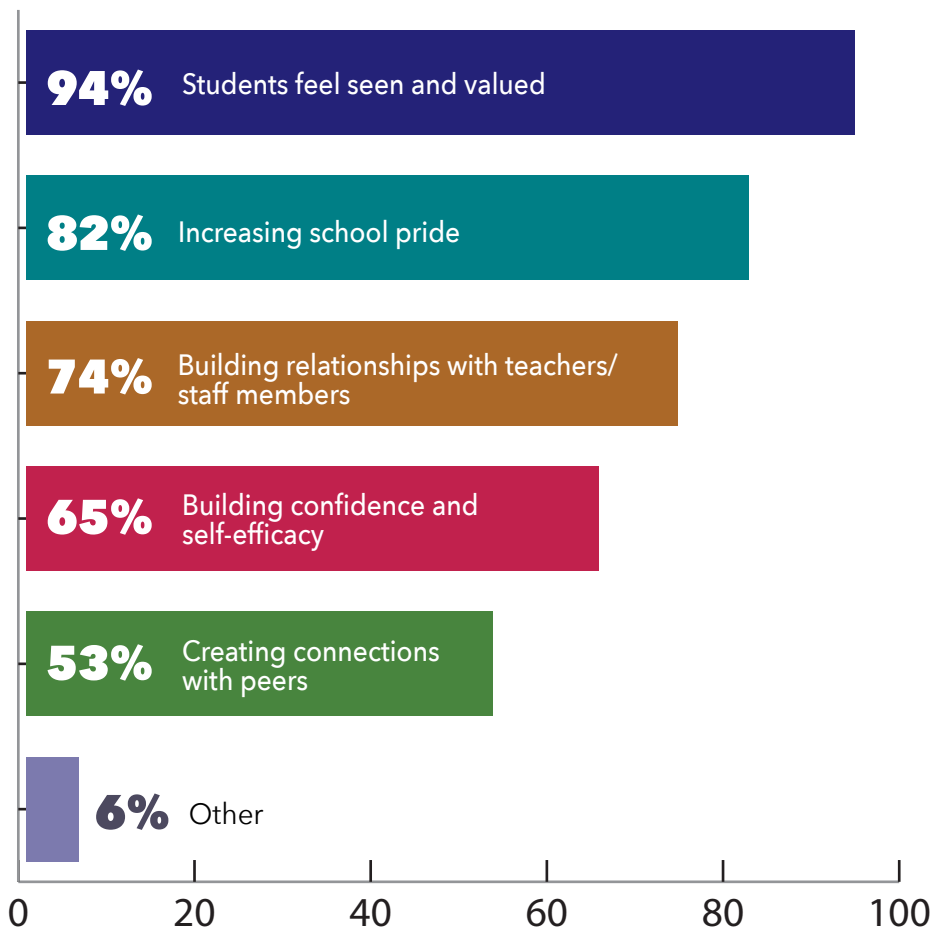
Student Outcome	It seems to help a lot	It seems to help a little	Doesn't seem to make a difference	It seems to make things worse	I don't know
Attendance	5%	18%	19%	0%	57%
Academic performance	4%	19%	19%	0%	57%
Behavioral issues	3%	19%	17%	1%	60%
Sense of belonging/connection to school	38%	32%	3%	0%	27%

? In your experience, how does student storytelling affect parent/family engagement?

45%	It seems to help a lot.
35%	It seems to help a little.
16%	I don't know.
4%	Doesn't seem to make a difference.
0%	It seems to make things worse.



? What factors do you believe contribute to these positive outcomes?

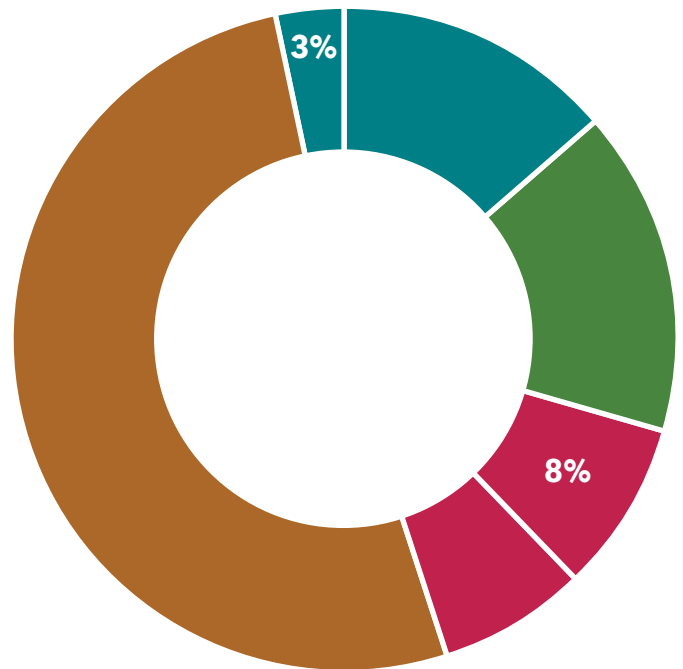


## Students can benefit from direct communication about school-related matters:

- 65%** | of respondents say their districts inform students directly at least some of the time when messages about them are shared with their parents.
- 58%** | give students access to the same communication platforms that their parents and families have.
- 55%** | believe that students' academic outcomes improve when they are included in school-to-home communications.

**?** Are students directly informed when a message is sent to their parents/guardians about school-related matters that also involve or affect them (e.g., academic updates, behavioral concerns, attendance, school-wide initiatives)?

- i** IT DEPENDS ON MESSAGE CONTENT AND STUDENT GRADE LEVEL | **49%**
- ?** I DON'T KNOW | **20%**
- ✓** YES, SOMETIMES | **13%**
- ✓** YES, ALWAYS | **3%**
- ✗** NO, BUT WE ARE CONSIDERING IT | **8%**
- ✗** NO, AND WE DO NOT PLAN TO | **7%**



## ? How are students included in school-home communications?

**58%** Students have access to the same communications platform as families.

**39%** Students are copied on email communications.

**37%** Students participate in family-teacher conferences.

**19%** Students are included in text communications.

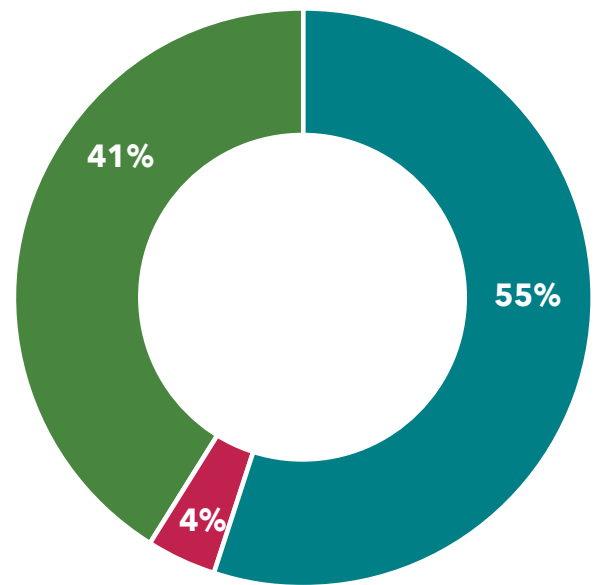
**19%** Other

## ? Based on your personal perceptions, do you believe including students in school-home communications can improve their academic outcomes?

✓ YES | **55%**

✗ NO | **4%**

? I DON'T KNOW | **41%**



## ? With the following groups of students, for what purpose does your district use direct communications with them (via texts, emails, student portal/apps, messaging campaigns, etc.)?

Student Outcome	For intervention (i.e., targeted support based on need)	For engagement (i.e., to motivate/build connections)	Not directly communicating with this group	I don't know
Students with attendance concerns	36%	22%	17%	45%
Students struggling academically	36%	23%	16%	45%
Students who are strong academically	7%	22%	22%	54%
Students with behavioral challenges	29%	16%	22%	49%
Multilingual learners	20%	25%	17%	51%
Students from underrepresented groups	14%	28%	18%	53%
Students with leadership potential	8%	35%	16%	49%



## Taking on students as communication interns takes effort and coordination, but comes with big rewards:

**69%** | of respondents do not currently use student interns in communications.

**59%** | of those who don't use student interns say they lack the time and resources to manage it.

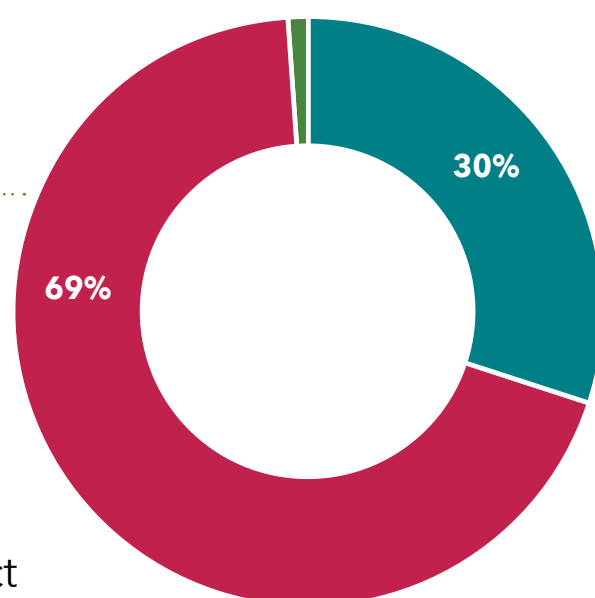
**92%** | of those who do use student interns rely on them to capture photos and videos.

**?** Does your district involve students in school communication efforts as interns?

✓ YES | **30%**

✗ NO | **69%**

? I DON'T KNOW | **1%**



**?** What are the primary reasons your district does not involve students in school communication efforts as interns?

**59%** We lack the time, staffing or resources to manage this type of program.

**28%** We haven't considered it.

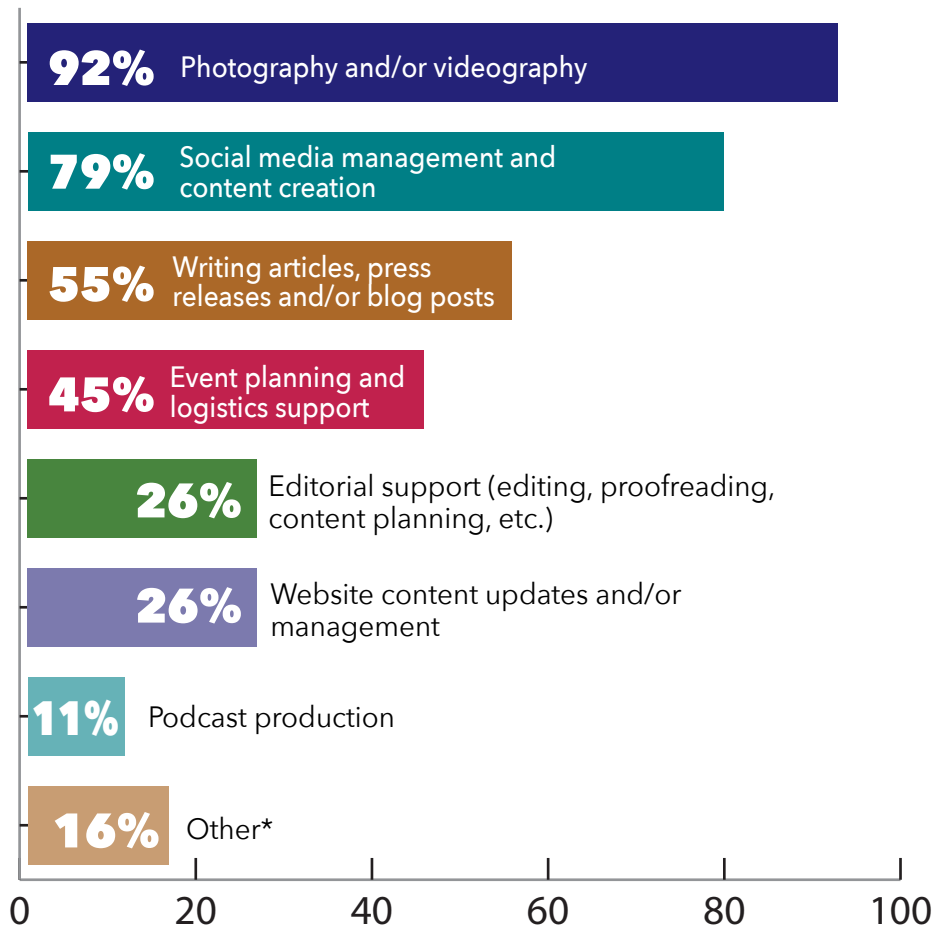
**13%** Concerns about privacy or consent

**12%** We have trouble recruiting a diverse group of students to participate.

**11%** We had one in the past but discontinued it.

**8%** Other

## ? What are the typical tasks or responsibilities that student communications interns have in your district?



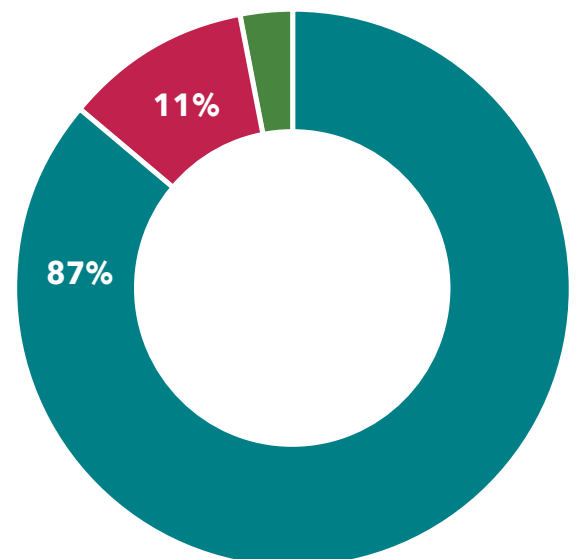
\*See examples of "other" responses, at right.

Six respondents shared other responsibilities student communications interns have, including:

- ✓ On-air radio content writing
- ✓ Graphic design of our school calendar
- ✓ Tailored to intern's areas of interest

## ? Who oversees or supervises student communications interns in your district?

- 87% A member of the communications team
- 11% A teacher, principal or other school employee
- 3% Other



Thirty-seven respondents described the processes they use to select students for communication internships, including:

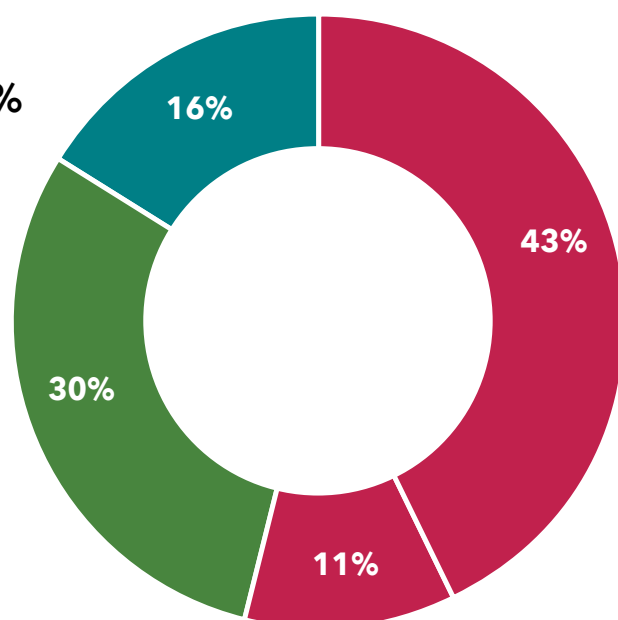
- ✓ Formal application and interview process
- ✓ Teacher, coach or administrator recommendations
- ✓ Via the district's workforce development department
- ✓ Recommended by former or current interns
- ✓ Part of high school internship course requirement
- ✓ Communications staff recruit students through visits to classrooms
- ✓ Volunteer(s) from student advisory group

? How are students acknowledged for their time and commitment?

47%	Paid internship experience
42%	Unpaid internship experience
39%	Earn school credit
5%	Other

? Does your district have board-approved policies or guidelines regarding the engagement of students through communications?

- ✗ NO WE DO NOT HAVE A FORMAL POLICY, BUT WE HAVE ESTABLISHED PRACTICES | 43%
- ✗ NO WE DO NOT HAVE ANY POLICIES OR GUIDELINES RELATED TO THIS | 11%
- ? I AM NOT SURE | 30%
- ✓ YES, WE HAVE A FORMAL POLICY OR GUIDELINES IN PLACE | 16%



## BENEFITS

*Twenty-six respondents shared benefits that their districts have experienced by engaging students through communications (i.e., first-person storytelling, direct-to-student messaging, student internships), including:*

- ✓ **Increased engagement and reach:** Higher social media interaction, more followers and improved “read rates” from parents, students and community members
- ✓ **Authenticity and trust:** Building trust and connection by making messaging feel more genuine and relatable
- ✓ **Student empowerment and skill development:** Boosting student confidence, public speaking abilities and career exploration through internships and ambassador programs
- ✓ **Stronger community connections:** Fostering relationships among students, schools, families and district leaders
- ✓ **Expanded communications capacity:** Supporting content creation, photography, and social media management with student contributions
- ✓ **Broader representation:** Reflecting the diversity of the student community and promoting inclusion through varied perspectives
- ✓ **Alignment with district goals:** Enhancing mission-driven messaging by placing students at the center of the story

## CHALLENGES

*Twenty-seven respondents shared challenges that their districts have faced when engaging students through communications, including:*

- ✓ **Student engagement and availability:** Difficulty recruiting students, inconsistent participation, and balancing academic and extracurricular schedules
- ✓ **Diversity and inclusivity:** Underrepresentation of diverse student groups and the complexity of serving a highly diverse community equitably
- ✓ **Oversight and workload:** Significant time, supervision and training required—often falling on small or single-person communications teams
- ✓ **Communication barriers:** Difficulty reaching students effectively due to email overload, inconsistent platforms or limited access
- ✓ **Content quality and sensitivity:** Preparing students for professional work without discouraging them, managing media consent and handling requests to remove sensitive content
- ✓ **Sustainability and consistency:** Maintaining student involvement and meeting expectations for regular content despite breaks or fluctuating interest
- ✓ **Resource limitations:** Financial and logistical barriers such as transportation, meals or incentives

## ADVICE

*Twenty-six respondents offered advice for districts looking to involve students more in their communications efforts, including:*

- ✓ **Start small and be intentional:** Begin with a few students or short internships to build a manageable program that can grow over time. Set realistic expectations and be patient.
- ✓ **Set clear expectations and provide structure:** Use application processes, clear boundaries and defined roles. Approach supervision as coaching, not policing, to encourage student ownership.
- ✓ **Provide mentorship and adult support:** Assign adults with strong rapport to guide students, help them follow through on tasks and offer consistent support throughout the program.
- ✓ **Leverage existing student leaders and groups:** Engage students already involved in leadership, clubs, media or academic programs. This taps into motivated and skilled participants.
- ✓ **Create meaningful, relevant opportunities:** Align projects with student interests and skills, such as social media management, video production or messaging development, to foster engagement and pride.
- ✓ **Coordinate centrally for consistency:** Have one department manage student involvement to maintain accountability and streamline communication.
- ✓ **Ensure legal compliance and transparency:** Understand media consent and free speech laws and communicate clearly with students and families about expectations and decisions.
- ✓ **Be prepared for time and resource investment:** Student involvement requires upfront effort and ongoing support but offers valuable learning experiences and can ease workload over time.
- ✓ **Solicit feedback and maintain open communication:** Regularly gather input from students and families to refine the program and ensure it meets everyone's needs.
- ✓ **Recognize and value student contributions:** Include students meaningfully in the process and celebrate their role as essential to the district's storytelling efforts.





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