

Improving Educational Experiences and Outcomes for Students with Disabilities Report on Student Voice Meetings: May 2019

Students with disabilities are our most valued and important stakeholders, which is why the Ohio Department of Education sought to inform the work to improve educational experiences and outcomes with students themselves. The Department hosted four input sessions in spring 2019. Parents and students 18 years or older completed release forms to participate in the Student Voice meetings.

Date	Location	Number of Students
May 15, 2019	Pickaway-Ross Career & Technology Center	10 students
May 15, 2019	Summit County Educational Service Center	3 students
May 21, 2019	Mount Healthy City Schools	14 students
May 22, 2019	Akron City Schools	6 students
Total		33 students

Student Voice Questions

1. *What do you enjoy about school? Prompt: What are your strengths at school?*
2. *What's hard about school? Prompts: What do you do if you have questions, concerns? Who do you talk to about questions, concerns?*
3. *Are you invited to your individualized education program (IEP) meeting? Prompt: How are you involved in your IEP meeting?*
4. *How do your teachers help you? Prompts: How do your teachers help you when you're struggling? When you have a problem, how do your teachers help you?*
5. *If you could change anything about school, what would it be?*
6. *If you could do anything after graduation, what would it be? Prompt: Where do you see yourself in five years?*

What We Learned

Relationships and fun make school enjoyable

- Caring and supportive teachers, counselors, intervention specialists
- Making new friends
- Academics: English language arts, mathematics, science, history
- Electives: music, art, drama
- Hands-on labs

Academics can be the hardest part of school

- Pace of algebra is too fast
- Teachers don't know how to help me with reading problems
- Too much homework. We need homework to practice what we learn, but maybe different kinds of homework
- Challenging state tests because I don't know the questions
- We need to learn what we are learning right now earlier

IEP meetings depend on relationships

- Majority of students report they are invited to their IEP meetings; however, their relationships with team or individual team members determines their attendance and/or participation
- If a professional was on the team and the student didn't like that person or get along with him or her, the student is powerless to change that team member or ask for someone different to be involved or help. Instead of attempting to advocate, the student would avoid that person, which typically meant avoiding a service or even the IEP meetings
- There was discussion around how teachers know you need help, and many felt they would try to ask for help, but others said they just 'shut down'
- Students report not knowing how to articulate they need help, being unsure about who to ask for certain/additional help, and not understanding the IEP meetings/processes. Are their opportunities to discuss the available help/accommodations?

Teachers are at the heart of education

- Some teachers stay after school to help you, will sit and listen to you, or relate to real-world problems
- Focused on student relationships
- Their hearts are in the right place
- When easily upset or frustrated and can't do something, the teachers understand and help

Improvement Recommendations

- Teachers could build better relationships with parents
- Ability to be in any place in a building without limits since some rooms of the school are terrible for hearing-impaired students to hear and learn
- We should be going to school longer each day so when we get home, we don't have to do homework. We need a break from school when we get home
- Longer school year with more breaks so we can remember what we learned (year-round schooling)
- High school goes by too fast, so we need to learn things earlier
- When students choose career-tech courses, they miss some of the home school's classes like art and music
- The school has a learning lab to help with accommodations for tests and other work. It could be more organized due to lack of adults and many students needing help. Sometimes it is crowded, and the one staff person present cannot meet the needs of all students. Other times it is very loud because it's adjacent to offices and maybe even a break room
- Focus on safety and restorative discipline not bullying

Conclusion

By offering the opportunity for students with disabilities to tell us directly in their own words what school is like for them, we learned some key takeaways. Relationships, especially with teachers who follow-through and offer help, are critical to students feeling positive about school. While learning can be hard for students, their suggestions provide tangible and concrete ideas to improve their educational experiences.