Incorporating student voice into school decision making is a topic of growing interest for educators across the United States and the Pacific Region.[1] Student voice can be a promising strategy for enhancing education access, opportunity, and success for students who are historically marginalized within the pre-kindergarten to grade 12 education system.[2,3] By supporting student voice, educators can gain a deeper understanding and appreciation of their students' varying cultural, economic, and geographic circumstances to ultimately better serve their students.

What is Student Voice?

Student voice is defined as

> **"the ways in which all students have opportunities to participate in and/or influence the education decisions that will shape their lives and the lives of their peers."**[4,5]

Student Voice in School Design

The Hawai'i Department of Education (HIDOE) defines school design as "the purposeful design of schools to ensure that every student is highly engaged in a rigorous, relevant, and innovative academic curriculum; in their learning environment, and in powerful applied learning practices aligned to careers."[6] HIDOE's four main principles for school design include:

- Core Values and Mindset.
- Curriculum and Learning Design.
- Infrastructure.
- Student Learning Products and Voice.

Including student voice in school design can support administrators in ensuring that the school design meets the needs of students.

Student Voice Implementation in Schools

There are multiple ways to structure student voice opportunities for maximum engagement. Models that decision makers can use to guide how they will engage their students include:

Adult-run; active listening.[7]

Adults solicit student feedback and input through surveys, interviews, focus groups etc. and incorporate student experiences into decision making.

Example: A teacher soliciting feedback on a lesson.

Adult-run; shared decisions with students.[8]

Adults organize the activities, but students directly contribute to decision making.

Example: Incorporating student representatives on school community councils where they have decision-making power.

Student-run; shared decisions with adults.[9]

Students organize the activities, but adults approve the decisions that students make.

Example: Creating a student advisory group in which students have the responsibility to make and execute a school-related decision that adults have approved.

Student-run; limited influence over decisions from adults.[10]

Students organize the activities and make decisions with limited influence from adults.

Example: Students organizing a monthly town hall meeting to discuss concerns in their school, identify ways to address concerns, and outline specific ways both students and educators can effectively address concerns.
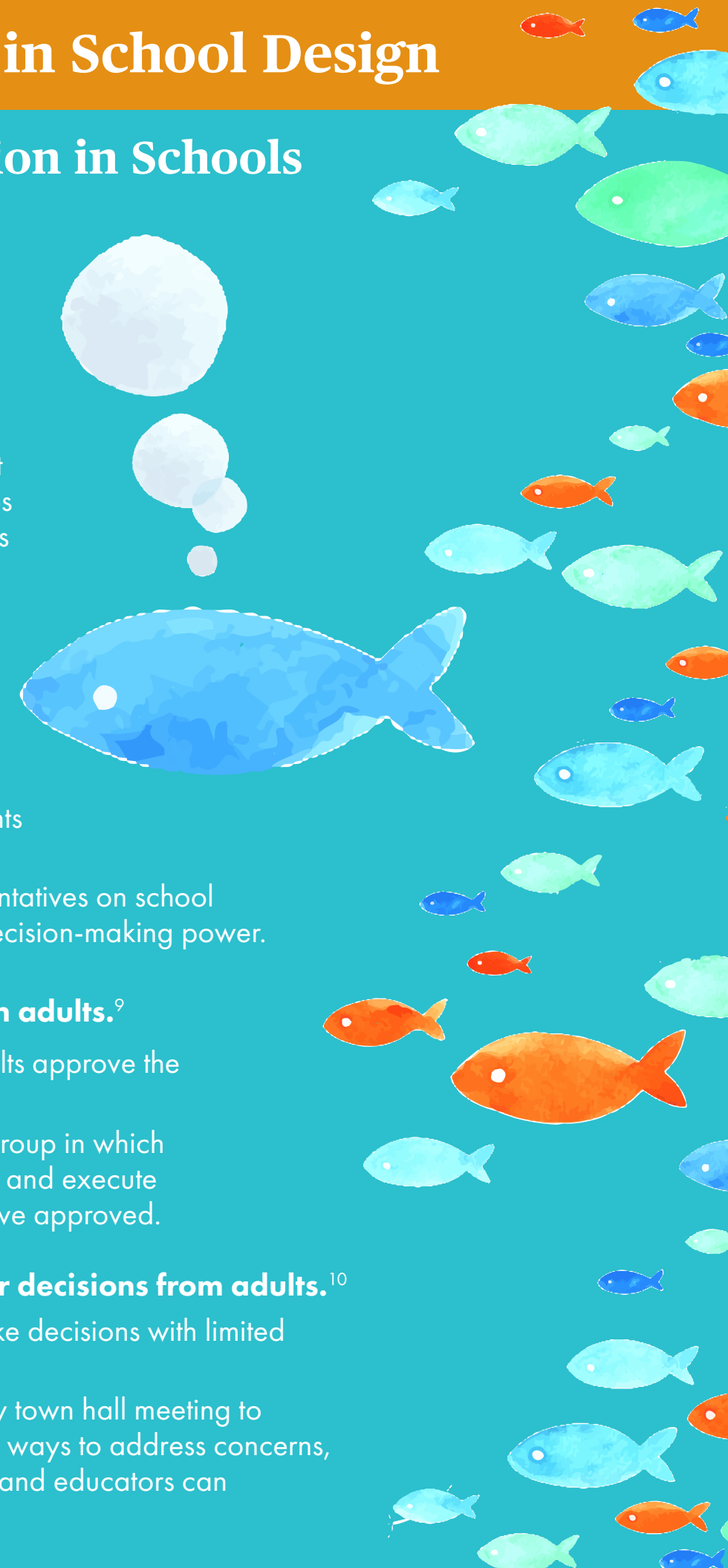
Promising Practices for Incorporating Student Voice Into School Design Decision Making

Decide on roles and responsibilities.

Before participating in decision making, students need to understand what their role is, and is not, and who is responsible for the decisions being made.[11] Educators can work with students to create clear roles and responsibilities within student voice opportunities.[12] For example, if school administrators are asking students to provide feedback on the school's climate, inform students how and when their feedback will be used to make decisions.

Offer diverse and accessible forms of participation.

Studies show that not all students feel comfortable speaking to administrators, responding to surveys, or participating in clubs.[13] Educators can strive to offer multiple ways for students to share and discuss their experiences by inviting students to participate in school leadership meetings or fostering spaces for students to discuss learning concerns with their peers. Educators can collaborate with students in deciding which methods for participating in decision making will be most comfortable for students.[14]

Identify adult allies.

To help students participate in decision making, it is often essential for educators to work with students in identifying adult allies with whom students can collaborate.[15, 16] An adult ally is a teacher or staff member who provides students with support and/or encouragement, answers their questions, and gives them advice. Adult allies may also champion students' needs with school leaders if students don't feel they are being heard.

Foster relationships between students.

Helping students build relationships with one another allows them to feel more confident and willing to participate in decision making.[17, 18] These peer-to-peer relationships provide essential supports to students engaging in student voice opportunities as they navigate new situations, overcome challenges, and work together to achieve common goals.

Offer students professional learning.

Student voice often requires students to share their voice in different situations, such as co-creating curriculum with teachers and serving as student representatives on school boards.[19] Educators can support student participation by providing learning activities to students at their request, or on topics they may not learn in school, such as conducting research and engaging in effective electronic communication.

Resist tokenization.

Researchers broadly define tokenization as a symbolic effort on the part of educators to include student voices without truly being inclusive of students' ideas, feelings, and thoughts in decision making.[20, 21] When educators strive to be open to all student voices — even when challenging existing decisions or views — they can build trusting, intentional, and long-term relationships with all students.[22] Educators and students should work together to identify ways to hold school administrators and teachers accountable when opportunities becoming tokenizing to students.

Avenues for Supporting Students as They Share Their Voice

There are many avenues educators can use to provide opportunities for students to share their voice in school design. It is important to co-identify and co-create avenues with students to share their voice to ensure their needs are met.[23]

Feedback Forms

Provide students with opportunities to share about their experiences in classrooms or schools. Co-conceptualize forms with students to ensure they effectively capture students' experiences.[24]

Youth Participatory Action Research

Co-lead research efforts to gain a deeper understanding of students' experiences. Co-create and administer surveys, co-facilitate focus groups, co-conduct observations, and co-analyze data to ensure that information gathered and analyzed accurately reflect students' experiences.[25]

Student Voice Groups

Provide space within the school or K–12 system where students can discuss their experiences, organize their ideas, and provide feedback to educators on school or system decisions.

Student Representation

Include at least two student representatives in school-wide decision making, particularly when changing or updating school values, curriculum, infrastructure, or learning products.[26]

Adult Professional Learning

Co-identify opportunities for students to provide professional development to educators. Example topics include how to incorporate students' voices into decision making, how to support students' social and emotional learning, or how to cultivate a positive school climate.[27]
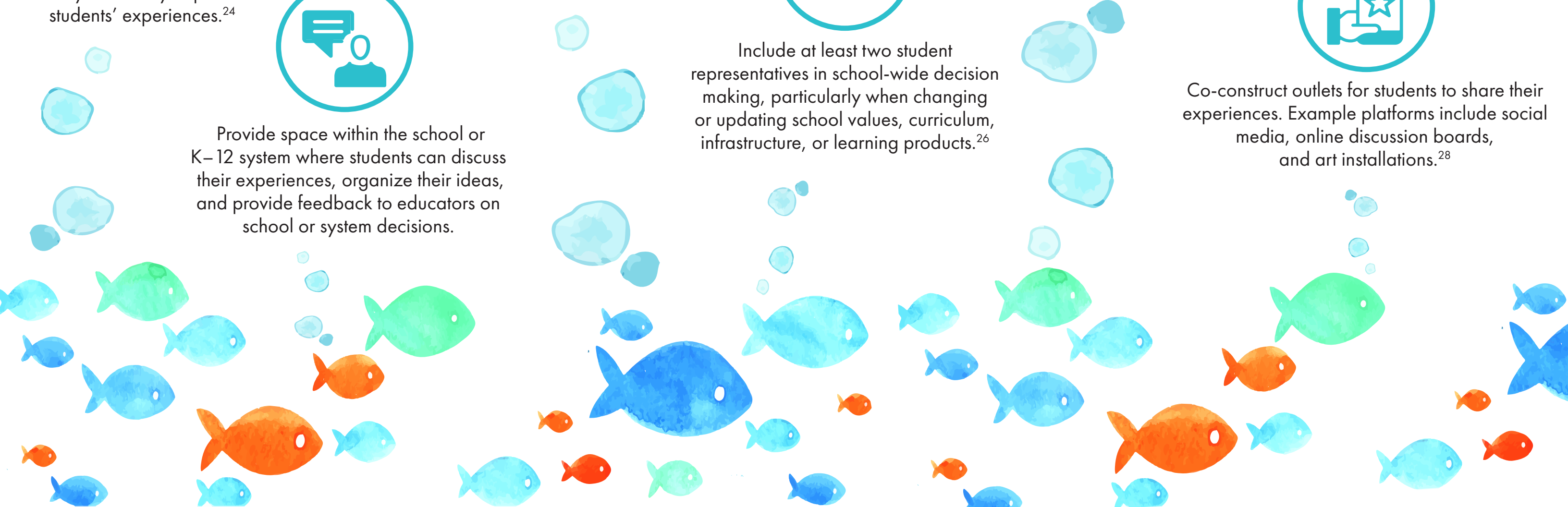
Peer-to-Peer Communication Outlets

Co-construct outlets for students to share their experiences. Example platforms include social media, online discussion boards, and art installations.[28]

Promising Practices for Sustaining Student Voice in School Design

Sustaining student voice opportunities over time can be challenging. When student voice opportunities are not sustained, students will no longer receive the benefits associated with these opportunities and may become disillusioned with participating in the education decision-making process in the future. These promising practices for sustaining student voice provide some insight into how students and educators can ensure that student voice continues to be integrated into education decision making.

Continued Engagement of Adult Allies

It is important for educators and students to collaboratively create a transition plan for when adult allies leave the school or district, which should include identifying new adult allies to support the continuation of student voice opportunities.[29]

Establishment of Student Leadership Opportunities

Providing students with meaningful leadership opportunities within student voice opportunities enables students to more deeply engage with and take more ownership over their work.[30]

Collaboration with Out-of-School Organizations

Working in collaboration with an out-of-school organization, such as a nonprofit, can support educators and students in ensuring that resources are available to sustain student voice opportunities even if priorities shift within the education environment.[31]

Building Flexible Structures and Practices

Because students, educators, and education environments are continuously changing and evolving, structures and practices need to be created to ensure that student voice opportunities are flexible enough to respond to the needs of students.[32]

Institutionalization of Student Participation

As students are continuously entering and leaving schools, it is important to create clear and consistent structures within student voice opportunities to support student participation.[33] Structures might focus on:

- the roles and responsibilities of students in decision making within the classroom, school, or district.
- how students will engage in decision making.
- how students will be recruited to participate.
- how educators will support student participation in decision making.

Commitment to School and District Leadership

For student voice opportunities to take root across a school and district, they require the continued support of school and district leadership.[34] It is essential for school and district leaders to continuously support students engaging in decision making through a commitment to providing student voice opportunities.

To effectively support student voice in schools, educators must also feel supported to share their voices. For more information on how to support educators in schools, check out REL Pacific's infographic

"How to Grow Teacher Wellbeing in Your Schools"

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