

# Praise for Student Voice

*Student voice is an often missed element of promoting a positive school climate, where students take ownership of their learning experience. This book sheds light on the importance of this topic and provides practical advice on how to let student voice take a central role in promoting learning at school.*

—**Pablo Zoido, Analyst**

Programme for International Student Assessment  
Paris, France

*This book speaks to a movement that many people talk about but few act upon, Student Voice. Russell Quaglia and Michael Corso have lived their professional careers listening to students and acting on what they have heard. Now they share what it takes for education to truly become student-centered.*

—**Raymond J. McNulty, Dean of the School of Education**

Southern New Hampshire University  
Chief Learning Officer  
Penn Foster  
Hooksett, NH

*Student Voice not only captures the urgency of our professional, societal, and moral imperatives to transform the educational system, but it also provides a thoughtful, thought-provoking, and well-researched framework for ensuring that all of our students can and will pursue and attain their aspirations. With moving stories and insights from students and teachers, heartfelt personal anecdotes, extensive analyses of data, and a deep understanding of the power of shared leadership, Dr. Quaglia and Dr. Corso have crafted a roadmap for the journey all of us as learners seek to travel—the road on which the voices of our students are the instruments of change in creating the future. Student Voice connects the dots of what too often seem to be disparate research about and facets of the elements of student achievement of academic, social, and personal aspirations and offers a comprehensive and coherent road to actualizing deep, meaningful, and sustainable change.*

—**Beth Havens, Educational Consultant for Innovation and Special Projects**

Horry County Schools  
Conway, SC

*Schools have long told students to have goals and aspirations. But when it comes down to it, test scores and Adequate Yearly Progress stand in the paths of schools and students. This*

*book lays out clearly that what students desire and what states require do not have to be mutually exclusive. I can't wait to share Student Voice with my colleagues.*

**—Lisa Brewster-Cook, English Teacher**

Somerville High School  
Somerville, MA

*Student Voice is the result of many years of experience working with students and teachers around the world—and it shows. Drs. Quaglia and Corso have stuffed every nook and cranny of this book with practical ways to understand young people that are both sensible and profound. This is your go-to field guide for student aspirations.*

**—Adam Ray**

Pearson Foundation  
Mill Valley, CA

*If you haven't considered student voice, then this book is a must read with great ideas and insightful stories that should engage you further and might just influence your practice. If you're already committed to student voice, then this book provides compelling evidence and vital structure that place student voice and aspirations front and center in education, a must-read aid to planning and implementation.*

*As we seek to increase schools' relevance in an ever more rapidly changing world, this book outlines and details a model for the way forward. Quaglia and Corso combine evidence from students, guiding principles, and conditions for their implementation in schools, stories from practice and practical notes to assist reflection and development. Written in an accessible and easy-to-read style, they together form powerful positive guidance for teaching and learning, and for change in schools.*

**—Gavin Dykes, Director**

Cellcove Ltd.  
Surrey, UK

*Students routinely achieving their full potential, high performing schools becoming the new normal—Student Voice makes the compelling case that we “can't get there from here” without fundamentally changing the culture of schools to listen and act on what students say about their schools, their lives, and their aspirations. Refreshingly straightforward, this book provides a unique mix of profound truths and practical guidance for transforming education.*

**—Anthony Jackson, Vice President for Education**

Asia Society  
New York, NY

*This book captures the essence of what has been missing in educational reform for the past several decades, in that it highlights the perspectives that matter most—the students.' Having witnessed the transformational potential of inculcating the*

*Aspirations Framework into a school, “student voice” will forever serve as the lodestar in the development of curriculum, instruction, and policy in my professional practice. The Aspirations Framework opens the door to this new era in education; in fact, student voice is the “McLuhanian” medium that will transform education in the 21st century, only if we, educators and society as a whole, take the time to listen.*

—**David E. Reilly, Assistant Superintendent**

Sequoia Union High School District  
Redwood City, CA

*Quaglia and Corso champion student voice in this beautiful and inspirational narrative. This book provides a career-changing framework for educators to listen, learn, and lead; driven by the most important voice of all. My personal Aspiration is now to dream and do more to elevate student voice. Student Voice is a MUST READ for every educator seeking to meaningfully impact the lives of students.*

—**Dr. Lisa Kinnaman, Co-Director**

Idaho Leads Project  
Boise, ID

*Student Voice is an extraordinary collection of research, success examples, common sense recommendations, and stories from the heart. I was struck by its quality, humility, simplicity, and complexity. This book is a call to action to move American public education from its fixation with test scores to winning the hearts and minds of our children “to allow our students to dream, reach, and succeed.”*

—**Robert Neu, Superintendent**

Oklahoma City Public Schools  
Oklahoma City, OK

*Student Voice reveals the secret to turning schools into vibrant communities of engaged learners—simply and profoundly—giving students a voice in their own learning. It offers a hopeful, poignant and elegant vision for closing the gap for the alarming number of students who are disconnected from school. Quaglia challenges educators to value student voice through intentional listening and responsive action and tells them how to create meaningful partnerships that keep students engaged, excited, and achieving. This is a must-read roadmap for reform-weary educators who will be inspired to take the less traveled path of listening to and responding to the voice of each of their students.*

—**Gail Connelly, Executive Director**

National Association of Elementary School Principals  
Alexandria, VA

*In this book, Dr. Quaglia and Dr. Corso offer a successfully tested framework designed to empower students by giving them a meaningful voice in the educational process. It starts with a conversation that leads to an understanding of student perceptions of their*

*educational experience and ultimately creates a trusting partnership between students and educators. The partnership guides the educational process, positively influences school climate and creates an environment in which students can successfully achieve their aspirations. Student Voice is a professional investment every school community should make.*

**—Steve York, Assistant Superintendent**

Montana Office of Public Instruction  
Helena, MT

*In this magnificent book, Quaglia and Corso have unearthed a deep missing piece in learning. The elephant in the room ironically turns out to be Student Voice! And now we have it—their Aspirations, the 8 Conditions of deep learning relating to Self-worth, Engagement, and Purpose. Thanks to the authors we have a whole new set of strategies where change, learning, educators, and students merge. This is innovation at its best.*

**—Michael Fullan, Professor Emeritus**

OISE, University of Toronto

# Student Voice

*To our children . . .*

*Lauren, Casey, Chelsea, and Cali Quaglia; and Rebecca and Elise Corso*

*There are no greater teachers in the world than our children.*

*Our kids have powered us with inspiration and insight; our job was to take it somewhere!*

# Student Voice

## *The Instrument of Change*

**Russell J. Quaglia**

**Michael J. Corso**





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# The Road Not Taken

by Robert Frost

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,  
And sorry I could not travel both  
And be one traveler, long I stood  
And looked down one as far as I could  
To where it bent in the undergrowth;  
Then took the other, as just as fair,  
And having perhaps the better claim  
Because it was grassy and wanted wear,  
Though as for that the passing there  
Had worn them really about the same,  
And both that morning equally lay  
In leaves no step had trodden black.  
Oh, I marked the first for another day!  
Yet knowing how way leads on to way  
I doubted if I should ever come back.  
I shall be telling this with a sigh  
Somewhere ages and ages hence:  
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I,  
I took the one less traveled by,  
And that has made all the difference.



# Preface

*I want to be good. I tried to be good. No one here [at school] understands me. Why don't they care what I am saying? Why don't they care about me? What is wrong with me?*

—Brian, high school junior

There are some things that stay with us forever. Brian was a bright, articulate student. He was a good athlete and on student council. He was the kind of student you meet and think, *Wow, the educational system is working for him.* He was one of those students who loved to get involved in things, no matter what the activity was. Students liked him, teachers enjoyed having him in class, and the principal knew him by name. From all accounts, Brian was a success story in the making.

However, as time went on his grades started to slip, his attitude was less upbeat, and he started to distance himself from his teachers. He was becoming increasingly frustrated with school. He often skipped classes and was repeatedly tardy. His grades showed it, and now he was in disciplinary trouble. He never complained, nor did he make excuses for his behavior, which made him even more endearing to me. I knew him pretty well because of the work I was doing in his school, where he was a member of the student aspirations team (a novel concept 30 years ago).

I happened to be visiting his school the day he was being suspended. Walking into the principal's office, I could see that Brian was upset. I asked him if he was okay. Obviously he was not. I asked him what had happened and he responded, "I hate this place."

"You can't hate this place," I said. "This school was made because of kids like you. You are a shining star!"

He regarded me blankly, and his eyes began to well up. Fighting back the tears (since athletes from New England don't cry), he told me, "I want to be good. I tried to be good. No one here understands me. Why don't they care what I am saying? Why don't they care about me? What is wrong with me?" Brian's raw statement

would become a defining moment for me, one that in many ways set my career in motion, and inspired my dedication to understanding student aspirations and advocating for student voice. In the moment, however, and in my haste to comfort a student I cared for, I told him that everything would be fine and that I was sure things would be better when he came back.

But I never saw Brian again. After his suspension, he never returned to school. My heart hurts every time I consider that experience because I always think I could have, and should have, done more. The system failed him. I failed him. No one was listening. I was in my twenties and only wish I had known then what I know now. Maybe through some miracle he will read this book and know that I heard him—that I learned from him and am dedicated to creating better schools for all students. His voice has made a lasting difference.

This book both reflects and promotes student voice. At its heart is a fundamental conviction that students are not the problem in our schools; they are the potential. We believe student voice should be instrumental to any educational reform agenda. Our theme, therefore, is *Listen, Learn, and Lead*. We must not only ask young people their thoughts, but we must truly listen. We must learn from what they are saying by asking important questions and discovering *why* they feel as they do. And finally, we must utilize what we learn to be effective educators.

Student voice should never be perceived as fulfilling a mandate or thinking students have a voice because a student is placed on a few school committees. Student voice is not window dressing or some ploy to inspire students to do well on exams. We describe student voice from an operational perspective as *occurring when students are meaningfully engaged in decision making and improvement-related processes in their schools*. Student voice must become a way of being, not some plan to pay lip service to students' desire to speak out. A ninth-grade student told us, "Student voice is being able to be heard, to be listened to, then being able to change things for the better. It is one thing to be able to say what you feel, but to actually have adults listen to you and actually process what you say is totally different."

Ensuring student voice in school is not easy and must be grounded in both theory and practice. Is student voice the missing variable in our reform agenda today? We believe it is. Such new and exciting work as *New Pedagogies for Deep Learning* led by Michael Fullan, where student voice is integral to Dr. Fullan and his team's effort; Gavin Dykes leadership at the Education World Forum, ensuring students have a voice at the annual conference; Andreas Schleicher, Deputy Director of Education and Skills at OECD, has incorporated student voice questions in the Programme for International Student Assessment, or PISA, study; and Dawn Haywood, who leads the Student Ambassadors Board at the Aspirations Academies in England are global examples that give us hope that incorporating student voice is far more than a passing fancy, but a force to be reckoned with and a now permanent feature of the educational landscape!

Student voice is not a fad to us. Nor is it some far-off notion that will not come to fruition in our lifetime. We are seeing more examples in schools where student voice as we define it is being taken seriously and having incredible benefits for the entire educational community. We see fewer dropouts, fewer absences, engaged learners leading to greater academic success, and, most importantly, students with purpose and an understanding of who they are and want to become. For the first time, we are seeing students as active partners in their education. These student partners are not an elected or selected “special” group of students but rather cut across all ages, races, and abilities. Students with voice have one precious thing in common—they know they matter!

This book represents a new and innovative way of understanding, involving, and inspiring students. First, the *Aspirations Framework* provides a model to understand students that is based on basic constructs of dreaming and doing. Second, this model is used to identify the conditions in school that inspire students to have self-worth, be meaningfully engaged in their learning, and have a sense of purpose. Finally, we develop this *framework for action* and present concrete ways and examples that promote and encourage student voice as an instrument for change.

We take great pride being straightforward and honest; our critics call it *bold*. It is designed to share the truth of what students think about school with educators who want to make a difference. The book is driven by what happens in practice, not just theory. It incorporates data from more than one million students using the My Voice student survey and student focus groups, as well as field observations and interviews spanning three decades and several countries.

We hope this book prompts you to reflect upon your own experience and expertise, and prepares you to lead with the sure knowledge that your students can and will want to join you.

—Russell J. Quaglia



# Acknowledgments

One of the best openings of a school year we have ever witnessed was at a district in New England. The superintendent had invited three students [an eighth grader, a high school sophomore, and a senior] and their parents to the staff convocation. Each student was a kind of turnaround story. He introduced the students one at a time, briefly telling his or her tale of getting back on track. Then, after acknowledging the students' parents, he did something wonderful. He invited any administrators who had overseen buildings that these students had attended to stand. Four or five people stood. He then invited any teachers or guidance counselors who had worked with these students to stand. Another 20 people stood. For the senior about double that number rose to their feet. Finally, he asked any staff member who had interacted with the student to stand. Administrative assistants, custodians, cafeteria workers, and attendance officers all proudly stood. The applause was thunderous and the point was well made.

Anyone in the field of education knows that any one person's accomplishment is an accumulation of the efforts of many other people. No less is true of this book. You will read numerous stories from the field. Some of you may even recognize yourselves! Without the tireless work of the teachers and administrators working with students in schools every day, there would be neither a source nor a purpose for what we have written. We are privileged to have worked with so many of you in one capacity or another. In addition, there are many individuals who work in central offices and state and federal departments of education who share our concern about the current state of our educational systems and the need for involving students more in finding solutions. Your willingness to find ways to adhere to pre-existing policies while at the same time pushing the boundaries of partnership with students motivates us to keep our shoulders against the larger, slower wheel of change with you.

Between the two of us we have talked to thousands of students. Their insights and energy are our constant inspiration. Nearly all of them have known that there is a different and better way of being a community of learners. They have been excited that someone is willing to listen to their ideas and invite their participation. They are the driving force of what we do.

The Quaglia Institute for Student Aspirations (QISA) could not have a better partner or friend than the Pearson Foundation. The Foundation distributes, collects, and reports on the My Voice survey you will learn about later. They are in the vanguard of the student voice movement and, as we know too well, that is sometimes a lonely place to be! In particular, Adam Ray at the Pearson Foundation has been a faithful champion of QISA's work over the years. We are thankful for his and the Foundation's ongoing support.

All the best thinking and intentions in the world about how to make schools better for students are mere dreams without those willing to do the difficult work of implementing the Aspirations Framework in their schools. The Aspirations Academies in England and QISA's Demonstration Sites in the United States have led the way to what meaningful student involvement in decision making is all about. They have courageously overcome obstacles and the naysayers to put students first and foremost in their schools and districts. Thank you!

Finally, we are so grateful to work alongside some of the finest people and educators we have ever known and who are part of the team at QISA. Sue Harper, QISA's administrative assistant, and Deborah Young, director of operations, keep QISA running smoothly so that we can run around the world listening to students and teachers and instigating change. Megan Bedford, QISA's director of communications, was incredibly helpful in reading numerous drafts and making suggestions for layout and design. Sarah Rawlings, director of research, and her predecessor, Dr. Matthew Bundick (now at Duquesne University), have been invaluable in helping us collect, understand, and analyze the survey results that form the backbone of this book. And several members of QISA's Field Team—Dr. Brian Connelly, Dr. Kristine Fox, Julie Hellerstein, and Susan Inman—have made innumerable contributions over the years to our thinking and to this text. When you read our words, trust that their experiences, insights, and efforts are part of what you are learning.

—Russell J. Quaglia and Michael J. Corso

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# About the Authors



**Dr. Russell J. Quaglia**, recognized globally as a pioneer in the field of education, is known for his unwavering dedication to student aspirations and student voice. Described by national news media as America's foremost authority on the development and achievement of student aspirations, Dr. Quaglia's innovative work is evidenced by an extensive library of research-based publications, prominent international speaking appearances, and a successfully growing list of ventures.

Among these ventures, Dr. Quaglia authored the My Voice suite of surveys, iKnow My Class student surveys, and the My Aspirations Action Plan, an online aspirations-based planner that helps students work toward their dreams and track their progress with the support of an adult Aspirations Advocate.

In addition to founding and leading the Quaglia Institute for Student Aspirations, Dr. Quaglia is the chief academic officer of the Student Engagement Trust, a non-profit organization based in the United Kingdom. He also founded and currently chairs the Aspirations Academies Trust, a sponsor of primary and secondary academies in the United Kingdom built upon his aspirations research.

Combining his entrepreneurial spirit with his devotion to helping students achieve their aspirations, Dr. Quaglia established Q-Bean Coffee in 2012, a company that donates all profits from the sales of its ecofriendly coffee to educational organizations and student scholarships.

Dr. Quaglia earned his bachelor's degree at Assumption College, a master of arts degree in economics from Boston College, and master of education and doctoral degrees from Columbia University, specializing in the area of organizational theory and behavior. He has been awarded numerous honorary doctorates in humanitarian services for his dedication to students. Dr. Quaglia's work has also led him to serve on national and international committees, reflecting his passion for ensuring that students' voices are always heard, honored, and acted upon.



**Dr. Michael J. Corso** is the chief academic officer for the Quaglia Institute for Student Aspirations (QISA). He has a doctorate in education from Boston College, has been an educator for more than 25 years, and has taught at every grade level, kindergarten through graduate school. He is deeply committed to the belief that students are the agents of their own learning. This passion makes him a natural fit for work in the area of student aspirations. Dr. Corso has worked throughout his career to improve teaching and learning through teacher training and education. In his role at QISA, Dr. Corso combines research on student perceptions of their schools with educational theory and the living, breathing practice of students, teachers, and administrators.