

International School Anti-Discrimination Taskforce (ISADTF)

Student Agency Committee Guidance Document

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INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL ANTI-DISCRIMINATION TASK FORCE



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ABSTRACT

Centering Agency in International Schools outlines the work of the Student Agency Group, a collaborative initiative formed by ECIS, the International Baccalaureate (IB), AIELOC, and Ecolint. Established in 2022 through an international convening in Switzerland, the group emerged from a shared recognition that students in international schools are often denied meaningful agency, with their voices marginalized and experiences of discrimination insufficiently addressed.

A central finding of this work is that sustainable student agency requires more than coordinator or teacher-led initiatives; it demands clear responsibility and visible ownership from at least one senior leader with positional authority. Without leadership-level accountability, agency and anti-discrimination efforts risk remaining peripheral rather than systemic.

To ground its recommendations in lived experience, the group gathered survey data and qualitative input from school leaders, educators, and students across diverse international contexts. Students were later directly engaged in shaping the direction of the work, ensuring that experiences of belonging, exclusion, and voice informed the resulting framework.

Recognizing the varied demographic, cultural, political, and legal landscapes in which international schools operate, the recommendations are intentionally adaptable rather than prescriptive. Schools are encouraged to interpret and implement them in ways that reflect their unique contexts. Ultimately, the initiative calls for international schools to move beyond symbolic gestures toward embedding student voice as integral to decision-making, policy, and practice—anchored by leadership responsibility and sustained commitment to systemic change.

ISADTF *Student Agency* Committee Guidance Document for Schools

Introduction

Purpose

Students thrive as agents of change when they are seen, heard, and meaningfully included in the life of their school. In international schools, where diverse identities, cultures, and lived experiences intersect, centering student agency is essential to fostering belonging, equity, and authentic engagement. This requires intentional attention to whose voices are being heard and whose experiences may be overlooked, ensuring that all students—especially those whose perspectives are less often centered—are meaningfully included in shaping the community.

This document provides recommendations and guidance for schools—specifically international schools—to center student agency. It reframes student agency as a systemic leadership responsibility grounded in equity, belonging, and anti-discriminatory practice, rather than a standalone initiative operating without senior leadership ownership and accountability.

Drawing on the work of the Student Agency Group (ECIS, IB, AIELOC, and Ecolint), this guidance recognizes that meaningful and sustained student agency requires clear responsibility and visible leadership at the senior level, alongside a collective commitment from all adults in the community.

For student voice to be authentic and impactful, adults must create the conditions in which it can thrive. This includes developing psychologically safe environments, modeling interculturally competent and inclusive behaviors, responding to harm with clarity and consistency, and embedding student perspectives into systems, structures, and decision-making. It also requires intentionally developing students as leaders—equipping them with the skills to facilitate dialogue, engage across difference, and contribute meaningfully to shaping their communities. Through guided opportunities, students learn not only to express their ideas, but to lead, collaborate, and co-create inclusive and equitable spaces alongside others.

This document supports schools in moving beyond symbolic gestures toward authentic, embedded practices where student agency is cultivated through staff agency, leadership authority, and shared accountability.

Ultimately, when adults take responsibility for building the conditions of belonging, students are empowered to engage as leaders, visionaries, and co-creators of equitable school communities.

Goals/ Objectives

1. Ensure Students Experience Leadership that Centers Their Voice

- Establish clear senior leadership ownership and accountability for student agency
- Ensure student voice is prioritized, protected, and systemically embedded
- Align student agency with the school's mission, values, and strategic direction

2. Leverage Positional Power to Center Student Agency

- Build staff capacity in equity-centered, anti-discriminatory, and intercultural practices
- Equip adults to facilitate dialogue, navigate difference, and respond to harm with care and consistency

- Support educators in modeling the behaviors that allow students to engage, lead, and contribute meaningfully

3. Create Environments *Where All Students Feel Seen, Heard, and Valued*

- Design learning environments that foster psychological safety, dignity, and identity affirmation, ensuring all students feel seen, heard, and valued
- Ensure systems reflect the full diversity of student experiences and perspectives, positioning students as active contributors through shared decision-making and co-creation
- Embed student voice into policies and practices, ensuring contributions lead to meaningful action, while recognizing that belonging is built through intentional adult action and shared community practice.

4. Sustain Systems that Support Student Agency Over Time

- Move from isolated efforts to coherent, system-wide approaches that center students
- Use student experience, data, and reflection to inform continuous growth and improvement
- Adapt approaches to reflect the cultural, political, and community contexts of each school

Recommendations for International Schools

The following recommendations are grounded in a central belief: student agency is essential to fostering belonging, dignity, and equity in international schools, yet it does not develop in isolation. It is cultivated through intentional systems, leadership, and adult responsibility.

A key insight guiding this work is that student agency thrives only when there is clear ownership and accountability at the leadership level. While educators and coordinators play a vital role, their efforts are limited without visible responsibility and alignment from those with positional authority. These recommendations therefore emphasize the importance of leadership not only in supporting student agency, but in actively creating the conditions in which it can flourish.

To effectively carry out these recommendations, it is essential that a key strategic school leader—such as the Head of School, Associate Head of School, Principal, or Director—holds clear responsibility for this work. This leadership must be enacted in intentional partnership with students, including Student Council leaders, Affinity Group leaders, and other student representatives or agency leaders. This is a firm expectation of the committee: for anti-discrimination and equity efforts and student agency to thrive, leadership ownership and student partnership must be explicit, sustained, and visible.

At the same time, these recommendations center students as partners, leaders, and co-creators of their school communities. They are designed to ensure that student voice reflects the full diversity of experiences within a school, and that students are not left to carry the burden of addressing inequity on their own. Instead, adults are called to build environments where all students can engage authentically, develop leadership capacity, and contribute meaningfully to shaping their communities.

Recognizing the complexity and diversity of international school contexts, these recommendations are intentionally adaptive rather than prescriptive. Schools are encouraged to interpret and implement them in ways that reflect their unique cultural, political, and community landscapes, while maintaining a clear commitment to equity, belonging, and anti-discriminatory practice.

Collectively, these recommendations call for a shift—from student voice as participation to student agency as embedded practice—where leadership, staff, and students work together to create schools in which agency, wellbeing, and belonging are not aspirational, but experienced by all.

Recommendation 1: Self Assess-Measure Agency as a Shared Responsibility

Establish a school-wide agency measurement process that evaluates both student experience and adult responsibility, using shared indicators across leadership, classrooms, and wellbeing

Recommendation 1A: Center Student Dignity and Meaningful Voice

Ensure student voice is not symbolic, but actively informs decision-making, policy, and practice.

Recommendation 2: Commit to Adult Learning and Accountability

Position intercultural competence, anti-discriminatory practice, and equity-centered leadership as core professional responsibilities for all adults.

Recommendation 3: Build Equitable Pathways for Student Agency

Create transparent and inclusive pathways for student leadership beyond representative voting, ensuring student participation is meaningful, supported, and protected from tokenism, overburdening, or harm.

Recommendation 4: Institutionalize Structures for Sustainable Change

Ensure agency and equity are embedded in systems, policies, and accountability cycles rather than dependent on individual leaders.

Recommendation 5: Use Listening, Data, and Wellbeing to Guide Action

Integrate human-centered listening practices—such as listening circles, student narratives, focus groups, and human libraries—beyond surveys, ensuring wellbeing is the foundation of all equity and agency efforts.

Sample Implementation Timeline

Phase 1: Laying the Foundation-Phase 1: Self-Assessment & Leadership Ownership (Months 1–3)

Step 1: Measure agency and establish senior leadership responsibility

- A. Establish a school-wide agency measurement process that evaluates:
 - Student experience (belonging, voice, safety)
 - Adult responsibility (leadership, classroom practice, systems)
- B. Identify and appoint a senior strategic leader (Head of School, Associate Head, Principal, or Director) to hold responsibility for this work.
- C. Name student agency, dignity, and belonging as school-wide priorities
- D. Ensure student voice is not symbolic by asking
 - Where is student input currently gathered?
 - How is it used?
 - Where are the gaps between voice and action?
- E. Begin identifying whose voices may not yet be fully represented

Step 2: Begin Adult Learning & Accountability

- A. Launch professional learning focused on:
 - Intercultural competence
 - Anti-discriminatory practice (identity, power, bias, racism, colorism, ethnocentrism, sexism, gender identity, ableism, neurodiversity, language, accent, linguistic equity, religious literacy and equity, socioeconomic inequity and access, discriminatory disciplinary practices, discriminatory safeguarding practices, etc.)
 - Psychological safety
- B. Develop shared understanding that:
 - Adult responsibility precedes student agency
 - Staff must actively create conditions for belonging
- C. Train the identified senior leader and leadership team to:
 - Advocate for students
 - Center dignity and identity safety
 - Lead this work with clarity and accountability

Phase 2: Listening and Student Centered Impact (Months 4–6)

Step 3: Center lived experience before designing solutions (Months 7–9) (Sample Survey Linked) Ensure participation is invitational and emotionally safe. Share themes (not names) back to the community.

- A. Implement human-centered listening structures:
 - Listening circles
 - Focus groups
 - Surveys
 - One-on-one conversations
- B. Ensure participation is invitational, emotionally safe, supported
- C. Share themes transparently with the community
- D. Identify where students feel heard, excluded or overburdened

Phase 3: Designing Equitable Structures of Student Agency (Months 7-10)

Step 4: Create pathways for meaningful participation and leadership

- A. Redesign leadership pathways for students beyond voting models to include:
 - Affinity/Bridge Builder leaders
 - Peer mentors
 - Restorative practice leaders
 - Advisory representatives
- B. Ensure pathways:
 - Reflect the diversity of the student body
 - Are accessible and inclusive
 - Do not overburden student leaders

Phase 4: Institutionalizing for Sustainability (Months 11–14)

Step 5: Embed Agency

- A. Integrate Agency into strategic plans, accreditation processes, safeguarding and well-being systems.
- B. Ensure leadership accountability remains visible and ongoing
- C. Use data and reflection to guide improvement—not evaluation of individuals
- D. Continue cycles of adult learning, student feedback and system refinement

Phase 5: Reflection, Refinement, and Growth (Months 15–18)

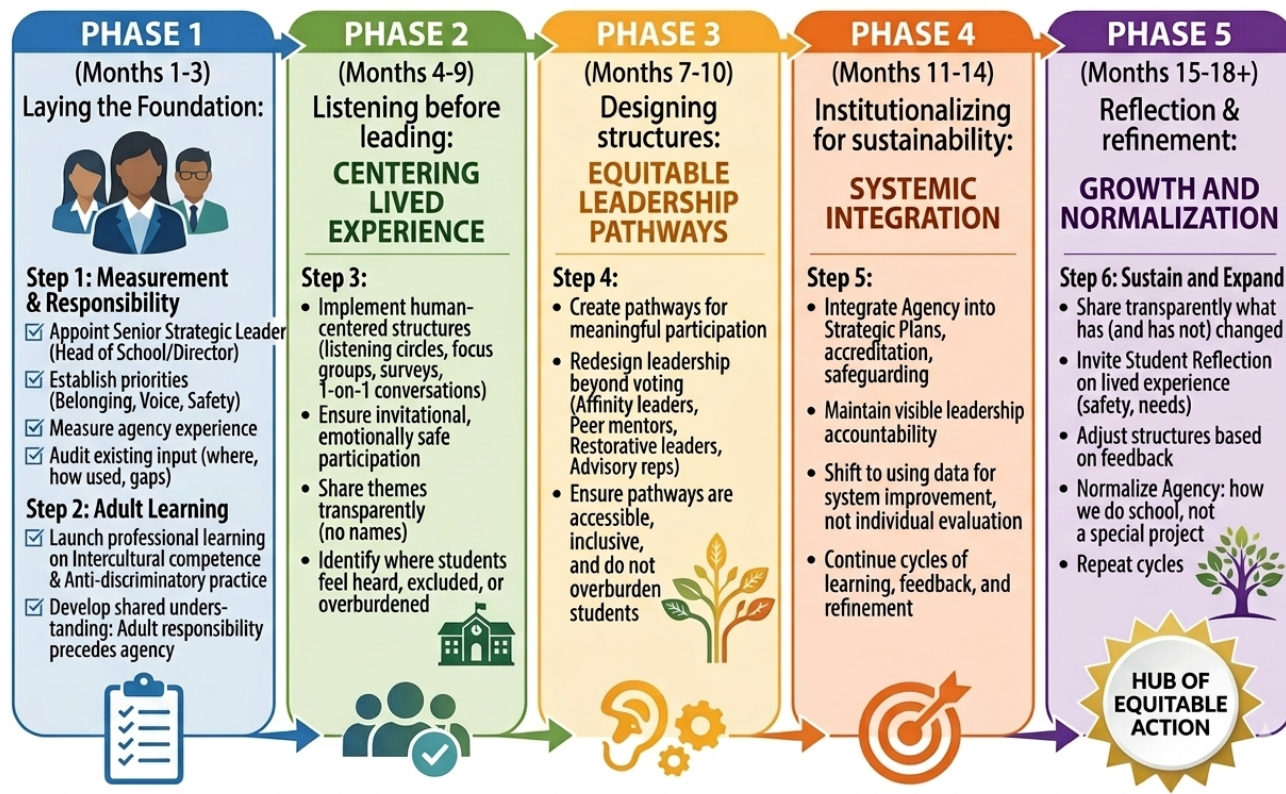
Step 6: Reflect, Refine, and Sustain

- A. Share transparently with students and staff what has changed and what has not
- B. Invite students to reflect on their experiences, including what feels different, what feels safer, and what still needs attention
- C. Adjust structures and practices based on feedback and lived experience
- D. Continue cycles of adult learning and leadership accountability
- E. Normalize student agency as embedded practice—how we do school—rather than a temporary initiative

Step 7: Repeat

- A. Adjust structures based on feedback.
- B. Continue adult learning cycles.
- C. Normalize agency as “how we do school,” not a special project.

Strategic Framework for School Agency and Equity



Conclusion

Centering student agency in international schools is not a singular initiative, but an ongoing commitment to aligning leadership, systems, and daily practice with the dignity and lived experiences of all students. When schools intentionally leverage positional power, invest in adult learning, and design structures that reflect and respond to student voice, they create environments where students are not only heard, but trusted as partners in shaping their communities. This collective effort calls for sustained reflection, accountability, and adaptation across diverse contexts, ensuring that agency is inclusive, meaningful, and enduring. Ultimately, when students are supported by adults who lead with clarity, care, and responsibility, they are empowered to grow as thoughtful leaders and co-creators of more just, equitable, and connected school communities.

Resources

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- Zhao, Y. (2012). *World class learners: Educating creative and entrepreneurial students*. Corwin.
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→ Direct alignment with IB mission and learner profile.

APPENDIX A—Related Definitions

Student Agency

The ability of students to actively shape their learning, experiences, and environment through voice, choice, and meaningful participation.

Student Voice

The expression of student perspectives, ideas, and experiences. Student voice becomes meaningful when it is not only heard, but acted upon and embedded into decision-making, policy, and practice.

Belonging

A sustained experience of being seen, heard, valued, and respected within a community. Belonging is not a feeling alone, but the result of intentional actions, systems, and relationships that affirm identity and ensure dignity for all.

Equity

The practice of ensuring fair access, opportunity, and support by recognizing and responding to differences in identity, experience, and need. Equity requires intentional action to address barriers and create conditions where all students can thrive.

Anti-Discriminatory Practice

A proactive and ongoing commitment to identifying, addressing, and preventing discrimination in all forms. This includes examining systems, behaviors, and decisions related to identity, power, and bias to ensure dignity and fairness for all.

Intercultural Competence

The ability to effectively and respectfully engage across cultural differences through awareness, knowledge, skills, and reflection. It includes understanding one's own cultural perspective while valuing and navigating the perspectives of others.

Intercultural Understanding

An awareness and appreciation of cultural differences and perspectives. It is a foundational step toward intercultural competence but does not necessarily include the skills or behaviors required to engage effectively across difference.

Identity Safety

The assurance that individuals can express and experience their identities without fear of harm, marginalization, or exclusion. Identity safety is actively created through inclusive practices, language, and systems.

Positional Power

The authority and influence individuals hold within a school based on their role (e.g., Head of School, Principal, teacher). In schools, positional power is used intentionally and responsibly to create conditions that support student agency, belonging, and equity.

Psychological Safety

An environment where individuals feel safe to express ideas, ask questions, take risks, and be themselves without fear of embarrassment, punishment, or harm.

Restorative Practice

A proactive, relationship-centered approach rooted in Indigenous community traditions that focuses on building trust, fostering connection, and addressing harm through reflection, accountability, and repair.

Dialogue through Difference

The practice of engaging in conversations across differing perspectives with curiosity, respect, and a commitment to understanding rather than agreement.

Courageous Conversations

Intentional, respectful discussions about complex or sensitive topics—or a sensitive issue—that require openness, empathy, and a willingness to engage in discomfort for the purpose of growth and understanding.

Student Leadership

Opportunities for students to influence, guide, and contribute to their community through roles such as Student Council, affinity groups, peer leadership, and other agency pathways. Effective student leadership is inclusive, supported, and connected to meaningful impact.

Tokenism

The superficial inclusion of individuals or groups without granting meaningful influence or power. In the context of student agency, tokenism occurs when student voice is collected but not acted upon.

Shared Accountability

A collective responsibility among leaders, staff, and students to uphold the values, systems, and practices that support belonging, equity, and agency. While students contribute as partners, adults hold primary responsibility for creating the conditions for success.

Human-Centered Listening

Intentional practices that prioritize lived experience and wellbeing, such as listening circles, focus groups, and storytelling, ensuring that individuals feel heard, respected, and valued beyond quantitative data.