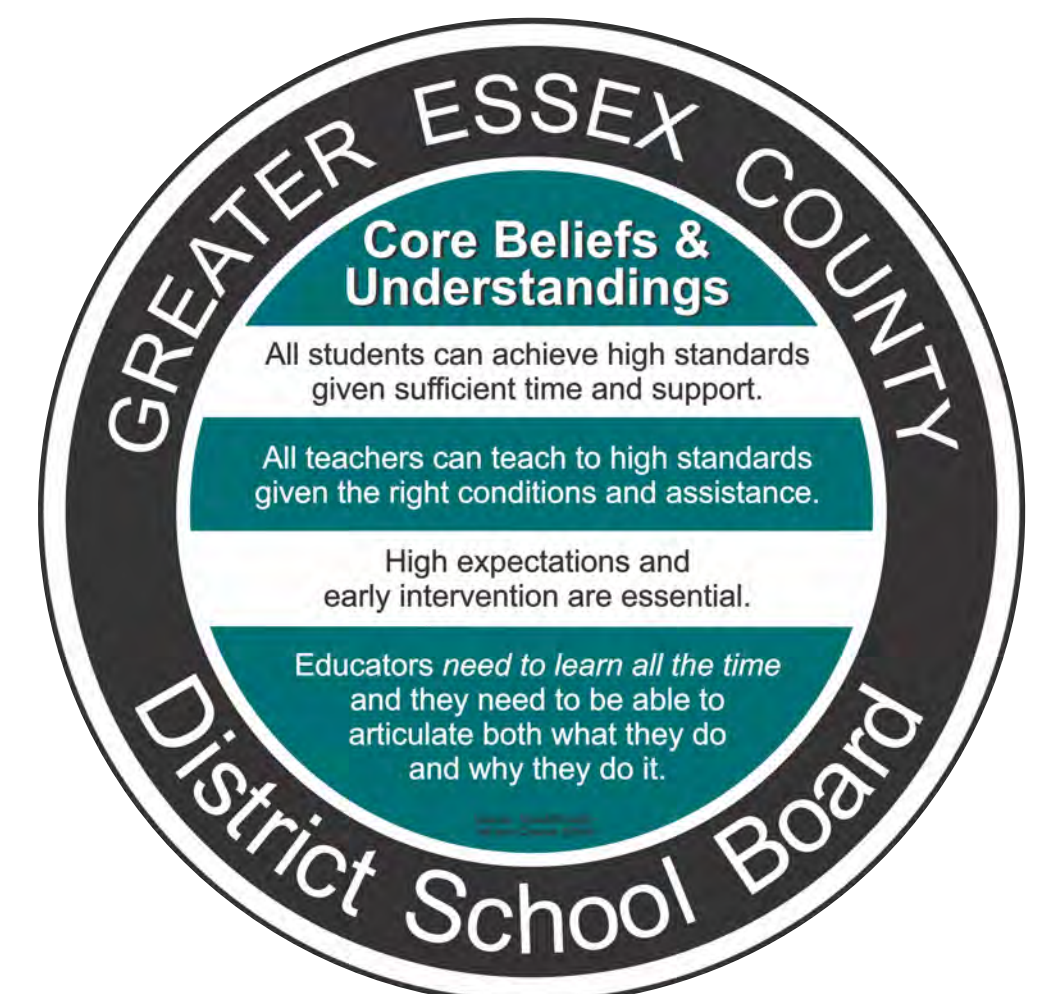


# GREATER ESSEX COUNTY DISTRICT SCHOOL BOARD

## Student Voice: Transforming School Improvement

The Greater Essex County District School Board (GECDSB) is a learning organization continuously striving to improve. The School Effectiveness District review process is consistently reflected upon and innovated to improve support for the school improvement process. Over the years, the district review process has moved from comprising of solely administrator teams to now also include the voices of educators and students in order to have the most impact on teacher professional learning, classroom practice and student achievement. Two protocols were designed for the purpose of the district review to support school improvement plan monitoring: Student Centred Learning Communities (SCLC) and Student Led Learning Walks (SLLC). The GECDSB believes when educators and students form genuine partnerships in the school improvement process the synergy of the work inspires learning for all.

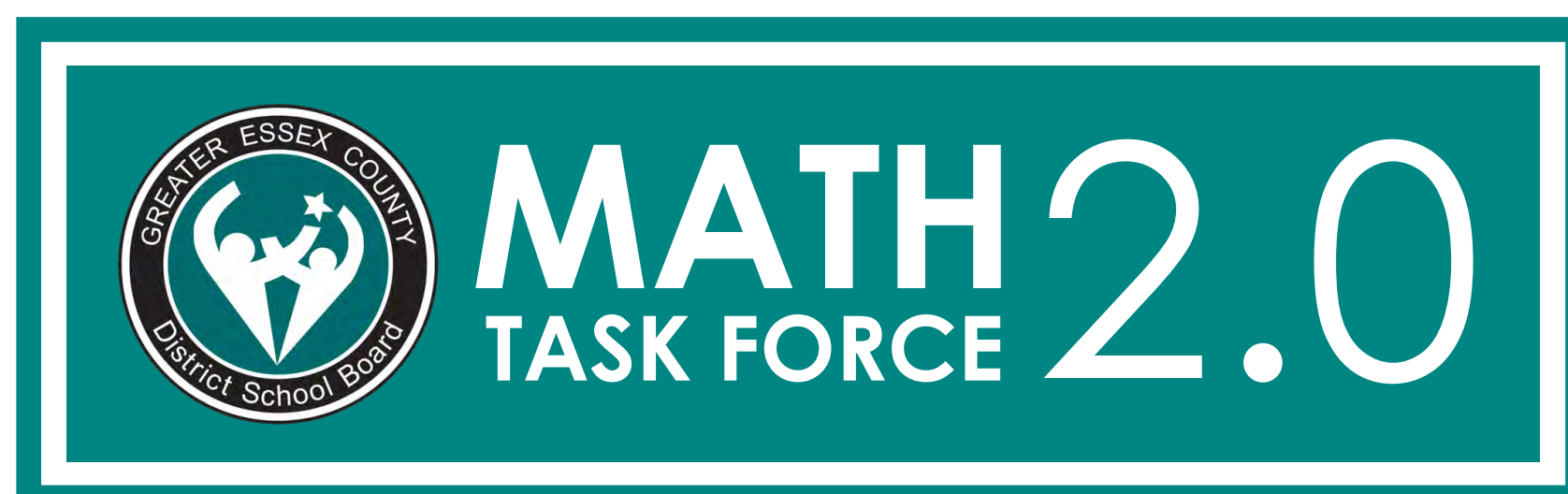


*“The Greater Essex County District School Board provides mathematics education that engages and empowers students through collaboration, communication, inquiry, critical thinking, and problem-solving, to support each student’s learning and nurture a positive attitude towards mathematics.”*

GECDSB, A Vision for Mathematics, 2016

The purpose of this research brief is to share the research and insight garnered from the continued work of the Greater Essex County District School Board’s Math Task Force. These papers are rooted in the GECDSB core beliefs, the Full-Day Early Learning—Kindergarten program and the Ontario Mathematics Curricula for grades 1–8, 9–10, and 11 & 12. The briefs are meant to elevate, enrich and extend the discourse of mathematics education and content pedagogy with the intention of encouraging a positive and productive disposition toward mathematics for all learners.

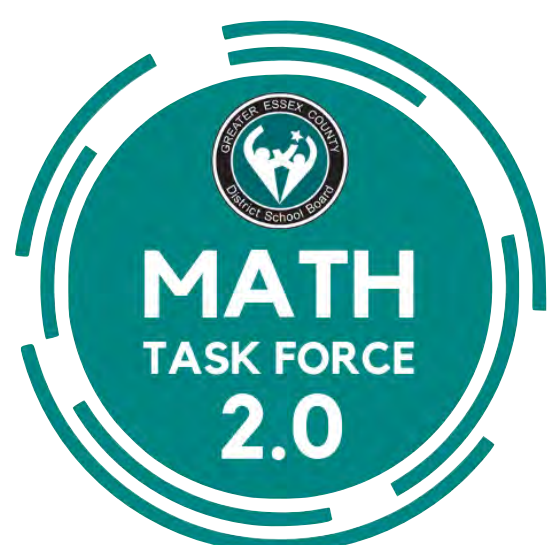
Each paper provides a list of sources to extend the professional conversation and enhance the learning. In addition, live links appear at the end of each paper with connections to various resources.







***“Staff and students meet one another as equals, as genuine partners in the shared understanding of making meaning to their work together”***  
(Fielding, 2004, p.309).



Focusing on successful implementation of school and district initiatives is a priority of the GECDsB. Over the past two decades, much has been written about the importance of student voice (Cook-Sather, 2006; Fielding, 2001, 2004, 2012; Fitzgerald, Graham, Smith & Taylor, 2010; Levin, 2000; Lodge, 2005, 2008; Mitra, 2006, 2008; Simmons, Graham & Thomas, 2015; Toshalis & Nakkula 2012). Student Voice has been explained as “a metaphor for student engagement and participation in issues that matter to learning,” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013, p.2). It is thought of as opportunities for students to voice their opinion and make decisions about topics that will influence their lives (Lodge, 2005; Mitra, 2006, 2008; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013; Toshalis & Nakula, 2008).

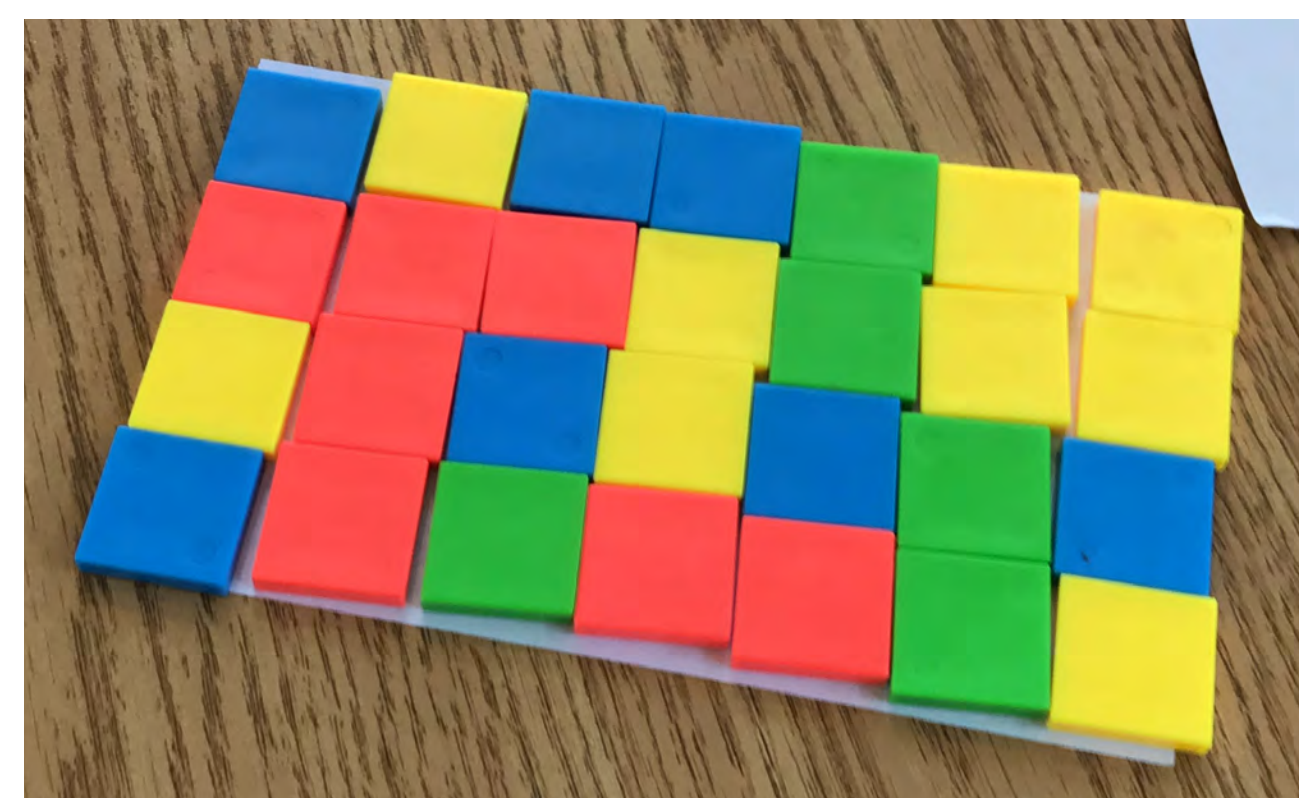
## STUDENT VOICE AND SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

Student voice has often been thought of simply to discuss social constructs of schools, for instance lockers, food and dress code (Lodge, 2005, 2008; Mitra, 2008), but students are also capable of engaging in discourse about the pedagogy of learning (Lodge, 2005, 2008; Mitra, 2008). Mitra states, “Students have much to tell us about how best to reform our schools. To improve student achievement it makes sense to go straight to the source” (Mitra, 2008, p.20). A growing body of research describes the significant role student voice plays in school improvement efforts, (Cook-Sather, 2006; Levin, 2000; Lodge, 2005; Mitra; 2008; Ritchhart, 2015; Simmons et al.,2015) however, there is limited evidence about its impact (Levin, 2000; Simmons et al, 2015). Cook-Sather (2014, p.361) suggest that organizational structures and cultures are needed in order for student voice to become a lived reality in the school improvement process.

## STUDENT VOICE CONTINUUM AND DISTRICT REVIEW

Different typologies have been developed that describe student voice activities from students viewed as data sources at one end to activists and leaders at the other (Fielding, 2001; 2012; Lodge, 2005; Mitra, 2006; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013; Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012). Partnering with students through Student Work Study brought our Board’s attention to the need to move along the student voice continuum to partner with students as co-learners and co-inquirers, not simply as mere data sources. Some students expressed feeling like objects of a study not as part of the study during the Student Work Study initiative. As educators build partnerships with students, adults need to be cautious of the inherent hierarchy of power in order to develop equitable relations where both groups listen, hear and learn with each other (Fielding, 2001, 2012; Mitra, 2006). Through this joint work, new communities of practice can emerge (Fielding, June 2001).

The re-imagined District Review process was centred on student voice. Fielding’s (June 2001, 2004, 2012) work on the student voice continuum has been the catalyst for the evolving District Review at the GECDsB. Our district was looking for a niche where “staff and students meet one another as equals, as genuine partners in the shared understanding of making meaning to their work together” (Fielding, 2004, p.309). Margery Ginsberg’s work on the motivational framework inspired our process. Her Data-in-a-Day and Shadowing protocols (2011) shaped our work to gain a deeper understanding of the student learning experiences.





## PROCESSES

The GECD SB designed two protocols to better understand the student learning experience in mathematics with colleagues from the same school, students, school superintendent and two learning partners from the program department: Student Centred Learning Communities (SCLC) and Student Led Learning Walks (SLLW).

The purpose of the classroom visit is to obtain a snapshot of the classroom in order to collect evidence based on the math focus in our board. An inherent belief in both protocols mentioned above is an asset -based approach to learning inside and outside the classroom. Partnerships are formed with students, teachers, and administrators for the purpose of monitoring school improvement plans. The visits are intended to be an open conversation between the team, teachers, and students.

The school visits occurred in the late fall and the late spring with a midpoint reflection gathering for all stakeholders involved. Following the spring visit, a focus group interview was conducted with four administrators and four teachers.

### STUDENT CENTRED LEARNING COMMUNITIES

The school team consisted of two teachers who volunteered to host the observation team. The observation team consisted of two other teachers who were invited by the hosts along with the participants listed above. The visit was comprised of 30 minutes of classroom observation. Half the team documented the physical environment in the classroom, while the other half partnered with students to document their voice as they were engaged in the mathematics learning. Once the classroom visit was completed, the educators gathered to share important noticings by recording their observations and clustering them to form questions. These wonderings guided the conversation with student volunteers from each class. The students' voices were again recorded and posted for transparency. The school team reflected upon the data gathered at this point and

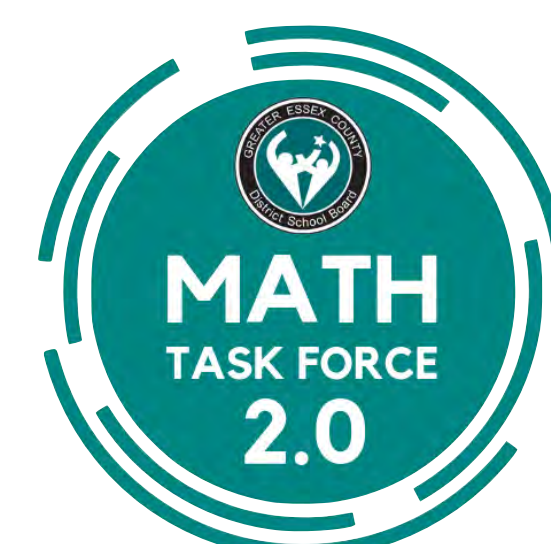
recorded evidence that was connected to the pre-selected School Effectiveness Framework indicators found in the School Improvement plan (SIP) for student achievement. This process was repeated for a second observation followed by a ghost walk in the school. The ghost walk happened in the school hallways and classrooms where teachers had volunteered to welcome the team. The school team met for another half day to reflect upon the learning, the SEF evidence, and the SIP to uncover celebrations and areas for growth. Part of this time was spent to plan how the information will be shared with the school in order to allow more voices to identify the next steps.

### STUDENT LED LEARNING WALKS

All school staff were briefed on the process, purpose and protocols of the Learning Walk. Select classrooms were chosen based on teacher volunteers. The walking team consisted of six teachers who volunteered and invited colleagues into their classroom. Additional teachers may have expressed interest in inviting the team to visit their classrooms. Participating teachers invited two students to be the Lead Walkers in their classrooms. The day was divided into three parts: Kindergarten -Primary division walk, Junior-Intermediate division walk , and reflection. During the Learning Walks, the team divided into two groups. One team entered classrooms and observed the physical environment, and the second team followed the Lead Walkers. The Lead Walkers were prompted: "Show us what helps your math learning in this classroom". Lead Walkers pointed out important things in their math classroom's physical environment that help them learn math. The visiting team documented what the Lead Walkers were saying. Once the classroom visit was complete, the process followed the same protocol as the SCLC.



*"Participating in reform efforts increases student's agency, self-worth, respect and sense of membership in school" (Mitra, 2008)*

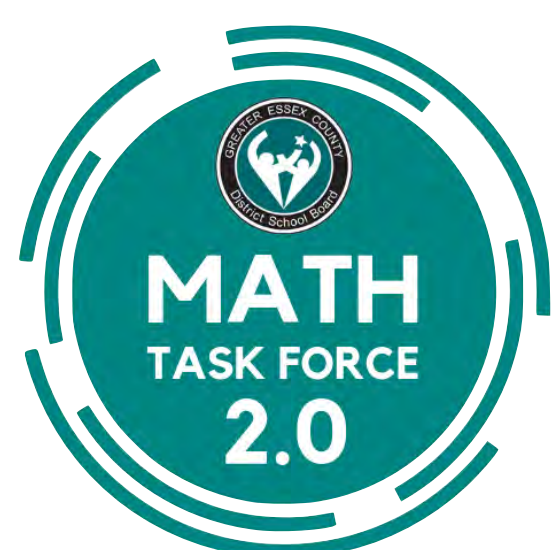






***“Teachers cannot create new roles and realities without the support and encouragement of their students; students cannot construct more imaginative and fulfilling realities of learning without a reciprocal engagement of their teachers. We need each other to be and become ourselves, to be and become better learners and teachers of each other together.”***

*(Fielding, June 2001, p.108 )*



## REFLECTION MEETING

After the fall process, a meeting was held for the schools involved. A principal, one teacher, and two students attended the meeting from each school. Furthermore, all five school superintendents and the director of education were present at the meeting.

The purpose of the reflection was to engage in learning conversations with students, teachers and administrators; to discover common themes of celebrations and areas for growth in order to deepen our understanding of the math learning in our schools; and to brainstorm ways to spread, adapt and innovate important components of this process. Refer to the links on the back page for the video reflection.

## FINDINGS

Quantitative and Qualitative data was collected using a variety of methods: a graffiti wall, presentations, a survey and a focus group interview.

### GRAFFITI WALL

Both educators and students were given the opportunity to express how they felt about the visits. Both students and teachers reported feeling “nervous” at first, but all participants reported that the fear dissipated as they engaged in the process. Most teachers and students felt “inspired”, “empowered”, “proud” and “excited. “ The educators’ second activity was to identify any components that may have contributed to the impact of this structure on teaching and learning. The question was derived from anecdotal notes that were documented during the SCLC and SLLW visits. Educators identified the following components to be impactful: student voice, time, reflection, collaboration, de- privatization of practice and connection to the SIPSA. The students’ second activity was to identify ways of including more student voice at their school. Students suggested forming group talks with varied groups of students, inviting more educators for classroom visits, and holding more meetings to include students in order to gain more comfort in sharing ideas.

## PRESENTATIONS

Students were placed in mixed groups to collectively brainstorm ideas about what is important to their math learning. After their brainstorming, they were given the choice of presenting the work to educators in the form that best suited their learning style. Students were asked the question: “If you had a chance to convince educators that \_\_\_\_\_ is important, what would you say? Explain why”. Their responses were presented in the form of songs, skits, and public service announcements. The presentations revealed the importance of manipulatives, group work, choice, and co-constructed anchor charts.

## THEMES

Educators from each school were asked to share their celebrations and areas for growth that their school team determined after the SCLC or the SLLW visits. The celebrations and areas for growth from all schools were clustered according to their similarities. It was evident that the themes aligned with the responsive mathematics learning environment, which was researched during the Math Task Force last year. All the themes mentioned above fell into the three realms: Physical, Social & Emotional, and Choice and Voice. Furthermore, new themes that emerged were connected to professional learning. These themes encompassed the focus on the SIPSA, time to learn, continuity across grades and divisions and de-privatization of practice.

## SURVEY

As mentioned in the literature review, many researchers (Fielding, 2001; 2012; Lodge, 2005; Mitra, 2006; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013; Toshalis & Nakkula 2012) developed various typologies to describe student voice. In 2013, the Ontario Ministry of Education’s Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat published a building capacity monograph titled “*Student Voice*”. This monograph included a student voice continuum (Figure 1) that was used as a reflective tool for the survey.



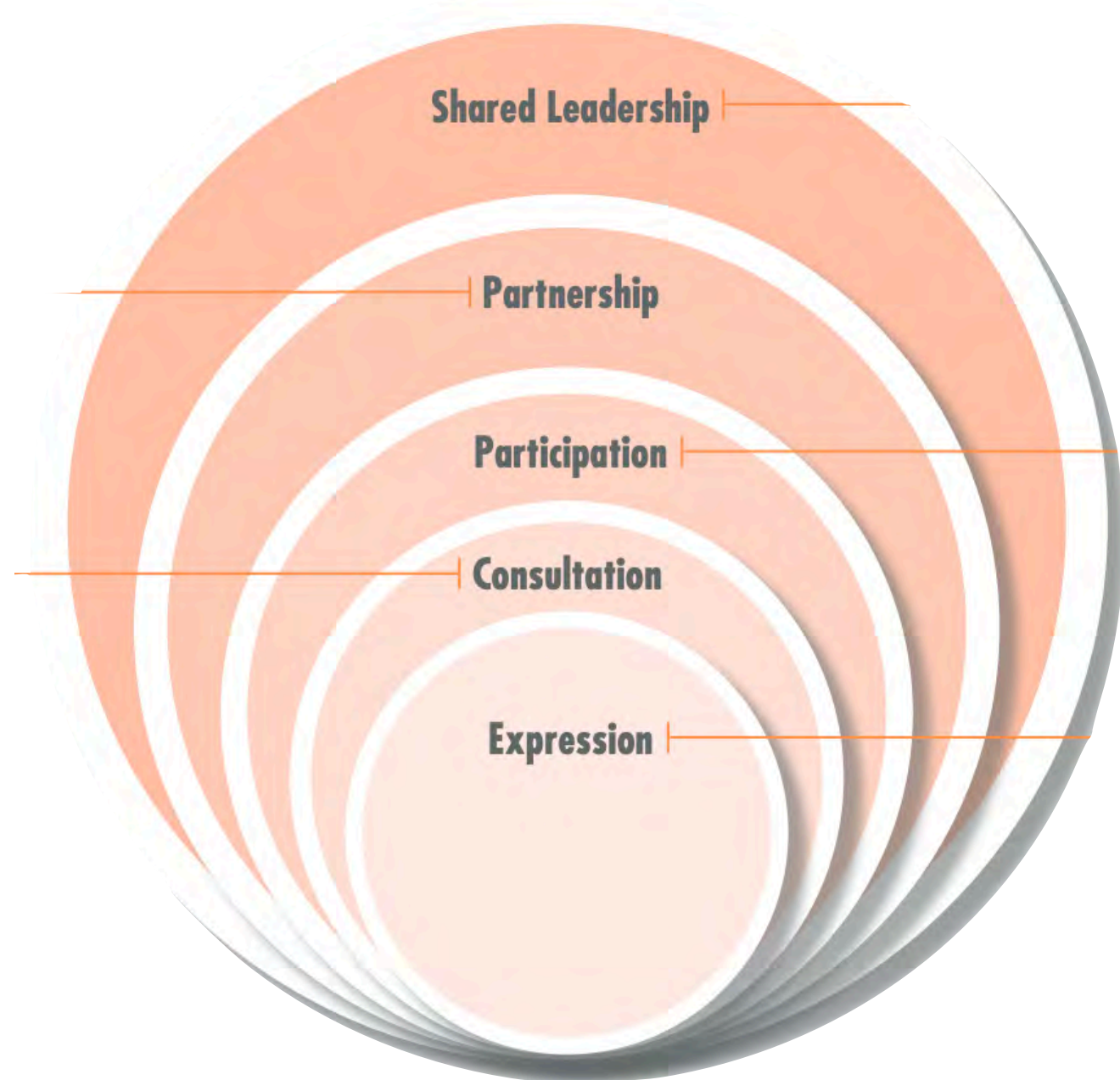


Figure 1: Student Voice Continuum (LNS, September 2013)

The last exercise during the reflection day, involved administrators, teachers and students indicating where they saw themselves on the continuum during the process of SCLC or SLLW (Figure 2) and during the reflection meeting (Figure 3). It is important to note that students identified their participation in both activities further along the continuum than their teachers and principals. All stakeholders identified their participation further along the continuum during the reflection day.

### FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEWS

Educators from four schools were invited to engage in a conversation around the impact, success, and challenges of participating in the SCLC and SLLW process. In addition, educators were asked to share their recommendations for future visits within our board.

Emergent themes from the analysis of the focus group interview were based on highest frequency of occurrence of ideas and opinions. These themes were: SIPSA monitoring, student voice, transformative practice, administrator as learner, recruitment, and empowerment.

### STUDENT VOICE

Educators noticed that students use the language of instruction such as “number talks” and “spatializing fractions”.

“I thought it was exciting when the kids were coming to the meetings to see how the kids internalized how we speak. When they spoke using terms like, spatializing fractions or how they talk about SIPSA or the keys to success.”

In many instances students voiced the importance of the resources/tools that supported them in their math learning and made suggestions for teacher practice.

“Students made the suggestion of moving the manipulatives to the front of the room because they were easily accessible.”

“Everyday is new learning for me and it teaches kids to reflect on how they learn. It has totally changed my classroom. I love how they are advocating for themselves. I had not seen that in the past, and now all of a sudden they were asking for things and normally they would just wait until I gave it to them. Now I have more leaders in the class.”

### SIPSA MONITORING

The process allowed for a focused and authentic monitoring of the SIPSA. Educators indicated that SIPSA goals were evident during the walk, and they noticed their SIPSA goals and strategies throughout the school. The SIPSA was now a living document within the school community. The students in the schools were able to articulate the goals of the SIPSA. Some schools have plans to include SCLC and SLLW in their SIPSA as a way to monitor their goals. The teachers and administrators expressed:

“We’re seeing the kids take ownership of it (SIPSA). They really feel like they have a voice and the confidence that comes from that. The kids are clearly articulating what their learning and being able to articulate the SIPSA as well.”

### EMPOWERING TRANSFORMATIVE PRACTICE

The process was transformative to administrators, educators, and students. A pivotal transformation for administrators and educators was listening to student voice, as this process used student voice in the monitoring of school improvement efforts. Since teacher actions were showing up in the kids’ voices, teachers were more aware of their impact in the

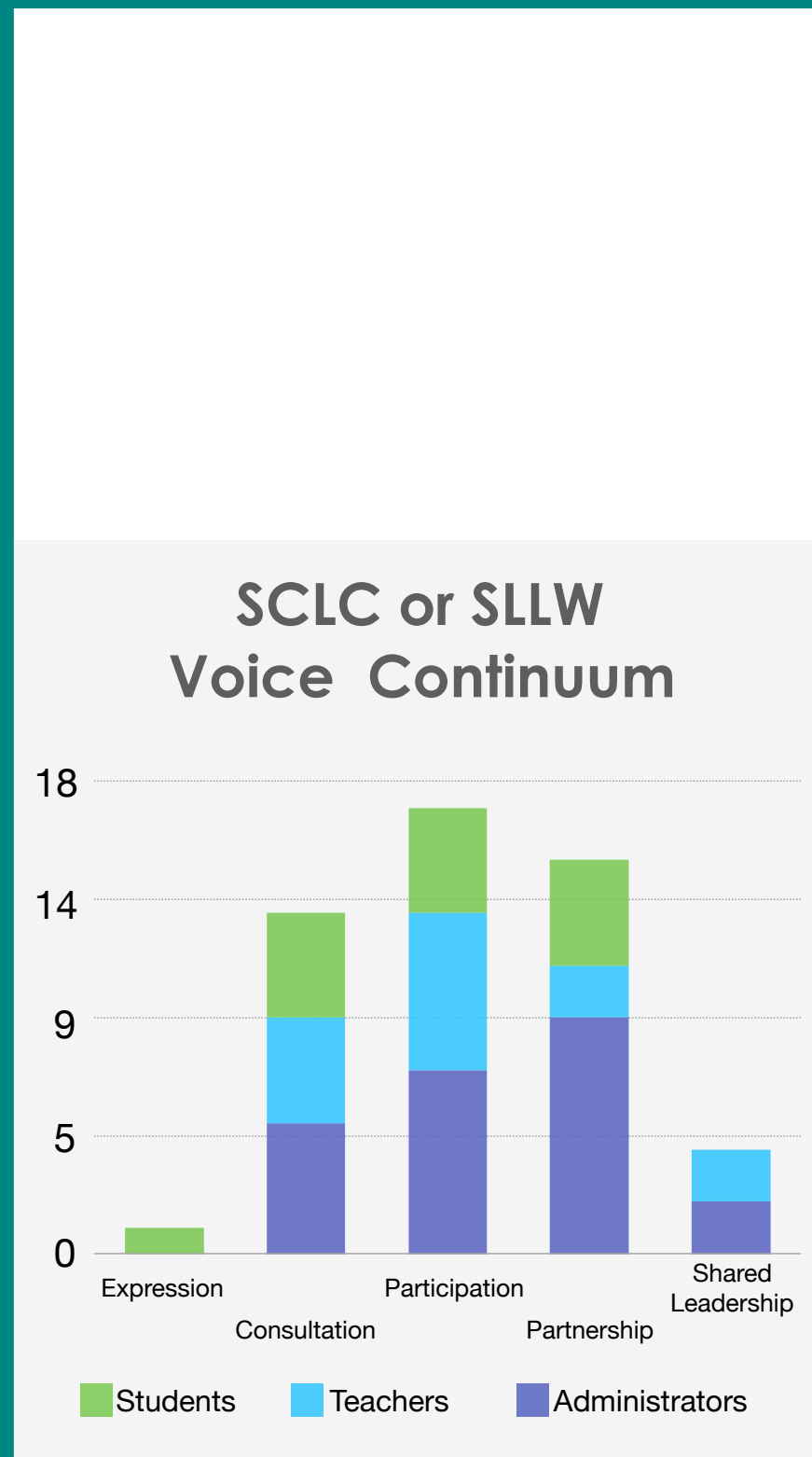


Figure 2: SCLC or SLLW Voice Continuum

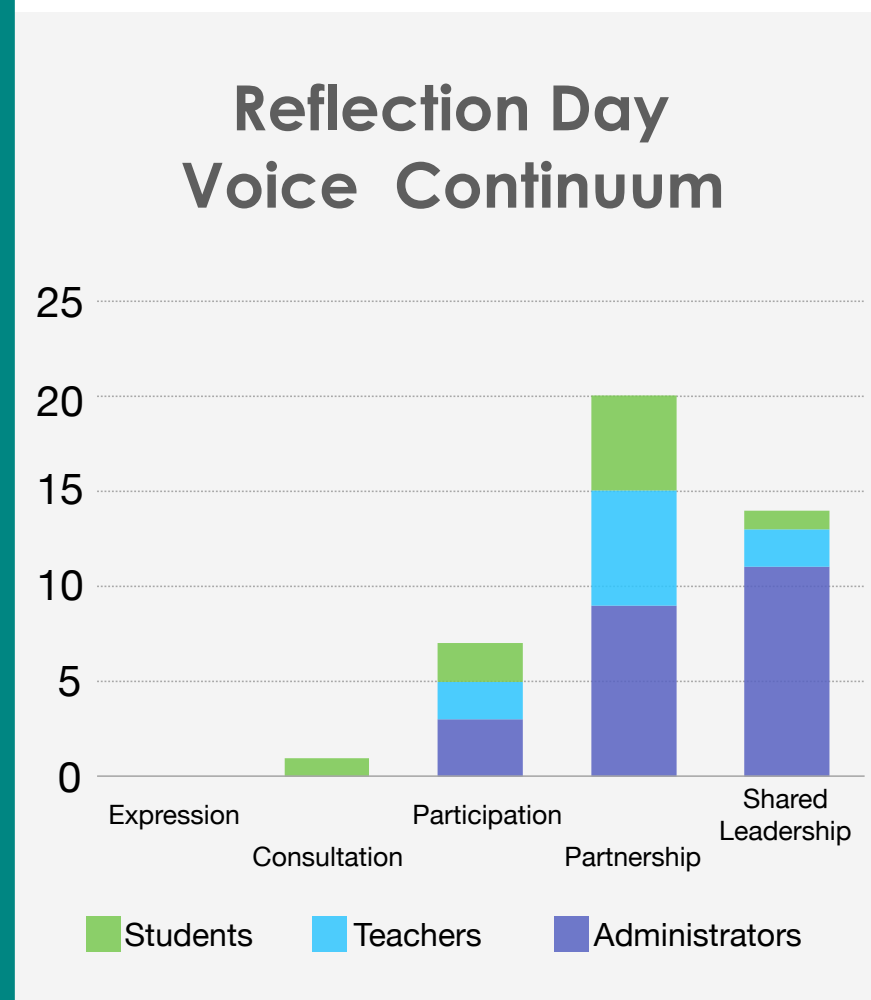
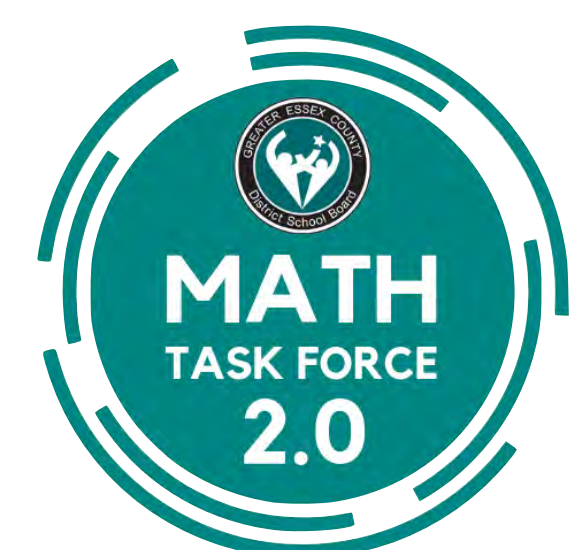


Figure 3: Reflection Day Voice Continuum

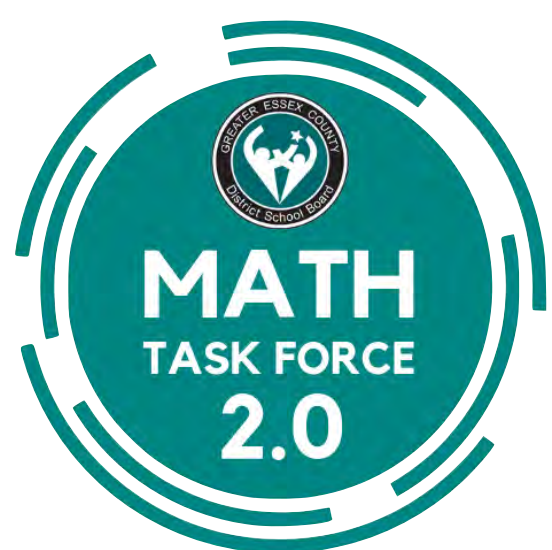






***“I never thought I’d be that kind of a person who would say, come on in, come on in or why aren’t you coming in. I never thought I’d be like that.”***

***“My next step is going to be to continue to learn and continue to keep this going. The last time we had the SLLW, I wasn’t a part of it because I had to share, I had to let somebody else in on it, I want to know, how can I get back in on this because I find it so valuable.”***



classroom and the connection between teaching and learning. This was how the classroom became student led.

*“Even just the impact to see the students interacting and to see how proud they were to be leaders like every room you went into they felt proud. They invited us to see them since they really felt it is important.”*

*“One of the student that I selected was a student with special needs who had a hard time communicating but was fully engaged in number talks and experienced success.”*

An administrator added:

*“I feel more empowered as an administrator. I find going into classrooms and talking to educators and students about learning is transformational. I feel more confident in my own practice.”*

Teachers expressed their interest in collaborating with others after being engaged in the SCLC and SLLW. They opened their doors to allow colleagues to observe their classrooms. Since this process was non-evaluative, the teachers welcomed the idea of visits and want to engage again in this process.

*“I never thought I’d be that kind of a person who would say, come on in, come on in, or why aren’t you coming in. I never thought I’d be like that.”*

*“Staff is getting so excited and wanting to be a part of it and then everyone is just opening their doors to each other, it has changed the dynamics of that in our school and all because of kids voices, all because of them really.”*

According to educators, the students who were the lead walkers and were part of the student debrief looked more confident in the way they carried themselves after the visit. The teachers were able to see beyond the well-being.

*“He was standing differently, like he was carrying himself differently, standing differently holding himself differently.”*

*“You could see a physical transformation in that child he wasn’t as tentative, he was maintaining eye contact he was smiling, he was feeling empowered.”*

### **Administrator as Learner**

As administrators were afforded the time to be at the meeting and observing classrooms for a whole day. Principals expressed the importance of the presence of the administrators at the table as a learner. The following are excerpts from administrators:

*“It afforded me time dedicated to observing students and listening to student voice as it relates to learning.”*

*“The importance of the administrator being at the table and being part of the process, not only as a learner, but to support the staff going forward. It’s trust and support. It’s important to be part of the positive feedback as well, to confirm that hard work is paying off.”*

### **Recruitment**

Administrators and educators discussed how recruitment for the first visit was a challenge. Once the visit was completed, it created a buzz in the building where more educators were interested in participating. This was evident in the second visit where recruitment of teachers was not an issue and almost 100% volunteered at two thirds of the participating schools. It was recommended that a past participating principal and a teacher visit new schools to explain the process and clarify any questions.

## **DISCUSSION**

It is the first time in our board history where students came together with educators, administrators and senior administration to engage in conversation about the pedagogy of teaching and learning. What students say about teaching and learning provides an important foundation for thinking about ways of improving schools (Lodge, 2005). The data from the SCLC and SLLW visits showed strong evidence of the impact of student voice on transforming teacher



practice and administrators' situational leadership. The teachers highlighted that listening to student voice has shifted their practice in the classroom to make the learning process more inclusive. As a result of the student participation in conversations about school improvement, we have noticed that students were able to articulate the components of their SIPSA, and make suggestions and take actions regarding teaching and learning. After students' involvement in the processes of SCLC and SLLW, some schools have cofounded students' focus groups and student councils to continue their partnerships. This grassroots approach to leadership amongst our young students is strongly supported by the literature (Mitra, 2008; Lodge 2008; Ritchhart, 2015).

Mitra (2008, p.25) indicates, "participating in reform efforts increases student's agency, self-worth, respect and a sense of membership in school. To become effective leaders, youth need to participate deeply not simply be heard." An educator summarized the need for student active involvement by stating: "Because they have a voice and they know now. Before we didn't tell them that we are working on, we just took it on ourselves. What are we going to do? What strategy are we going to put in place? But we didn't tell them. Now they know what struggles we have at school, and collectively we are working on school improvement. And you never thought before to let them know. You just thought, oh we have a problem; we just tried to fix it on our own."

As part of the process, choosing colleagues to be partners in the visits has allowed teachers to feel comfortable in opening their classrooms for observations. This collaboration turned into an empowering safe environment where teachers were left with aspirations to collaborate in their teaching career. As both processes focused on student voice and the physical environment, the educators saw the benefit in establishing a culture that nurtures a collegial exchange of ideas and promotes a certain level of trust between educators and students. We agree that opportunities for including student voice are limitless

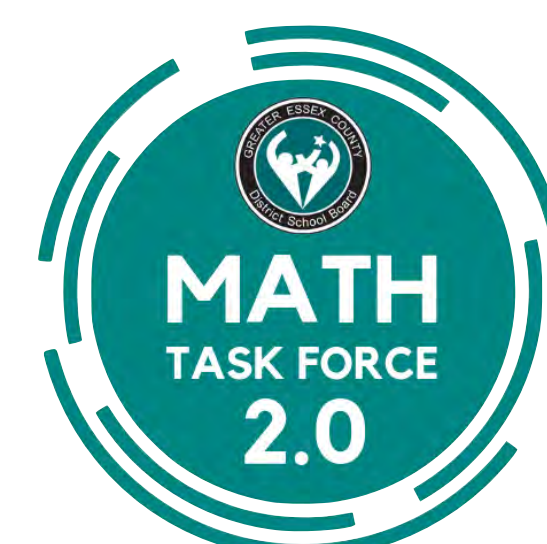
and there is no single approach to classroom observation, but when expectations are clear and participants understand how to use and benefit from the process, the impact is more profound. The importance of creating safe spaces for educators and students to work together forms a reciprocal engagement where both teach one another (Fielding, June, 2001, 2004, 2012; Levin, 2000; Lodge, 2008; Mitra, 2006).

Educators realized the importance of giving feedback to students who participated in these processes about what change was made due to their involvement. As mentioned by educators: "I think the next step is following up with students if you are going to use them to provide information, then there has to be some kind of follow up with them as well. They would like to know how you have implemented what they have told you or have used their voice. Do you value their voice or not?" This was supported by Fitzgerald et al. (2010) who argues that when students are involved in participatory opportunities with teachers, they need to receive a great amount of feedback regarding the value of their contribution and what evidence of decisions were taken based on their voice.

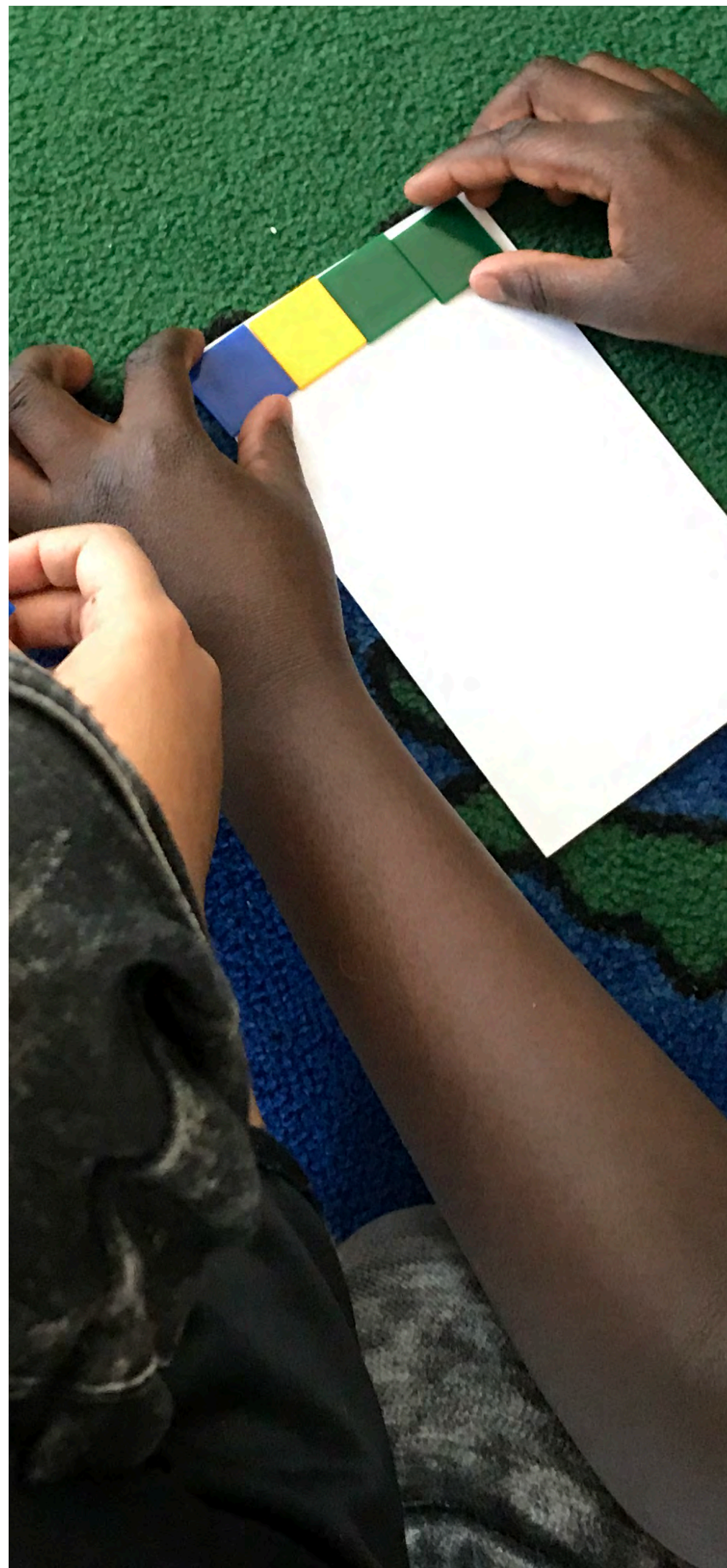
At the GECDSB, students have the competency to engage in mathematics pedagogical discourse. The reason for including student voice was not only to be part of the conversations, but also to ensure that educators accurately interpret the information given to us by students (Mitra, 2008). Throughout this process, we witnessed students of all ages engaging in mathematics teaching and learning. Our district finally found a niche where "staff and students meet one another as equals, as genuine partners in the shared understanding of making meaning to their work together" (Fielding, 2004, p.309). At the GECDSB, we believe that SCLC and SLLW provide the structures and the conditions needed to make student voice in the school improvement process a lived reality. The conditions allowed for teachers to see their voice reflected in their students who were repositioned as agents of positive educational change.



***"Change is a big idea. To genuinely engage not only students' voices but also their entire beings, we need to be open to change, willing to change."***  
(Cook-Sather, 2006. p.383)

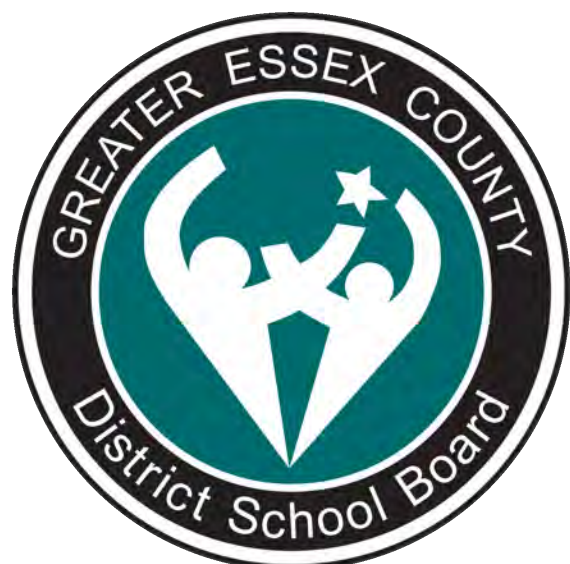






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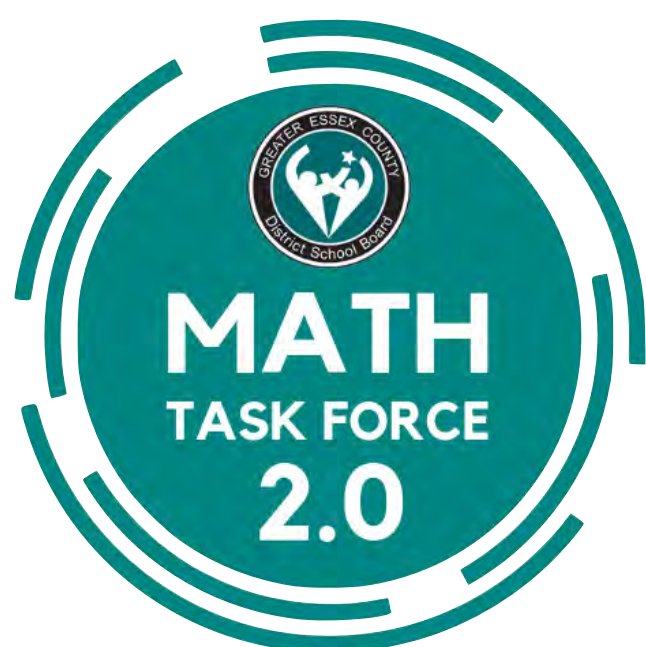
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## LINKS

### Student Voice

[http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/literacynumeracy/inspire/research/CBS\\_StudentVoice.pdf](http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/literacynumeracy/inspire/research/CBS_StudentVoice.pdf)

### Supporting All Mathematics Learners through Responsive Learning Environments

<https://www.publicboard.ca/Board/Administrative-Reports/Math-Task-Force/Documents/Supporting%20All%20Mathematics%20Learners%20through%20Responsive%20Learning%20Environments%20.pdf>