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Lean in Louder

Peter Ferguson

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Lean in Louder

Abstract

Lean In Louder aims to do more than showcase; it seeks to empower, educate, and act as a catalyst for scholars, adults, communities, and co-conspirators to enhance and elevate youth voices. The following pages will include foundational and tangible ways to exemplify equity and elevate scholars' voices. This will consist of links to selected resources and exercises/activities to support best-practice youth development engagement around scholars' voices. You can scan the QR Code for regularly updated activities, practices, supports, examples, journal addendums, and scholar and practitioner resources to develop the mindset and practice of "leaning in louder" to elevate scholars' voices.

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LEAN IN LOUDER

NATIONAL YOUTH ADVOCACY AND RESILIENCE JOURNAL

SPRING / FALL 2024



FEATURED SCHOLARS

AMNA
CATRICE
JESUS
LAYLA
LILLIAN
LUKAS
RAFA
ZAINAB

ELEVATING SCHOLAR'S
VOICES THROUGH

Equity



"You'll know you are a dreamer, just like Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and me, Azcia Fleming, when you can complete this sentence: I have a dream and this is what I believe."

The quote above captures the essence of a meaningful moment shared by Azcia Fleming, then a fourth grader at the 17th Annual Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Youth Rally 'Call to Action' program. These words, followed by a standing ovation, were a precursor to her 8-year involvement in the planning committee, which elevated her voice. Because of that elevated voice, this year marks the beginning of her journey to empower scholar voices from a different platform—a classroom—as a first-year educator in the same city and district she sought to promote positive youth action.

Scholars' voices are not just about giving students a platform to speak and be heard. They are about schools and communities collectively valuing and appreciating students' perspectives and opinions and taking tangible action based on them. This collective responsibility is what truly influences decision-making within their communities.

It is crucial that we urgently create more spaces where scholars can feel safe and supported to engage meaningfully and purposefully. This is not just a need, but a necessity in our quest for a more inclusive and participatory society.

Essential Ways to Elevate the Voices of Scholars:

- Recognize the importance of building strong relationships.
- Shift our mindset from creating safe spaces to ensuring brave spaces founded on equity, inclusion, and belonging.
- Adapt the principles outlined in Suzann Rye's book, "Your Voice Is Your Calling Card," to go beyond just understanding 'why' your voice matters to understanding 'how' to use it purposefully.

The purpose of "Lean In Louder" is to elevate scholars' voices through the Equity Journal:

- Highlight the value of youth voices beyond a singular moment.
- Showcase diverse youth voices in action across various industries, such as K-12 education, post-secondary education, for-profit and non-profit organizations, government agencies, community work, and funding initiatives.
- Serve as a resource to support and promote the understanding of how we can shift from merely acknowledging youth voices to actively validating and addressing their visions for systemic change.

The phrase "Lean in louder" is likely a call for more vocal and assertive engagement in discussions about diversity, equity, and inclusion. It could suggest that practitioners, educators, and scholars should be more proactive and visible in advocating for these issues, making their voices heard clearly and forcefully. This could involve actively participating in conversations, challenging inequities, and pushing for meaningful changes in many different aspects.

Scholar G is an alumnus of the Empowerment Elevation of Youth Program facilitated by Peter Ferguson



REV. DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. YOUTH RALLY

For 30 years, the Annual Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Youth Rally has united the community to 'walk together' through a unique scholar showcase. The Rally is a unique, wholly run youth-planned engagement held in conjunction with the national recognition of the birthday of the late Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. to promote the lives and dreams of the late Rev. Dr. King, Jr. and Rally founder Dr. Leola Bullock through positive youth action.

BIGGER THAN THE SCORE

"Bigger Than the Score" is a weekly radio program hosted by Peter Ferguson. It airs from 8–9 a.m. Central Time on 93.7 The Ticket KNTK in Lincoln, Nebraska. The show's primary goal is to amplify diverse voices. It also promotes positive actions by youth and adults on and off the field/court. It raises awareness about various programs, achievements, and advocacy in Lincoln, the greater community, and the country. It provides a platform for scholars' perspectives to support efforts that go beyond just the score.

T.R.A.C.K.S. ELEMENTARY EMPOWERMENT/LEADERSHIP PROGRAM

T.R.A.C.K.S. stands for **Teaching (Empowerment), Relationships, Accountability, Com•Passion, Knowledge and Scholars** is an elementary (with transferable content to middle, high and post-secondary) leadership program created to empower scholars to enhance their self-identity, self-advocacy skills, and vision. It aims to support scholars in realizing their academic and life potential by nurturing their hopes and dreams. This is achieved through culturally appropriate experiential leadership sessions which promote understanding the value of their past, current, and future selves and help scholars establish and maintain high expectations for themselves and investment from others to achieve their hopes and dreams.

"We Will Not Be Silent" is an award-winning documentary that follows the four-month journey of eight scholars from Belmont Elementary School and the mentors who guide them as they prepare for their moving performance at the annual Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Youth Rally and March in January 2021. Produced by the Lincoln Public Schools Library Services Department; 2021 Heartland Emmy nominee.



Scan the QR code for the "Bigger than the Score" archive.



Scan the QR code to watch "We Will Not Be Silent".

A 'VISIONARY' FOR YOUTH ENGAGEMENT & ADVOCACY

PETER [PEE-TER] VISIONARY, EDUCATOR, YOUTH AND ADULT DEVELOPMENT

Peter Ferguson is the son of the late Alida and Howard Ferguson. His mother was a 40-year educator, and his father was a 25-year military veteran. He attributes their influence, advocacy, and resilience to shaping his youth development approach.

His professional youth development journey began in 1997 when he joined the Consortium for Planning and Advocacy for the City of Lincoln. During this time he became involved in the N.A.A.C.P. managed Annual Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Youth Rally (MLK Rally), a pivotal involvement for Ferguson to become more deeply involved in youth advocacy and empowerment.

Ferguson understood the value of mentoring and relationships when transitioning to Big Brothers Big Sisters. He introduced the "Big For A Day" experience, pairing mentees (Littles) with mentors (Bigs) such as the mayor, city council members, business leaders, and athletes. Ferguson then joined Leadership Lincoln Inc. It included a transformational experience in 2003 when the iconic civil rights activist, the late Congressman John Lewis, visited Lincoln. Ferguson advocated and was supported in creating "For the Youth," A Town Hall with Lewis that preceded the annual Community Celebration he was keynoting. He and other adults witnessed the engagement and how Lewis brought relevance and built relationships with attending youth. This served as an additional catalyst for Ferguson to enhance existing and create original programming to elevate scholar voices and provide opportunities, especially for youth often underrepresented in meaningful spaces. He developed programming under the Empowerment umbrella, offering skill development, intercultural exchanges, and unique experiences.

In 2007, Ferguson furthered his commitment to youth involvement by joining Lincoln Public Schools. His role in programs such as the Lincoln Public Schools District Scholar Equity Cadre has been instrumental in promoting district and community voice. Additionally, he hosts a weekly broadcast on 93.7 The Ticket and founded Peter Ferguson B.H.S., LLC., which emphasizes the foundational importance of relationships, inclusion, belonging, and equity.



MY PURPOSE:

**"EMPOWER, EDUCATE,
& ENGAGE."**

Scan the QR Code for additional information about Peter Ferguson. He is the Primary Belief Officer of Peter Ferguson BHS, LLC, with nearly 30 years of experience in youth and adult development and 17 years of service in the local school district. **Connect:** Peterfergusonbhs.com



What challenges come with empowering youth to speak their mind?

In the early days of the 2020 George Floyd murder protests in Lincoln, I received a text that said, "They mentioned you. One of the youth speakers said we should all have a purpose and voice heard like Mr. Pete always tells us to." The speaker's words were a powerful catalyst, inspiring purpose and action in the audience and the greater community, especially in that moment.

I have immense pride and joy in seeing scholars flourish. However, sometimes, it makes me worry that the supportive environment I and co-conspirators create will be rare outside of it. Empowering scholar voices helps build confidence, capacity, and communication skills and enhance the ability to advocate for others but, more importantly, themselves. Throughout history, the youth have fought for what they wanted and what we needed. Giving scholars a voice is where necessary change starts. It's always been imperative, but now more than ever, it is time to modernize our approach, elevate scholars' voices, and 'lean in louder' through equity.

RAFA [RAH-FA] SUDANESE IMMIGRANT BORN IN DUBAI RAISED IN LINCOLN, NE

My poem, "Syrup for My Mother," was developed for and delivered as part of the 2024 Annual Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Youth Rally. The poem illustrates the impact of immigrants, locally and across this country, striving to be seen, heard, and understood by others.

Many in the crowd could relate to the story, raising the challenge of accurately portraying my mother and others in the crowd.

Two excerpts that speak to my purpose and desired impact were:

*"The woman works as Americans do. She loves her kids as Americans do.
She lives in America as Americans do.
She is an American, right?"*

She has the same documents Americans do. She was promised this American dream she soon realizes the world does not believe she is a true American.

That young woman who had to tear her dreams down is my mother, my mother who flipped her whole life upside down to move to America. She wanted to give us a life far better than hers, as do so many others. Little does she know that every bit of activism, advocacy, and involvement that I do is so that me and my mother, so that any and everyone, can taste the sweet, sweet syrup that is freedom."

Scan the QR code for the full poem



MY PURPOSE:

"TO HELP EVERYONE IN ANY WAY THAT I CAN."

Listen to Rafa discuss how she will leave and lead different spaces, but make sure to enter new communities.



Elevation of My Voice

I engage in various community activities, including my school's Hope Squad and student council, my district's Equity Cadre, and local community experiences like the Annual Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Youth Rally.

Scholar Impact

I amplify the voices of those around me by using the various communities I am part of as platforms for the ideas of my peers and myself.

Apply my words in everyday life.

While I only have answers for some of the challenges that come with the elevation of a scholar's voice at the seasoned age of 15, I do, however, have words to leave you with that remind me of the humanity in the world and allow me to take in the words of everyone around me. While it takes practice, I hope you can shape and mold it to fit your life's impact. 'Listen, Louder.'

LUKAS [L 00 - K UH Z]

T.R.A.C.K.S. EMPOWERMENT AND BELMONT SCHOLAR SON/BROTHER

As a fourth-grade member of the T.R.A.C.K.S. Empowerment/Leadership program, I raised my voice to inspire others. In fifth grade, I was part of the annual Civil Rights book project, delivering an inspiring presentation as part of the annual Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Youth Rally based on the Preet Bharara book, "Justice Is." I shared my wish for future educators as they complete high school and embark on their journey to becoming educators. I inspired others to do what they needed to say, to speak with their hearts, and show that if you listen, people will believe what you say and help what you say

The older people get, the more they want to know how the world will be after. So they would try to watch the younger kids. So then they'd be like, I got hope in this new generation...That's it, as in this generation. So, it gives them hope for a better world than it is at the moment.

Elevation of My Voice

I want people to know that they can all be part of the change. Keep trying, even when it gets hard. Some may feel like giving up, taking a nap, or playing video games. If you don't give up, we can all make the world better through:

- Equity: Use your gifts to help others in the right way.
- Justice: Everyone is equal, even if you think they are different. We are all connected as one people.
- Kindness: Give to others who need more than you (sharing and giving).



MY PURPOSE:

"HELPING OTHERS NOT JUST THINKING ABOUT SELF WHILE HELPING THOSE AROUND YOU."

Scan the QR code to learn more about Lukas in his January 2024 interview on 93.7 The Ticket, "Bigger Than the Score."



Scholar Impact

I believe in the power of my voice to positively impact the future of many people. Kindness can spread to others like wildfire, leaving a lasting impression. It's important to remember that everything we do has consequences, like fires that leave scars and pave the way for new growth.

Apply my words in everyday life.

I want people to use my words as a hope to motivate and make them believe. One step scholars can take is to speak to people they trust. The first step is to say it and not be scared; everyone can do it if they put the 'grit' into their work. If you lean in louder to hope, this means to say your voice with confidence, to believe in yourself, and not to give up with a loud voice so that people will have to hear you. Don't stop, even if someone tells you to.

Scan the QR code to view the 2024 annual Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Rally, including the Civil Rights Book Production of "Justice Is." (Begins at 33:10)



LILLIAN ["LIL" + "EE" + "UHN"] BORN & RAISED IN LINCOLN, NE PRONOUNS: SHE/HER

For my junior year speech topic, I compiled different works from various authors to create a multi-perspective piece called "Underneath the Surface." Through their collaboration of words, I was able to portray the struggles of individuals with hidden chronic illnesses. I have a personal connection to this topic, as I have Immune Thrombocytopenic Purpura (ITP), a rare autoimmune disorder that causes my immune system to destroy my platelets, resulting in improper blood clotting. This impacts my life in ways people don't often notice.

*"I see shadows on the back of my legs,
on the width of my arm and
length of my body.
If I get lucky, they blossom yellow,
but now they stay blue
like the eyes of my doctor
when he tells me about treatments
that don't really treat."*

It took me many years to feel comfortable discussing my chronic illness, as I felt pressured to keep it hidden for fear of burdening others with something they might not understand. However, I realized that the only way to feel at ease was to educate others. I believe that everyone can learn the importance of embracing discomfort in challenging situations.

Apply my words in everyday life.

Similarly to how you might be aware of the wheelchair button near the door (as a form of equity), it's important to take into account the lives of others around you. Not every issue will affect you personally, but when you utilize empathy and understanding, it makes a significant impact. Remember that learning creates growth, and any new experience that you've learned can be put into practice by utilizing it in further conversations and discussions about equity (and beyond that as well).



MY PURPOSE:

**"TO EDUCATE OTHERS
WITH MY EXPERIENCES
WHILE ALSO LEARNING
FROM THEIRS."**

Elevation of My Voice

My 11-year-old brother told me he wishes adults would listen to young children because he believes they can and want to help. Platforms that elevate scholar voices do exactly that. It is incredibly important to provide as many opportunities as possible to individuals who are capable of creating change. Scholars are capable. The direct impact of giving scholars a place that elevates their voice is the multitude of new perspectives that are provided. Instead of one adult lens, you open up a world of younger, more creative lenses.

I participate in various school activities such as Hive Helpers (an environmental club), speech, journalism, and the LPS District Equity Cadre. These activities have provided me with a platform to express myself. In particular, speech has allowed me to address and depict equity issues through an artistic perspective.



Scan the QR code for the speech and other examples of scholars' voices.

JESUS [HAY + "ZUHS"] IMMIGRATED TO LINCOLN, NE FROM MEXICO AT JUST 3-YEARS-OLD

Everybody benefits from and is impacted by stories, but I want to be a beacon for scholars and people who look to me to give them hope and spark the confidence to raise their voices, share their stories, and make an impact.



As a practitioner, how can you use my words and put them into practice?

Many of us are busy building our careers and living our lives, so sometimes people are hesitant to open up and share their stories while also being reluctant to listen and take in others' stories. But in reality, building careers and living life is about creating relationships and connections.

“ I intend to approach everything I do and say with purpose and urgency. I hope that when others see and experience my story and the stories of other people, they feel an urgency to understand and accept one another.

”

The Seat Beside You is a video-series engineered by Brian Seifferlein and David Koehn with the premise that behind every student at Lincoln Public Schools, there's a story. Scan the QR code to hear Jesus' story.



MY PURPOSE:

“BE A BEACON FOR THOSE WHO LOOK LIKE ME.”

Elevation of My Voice

I have been involved in several opportunities that have allowed me to amplify my voice in various settings and in front of different audiences. One of my significant contributions was developing and presenting the annual State of Diversity address to the school board and community members as part of the Lincoln Public Schools Scholar Equity Cadre. Since 2021, the State of Diversity has included discussions, reports, and updates on district initiatives aimed at informing and engaging the community on diversity-related trends and elevating the voices of scholars. This address, delivered by me and my peers, shares our expertise and suggests pathways for achieving inclusive excellence in Lincoln Public Schools. I was also selected to share my voice and story as part of "The Seat Beside You: The Voices of English Language Learners" collection series. This experience allowed me to highlight the depth of my story and its alignment with my purpose. Through Cadre Storytime, I had the opportunity to interact with and impact preschool and elementary-age youth.

Scholar Impact

With everything I do and say, I aim to act with purpose and urgency. When others see and hear about people's stories and backgrounds, I hope they feel a sense of urgency to understand each other and learn to accept one another.

ZAINAB [ZAI-NUB] FOUNDER AND PRESIDENT BLACKISBEAUTIFULNE.ORG PRONOUNS: SHE/HER

Engaging with youth can be incredibly rewarding, but it's understandable to feel hesitant to do so. To overcome these hesitations, start by simply listening. Approach young people with an open mind and a willingness to understand their perspectives and interests.

Building trust is crucial; establish a foundation by being consistent, reliable, and respectful, showing that you genuinely care about their thoughts and feelings.

Our upcoming generation of youth are so intelligent and open to creating better understanding and growth within themselves.

Elevation of My Voice

My "aha" moment was not a single, isolated incident, but rather a culmination of numerous experiences where I often found myself as the only person of color in various settings—leadership camps, dance teams, and award programs. These instances highlighted the critical need for diverse voices and perspectives in every sphere and prompted me to want to continue to find ways to elevate and focus on how representation matters everywhere.

Scholar Impact

Professionally, these experiences have honed my leadership skills and strategic thinking. Identifying the gap in financial assistance for people of color in Nebraska seeking post-secondary education led to the establishment of scholarship programs through my nonprofit. This endeavor required setting ambitious fundraising goals, forming strategic partnerships, and fostering a community of support.

The ongoing efforts have continued to expand my leadership skills as well as created broader opportunities for youth in our community to be elevated in volunteer opportunities, community event participants and/or scholarship recipients.



MY PURPOSE:

**“TO UPLIFT, ENCOURAGE,
AND REPRESENT.”**

Scan to gain insight into
BlackIsBeautiful.org.



Apply my words in everyday life.

Engagement, engagement, engagement—this is the key to truly hearing what our scholars have to say and creating meaningful change. By establishing diverse avenues for engagement, such as mentorship programs, interactive workshops, and inclusive curricula, people like practitioners, educators, and governmental officials can start to elevate scholars' voices. These efforts ensure that scholars not only feel heard but are actively involved in shaping their own futures.

Authenticity is key. Youth can easily sense when someone is not being genuine, so be yourself and share your experiences honestly. Don't be afraid to not only be yourself when engaging with youth, but also being open and mindful of their ideas and conversations. Be willing to learn from the youth you engage with, as they can offer fresh perspectives and insights. Take time to understand the change that our youth has been creating in our community because there are so many unheard and unseen stories.

AMNA [AA- MEH- NAH] IRAQI ARAB REFUGEE FIRST GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENT

At a very young age, I became an adult. Being a refugee Arab woman living in America meant I had to grow up faster than my peers, from changing diapers and cleaning the house when I was 5 to translating for my parents. Even at 18, I still help with translating.

I define scholar voice as the voices of today. We are making an impact or a change through everything we do and experience we have. Our voices can not only change the future but today as well.

My engagement with my community encouraged me to join the Lincoln Public Schools District Scholar Equity Cadre where I got to help Lincoln Public Schools create a more diverse and equitable environment for people of different backgrounds and experiences.

Someone once said to me in a cadre meeting, "the solution is in us," for creating equity. That caused a revolution in my mind. It helped me realize I was not alone and that I should be sharing my culture and experiences rather than covering them up. The Cadre helped me to not be afraid, to advocate and stand up for myself, and to be louder.

As a practitioner, how can you use my words and put them into practice?

You can include scholar voices by taking the extra step of reaching out to scholars and letting them know that their input matters. Putting scholars in a comfortable position, allows them that platform of able to speak on what they believe, and giving them opportunities will enable them to give their input on things they never thought imaginable. It was great learning from each other when I started getting these platforms and meeting amazing people in those interactions.

Ever since I was a little girl, my mom has told me education is power. She told me education is like a weapon no one can take from you. It gives you a concrete foundation in life that's unmoveable.



MY PURPOSE:

**"TO ELEVATE OTHERS
BY SPREADING MY
POSITIVITY."**

Scholar Impact

I want to dedicate my career to helping make positive changes. I plan on taking what I have learned and the resources I have been offered and growing them in my future classroom. I want to get a degree in elementary education so I am able to make a change in the lives of children. I want to help them elevate their voices, and give them the opportunities to be proud of who they are earlier in life, something that I was given in high school [as a member of the Cadre]. Elementary school is the time when they develop the most and are learning who they are.

Elevation of My Voice

A time I was involved in being the voice of today is when I presented in front of the school board. Being able to stand in front of all the decision makers and showing all that we have done and wish to continue doing in DEI in not only our schools, but our communities, made me feel accomplished.

My engagement with my community encouraged me to join the LPS Equity Scholars Cadre where I got to help Lincoln Public Schools create a more diverse and equitable environment for people of different backgrounds and experiences.

CATRICE [CA TREE ZE] BORN IN LINCOLN, NE & RAISED BY A SINGLE MOTHER

I had the opportunity, along with 10 of my peers, to engage educational human resource professionals from Missouri, Kansas, Nebraska, and Iowa at their annual conference in November 2024, organized by the Missouri Valley Personnel Administrators. Our session was interactive, in a unique roundtable format that supported an authentic, informative, and action-oriented dialogue. We provided feedback, perspective, and steps on many items, including but not limited to what constitutes a top-notch educator, diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging, and the opportunities and challenges of bringing youth (and educators of diversity) into the field.

In conjunction with the professionals I engaged with, I provided a clear understanding of the pivotal role of scholar voices in the career development of educators and administrators. A practical insight was the need to build relationships within the classroom that extend beyond the curriculum. A deeper understanding of students' learning and personality styles is instrumental in creating an environment where they feel comfortable expressing their thoughts and values.

Scholar Impact

I want to educate others as I continue to be a lifelong learner and use my voice to represent my beliefs.



MY PURPOSE:

“TO BE A VOICE FOR THE YOUNGER GENERATIONS UNTIL THEY FIND ONE FOR THEMSELVES.”

Elevation of My Voice

I have been able to use my voice throughout my community. I am involved in the Lincoln Public Schools Scholar Equity Cadre, was a captain for my high school's volleyball and basketball teams, was a part of my school's student leadership cadre and sportsmanship group, and participated in youth development work through the Lincoln YMCA.

As a practitioner, how can you use my words and put them into practice?

While I may not be as experienced as an authority figure, I have had the opportunity to be in environments that nurture diverse perspectives and beliefs. I will challenge you with my words in the same light that my mentors have challenged me throughout my educational experience. To grow and evolve as a society, we must be "comfortable being uncomfortable." Push yourself to make a statement in an unfamiliar or awkward situation, as it is in these moments that personal growth and societal progress are born. As a practitioner, educator, and community member, your voice is a catalyst for change, and it is your responsibility to ensure it is heard.

LAYLA [LAH-EE-LAH] RAISED IN LINCOLN, NE, ATTENDED PREDOMINATELY WHITE & CULTURALLY DIVERSE SCHOOLS

I feel as if success is subjective. However, I take pride in all I have been a part of concerning equity. Instead of putting individuals on a pedestal for their singular achievements, we need to avoid the "you're so brave" aspect of placing scholars on a pedestal for their accomplishments. We should view the movement as a success and ask the question, "When does meaningful scholar voice become the norm?"

Many of my frustrations lie in repeating conversations with visibly no change from a scholar's perspective. I often feel physically and mentally exhausted from voicing the same issues that my older siblings faced in their education.

As a practitioner, how can you use my words and put them into practice?

A speculation I have made throughout my life, my educational experience, and my observation of world events is comfortability in relatability.

People tend to be more welcoming to challenging ideas and conversations when there is a piece they can relate to in their personal lives. Ideally, throughout all careers and aspects of life, there will be a shared view and execution of equity. However, this romanticized view must be attainable due to many contributing factors.

I ask each person to find equity in their respective fields and use their life experiences to elevate and empathize with those around them. Recognize what you would have (or potentially still need) to feel seen and valued and use that to relate to others.

Critically speaking, it also requires respect for those who are "under" you—whether younger, an associate, or a colleague—valuing all voices rather than undermining the words of anyone who might not have the same literacy, terminology, or education level.



MY PURPOSE:

**“TO PROVIDE A VOICE TO
THOSE WHO FEEL THEY
ARE UNABLE OR
UNEQUIPPED TO UTILIZE
THEIR OWN.”**

Elevation of My Voice

I am a 2023 high school graduate. My journey, involvement, and life pathway have been marked by active extracurricular involvement. I have spread my voice through many aspects of my life, including but not limited to my job, high school, and the University of Nebraska–Lincoln coordinated conferences, including the 2024 Aspiring Educators of Color Symposium and the development of educator professional development resources to support an equitable scholarly experience.

Scholar Impact

Creation of spaces where all voices collaborate to better future conversations and movements. The work in place before my participation built the foundation for deeper conversations, including mine. The work I have been fortunate to be a part of has opened the floodgates for what the scholar's perspective can elevate.

AN EDUCATIONAL LEADER LEANS IN LOUDER

DR. STEVE JOEL RETIRED K-12 SUPERINTENDENT

Dr. Steve Joel, who led Lincoln Public Schools as Superintendent from 2010 to 2022, has a leadership journey that spans three decades. His commitment to finding comprehensive solutions to significant school and community issues has been a hallmark of his tenure. Under his leadership, Lincoln Public Schools saw a considerable increase in scholar and staff diversity, a testament to his inclusive approach to leadership.

"It became clear to Lincoln Public Schools that more had to be done to ensure that all students had equitable opportunities to be successful."

Unfortunately, this work became even more critical following the George Floyd tragedy. The impact on our students and staff was emotionally challenging, and we knew that gathering their voices would be essential in helping us understand what they were experiencing and how we, as a school community, could support them. Time with students has always been valued, but rarely maximized. The structured manner of the conversations with the scholars made me wish I had done this earlier in my career. While I always held listening sessions, it was rare for them to lead to action. The students' voices were elevated by giving presentations to our district staff. We all grew as humans through these interactions and understandings.

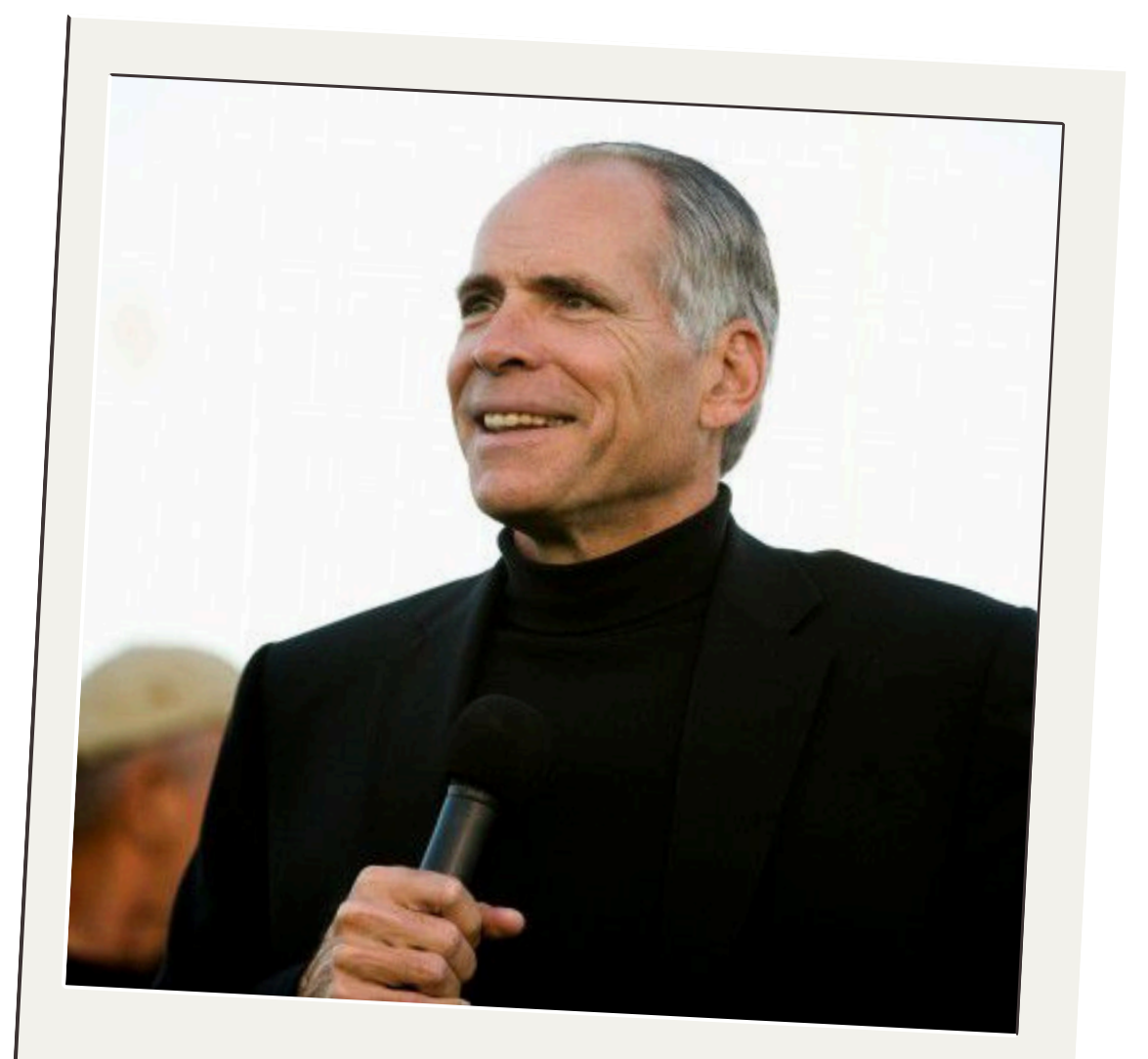
How has elevation of scholar voices impacted you?

In one of the first sessions we held following the Floyd tragedy, I was taken aback by the calmness exhibited by our scholars and their willingness to participate in solutions. I realized then that we truly had a group of scholars that we could tap into as a resource for moving the needle forward for ALL students. In the months following, we did just that, and worked to create district-wide plans to gain a better understanding of what our scholars were experiencing.

Advice for practitioners to 'lean in louder' to elevate scholars' voices.

I would implore district and community leaders to embrace scholar voices to gain an understanding and then develop action plans. Merely listening and not engaging won't lead to progress. In Lincoln, these Scholars became much better equipped to become community leaders. I was impressed with their desire to go forward and continue to make a difference in their communities.

Despite our country being close to 250 years old, we continue to experience racial strife and a lack of understanding and appreciation for the differences our many cultures represent. Incorporating the Scholar's voice into conversations designed to help our students navigate their personal and societal challenges should be an essential strategy used by school and community leaders to help our schools, communities, and country become more inclusive. It clearly was successful in Lincoln, Nebraska.



A COMMUNITY ALLY LEANS IN LOUDER

MICHAELLA KUMKE FOOD BANK OF LINCOLN

For almost a decade, I have worked at the Food Bank of Lincoln. I began serving as the organization's President and CEO three years ago.

I first witnessed the scholars' passion, potential and persistence at one of the MLK, Jr. Youth Rally gatherings. I felt a spark of curiosity light within me. It propelled me to pay closer attention to their work and find opportunities for allyship.

In February 2024, the Food Bank of Lincoln hosted its Steps Toward Equity meeting in collaboration with the LPS Equity Cadre, which aims to build awareness, access, and accountability for food equity in Southeast Nebraska.

I'm not sure I expected to learn as much as I have from the scholars, but I am so glad I have. They have impacted my thoughts about food access, from types of food to how we distribute it. I have also learned about obstacles many of the scholars have overcome simply because of the color of their skin. The inequity of it is unacceptable to me. I didn't expect to be so moved and motivated by this group, but I was and I am.



How has elevation of scholar voices impacted you?

Seeing young people who so confidently embraced their existence and used that acceptance of self to take positive action was a light bulb moment. I understood it didn't "just happen" but that they had adults who helped elevate their thinking and make room for their action. I realized as a young professional building my own reputation, I had an opportunity to learn from and with this inspiring group.

The scholars have also inspired my bravery. The quote, "Speak your mind, even if your voice shakes" is attributed to American activist Maggie Kuhn. It's a sentiment to which I wholeheartedly subscribe.

The contrast is Ms. Kuhn used her voice to advocate for elderly welfare, while I use mine to inspire young scholars, colleagues and my own confidence.

Advice for practitioners to 'lean in louder' to elevate scholars' voices.

Invite the opportunity to learn. Specifically, extend an invitation for youth leaders to come into your space—whatever that space may be (workplace, place of worship, community committee/social group, etc.). With that, do not get hung up on creating the "perfect" situation before you make the opportunity happen. Accept that it may have some unease. Be honest with yourself—are you really willing to learn from the youth? If you think your sole purpose in that dynamic is to instruct, I'd encourage you to rethink engaging because that isn't a beneficial mindset for anyone involved.



A CO-CONSPIRATOR 'LEANS IN LOUDER'

KEITH L. BROWN AKA "MR. I'M POSSIBLE" & "UNCLE KEITH" NATIONAL/GLOBAL SPEAKER

Keith L. Brown is the Principal Speaker/Lead Consultant at 2020 Enterprises. He is a Presidential Lifetime Achievement Award Winner and "World Class Speaker," empowering hundreds of thousands annually in schools, colleges and universities, family advocacy agencies, government agencies, corporate America faith-based institutions, and the entertainment industry.

When scholars elevate their voices, I know I have been called to be a co-conspirator, called to be a facilitator not a dictator, which is often the norm when it comes to scholar and mentor/coach relations.

I've witnessed many examples of youth silencing the critics who believe the voices of our youth should not be elevated for whatever reason. I've seen the Lincoln Public Schools District Scholar Equity Cadre, a cohort of sincere servant leaders stand before the Board of Education and outline the horrific acts and unacceptable behavior of individuals at rival schools who shouted racial epithets and held signs of hate at local sporting events. They used their rights to inform and challenge the conscience of the School Board, the very entity that is called to protect our children and youth. This sense of boldness and wisdom came from the minds of the very ones whom many attempted to silence. They are a part of the same "Freedom Fighters" who lend their talents and voices to the annual MLK Youth Rally, highlighting the heroism and sacrifices of those in the Civil Rights movement, beginning with those in Lincoln, NE, and extending to those who fought for Civil Rights on a national scale.

The empowering aspect is these are youth of all racial and cultural backgrounds, which speaks to a collective energy and commitment.



How has elevation of scholar voices impacted you?

I am driven to enhance and expand my advocacy due to the passion and commitment illustrated in the voices of our scholars. When they speak and move to action, it is my cue to elevate my coaching and training. When they bring solutions, I am moved to locate or create the access and resources needed to help manifest them. Through the years, the elevation of their voices has caused me to ensure they are taken seriously and protected. The elevation of their voices has enhanced my voice and purpose.

I am grateful for the dedication and commitment of one I consider a dear friend, comrade, and fellow co-conspirator in the mission and assignment of ensuring our youth's voices will NOT be silenced, 'Purposeful' Pete Ferguson, who I call "Visionary," with honor and respect.

Advice for practitioners to 'lean in louder' to elevate scholars' voices.

For those who are hesitant to work with youth, I ask them to be authentic and transparent with our youth. I encourage them to share their stories of resilience and servant leadership during their adolescence. Let them know there are many ways to engage our youth, and there is no cookie-cutter way.

School Districts can ensure Equity is at the forefront and not treated like a watered-down elective course. While teachers can amplify their voices, they are only as strong as the voice of the School District that hired them.

HOW WE 'LEAN IN LOUDER' TO ELEVATE SCHOLARS VOICES

Let's Come Together and 'Lean In Louder'

Lean In Louder journal aims to do more than showcase; it seeks to empower, educate, and act as a catalyst for scholars, adults, communities, and co-conspirators to enhance and elevate youth voices. Meghan Perry's 2017 Education Northwest article, "Four Principles for Meaningfully Incorporating Youth Voice into Programs and Services," states an accurate reminder that all innovative practices take time to understand, exercise, and perfect, and if we want to model growth mindsets for young people—and we definitely do!—just because something is hard, it doesn't mean it's not worth pursuing.



The following pages will include foundational and tangible ways to exemplify equity and elevate scholars' voices. This will consist of links to selected resources and exercises/activities to support best-practice youth development engagement around scholars' voices. You can scan the QR Code for regularly updated activities, practices, supports, examples, journal addendums, and scholar and practitioner resources to develop the mindset and practice of "leaning in louder" to elevate scholars' voices.

Scan the QR code for updates, scholar and practitioner profiles, and to share examples, successes, and resources.



Resource Articles

Meghan Perry's 2017 Education Northwest article Four Principles for Meaningfully Incorporating Youth Voice into Programs and Services

<https://educationnorthwest.org/insights/four-principles-meaningfully-incorporating-youth-voice-programs-and-services>

The 7 Norms of Collaboration are how your group communicates and interacts. Highly creative teams are also highly collaborative, so these norms may align with current practices for young people and adults who want to be creative and innovative together. For a more detailed understanding and a Round Robin Reflection activity, you can refer to the additional resources provided in this United Department of State link.

<https://2009-2017.state.gov/m/a/os/43984.htm>

RELATIONSHIPS MATTER

Assess and put in the effort to learn. Being intentional about relationships requires us to deliberately share resources, listen, learn, and reflect on our own biases about youth voices.

For Educators: Relationships are essential – Data is valuable, but don't let it lead to a lack of relationships.

For Scholars: Act by first recognizing to 'self' that your voice matters.



Courageous conversation is a strategy that utilizes agreements and conditions to engage, sustain and deepen interracial dialogue about race to examine schooling, deinstitutionalize racism, and improve student achievement.

To support 'lean in louder' Courageous Conversation norms toward elevating scholars' voices utilization of Singleton, G. & Linton, C. (2006). *Courageous Conversations About Race: A field guide for achieving equity in schools*. Thousand Oaks: Corwin Press Inc. Adapted by Angela Brown, VSB Anti-racism & Diversity Consultant (2006)

Exercise / Activity • Adult and Scholar

Think about what you need and still may want to be heard and valued.

For the next seven days, develop who, when, and how you will elevate your voice.

Keep a daily record for the next seven days of who you asked about the need, approached knowing they had the need, or thanked for providing you or someone else with that need.

Reflection questions

- What did this experience look, feel or sound like to you?
- Who acknowledged your voice mattered?
- When were you comfortable being uncomfortable.
- How will you continue this practice?

Engagement Norms

Courageous Conversation uses the following four agreements:

- Engage those who may not usually talk
- Sustain the conversation when it gets uncomfortable or diverted
- Deepen the conversation to the point where authentic understanding and meaningful actions occur

Four Agreements of Courageous Conversation

1. Stay engaged
2. Speak your truth
3. Experience discomfort
4. Expect and accept non-closure

BRAVE SPACE

Annual Rev. Dr. Martin
Luther King, Jr.
Youth Rally



Develop and provide regular access to a *Brave Space. The space should have a foundation of authentic relationships beyond just liking kids.**

*Brave Space is environment that acknowledges the challenges when one shows up as their authentic selves, discussing sensitive topics like race, power, privilege, oppression or merely being present. The Space's role is to ensure physical and emotional safety while promoting open dialogue, creating a space for learning and understanding where everyone's voice/presence is not just encouraged but deeply respected and valued.

Examples of organizations proficient in creating and sustaining 'Brave Space' are the award-winning Arrow Youth Leadership Council International (www.thesfayc.org) and the 30-year-annual Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Youth Rally (mlkyouthrally.com).



Activity

Activity – Encourage scholars and educators to express their thoughts, questions, experiences, and aspirations about the school using a single word or no more than six words. Both parties can do this anonymously to create a safe and open environment. This activity provides an opportunity for mutual learning and growth as adults and scholars share their perspectives. The conversation will align through reviewing vulnerable, honest, and revealing responses about what scholars/adults think about our school/district, etc.

'Lean in louder' calls for practitioners to go beyond passive support for DEI values by actively advocating, amplifying marginalized voices, and critically assessing institutional practices to foster inclusivity.

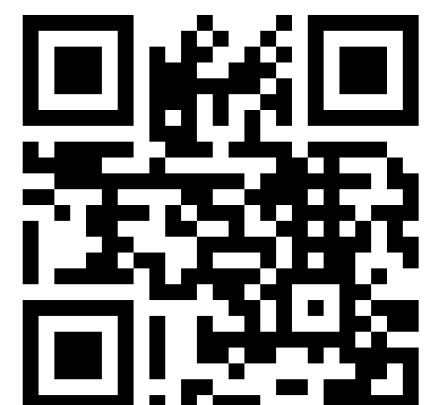
Zein Saleh

University of Nebraska | ASUN Internal Vice President
2024 Barry Goldwater Scholar

Debrief

The debrief will be an opportunity to experience and practice "being comfortable being uncomfortable." The diverse responses, whether thoughtful, funny, heartbreaking, brave, seething with anger, or brimming with hope, all hold value. Some responses may bring a smile, while others might challenge us. However, engaging with the more challenging thoughts will demonstrate respect for the lived experience of the scholar or adult. Being engaged with some of the more challenging thoughts will demonstrate our respect for the lived experiences of our scholars and educators.

Arrow Youth
Leadership Council
International



Many Thanks

Those involved with the Journal sincerely thank everyone who contributed, supported, and reviewed this endeavor. It is a timely, modernized resource designed to empower, educate, and engage educators, scholars, practitioners, parents/guardians, and youth-serving agencies.

Featured Scholars and Their Families

- Amna
- Catrice
- Jesus
- Keilani
- Layla
- Lillian
- Lukas
- Rafa
- Zainab

Featured Practitioners

- Peter Ferguson
- Keith L. Brown • 2020 Enterprises
- Michaella Kumke • Food Bank of Lincoln
- Dr. Steve Joel • Retired K-12 Superintendent

National Youth Advocacy and Resilience Conference

- Dr. Alisa Leckie
- Dr. Taylor Norman
- Dr. Michelle Reidel

Annual Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Youth Rally

- Dr. Jake and Delores Kirkland
- Emily Koopmann
- Brittney Hodges-Bolkovac

Azcia' Fleming
Belmont Community Center
Brandi Benson
Black is Beautiful Nebraska
City of Lincoln (Nebraska)
William Bryant
Emely Chairez
Guor Chuol
Connie Edmond
Bobbie Ehrlich
Stephanie Emry
Jaden Ferguson
Peter Ferguson BHS, LLC.
Hastings College (Nebraska)
Dr. Karen Kassebaum
David Koehn
Dr. Jeni Langfeldt
Food Bank of Lincoln Inc.
Kansas Children's Service League
Lincoln Journal Star
Lincoln Public Schools
Derrick and Rebecca Pearson
Dr. Vann Price
Jarell Roach
Brian Seifferlein
Jessica Sodeke
Sam Stecher
Barry Thomas
University of Nebraska-Lincoln
Jason Witmer
93.7. The Ticket KNTK Radio & Digital Stream

**FOR ADDITIONAL
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