Student Driven Research on School Climate in Providence Schools

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Too often, we make decisions about education reform without the primary consumers of our education system at the table—students. Lasting, systemic change cannot be achieved without the partnership of young people. Authentic youth voice, based on real data, is critically needed. Through the exceptional work of Young Voices, youth have surveyed 1,500 of their peers, literally providing voice to the voiceless. They have also engaged a cadre of students who can partner with policy-makers to bring about real change.

This body of work is impressive, not only in its scope, but in its thorough and unique methodology. I commend the youth who did the laborious work of conducting this extensive research. These young people met with local researchers and staff from Brown University to develop valid survey tools and research protocol, and continued to receive guidance as they distributed surveys directly to their peers. Often when research is done, it is conducted by adults for youth. Very rarely do we have youth as the driving force for research, designing the survey questions themselves. This is critical, because when youth frame the questions, we get a whole new body of data to which we would never have had access.

More importantly, the youth of Young Voices see this data not as an end in itself, but as a catalyst for real change. They aim to use this data, in partnership with adult leaders, to create needed systemic reforms. Through upcoming Education Forums, they will rally young people to really become active participants in the transformation of their education system. They will make sure their voices are heard by government leaders, school administration, educators, and every group that can influence their daily experience in the classroom, and ensure their access to a quality education. Over the next year, they will be supporting youth in other RI urban communities to collect data, ensuring that young people’s voices across the state are heard.

I am excited to be partnering with an organization that not only supports youth to gather important data, but also trains them to engage with policy-makers in the challenging work of system reform. I believe we have a foundation for a national model, which could be replicated across the country—giving educators, community activists, and government officials alike an opportunity to create educational systems based on the consumers.

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Since its founding in 2006, Young Voices has enabled youth to create policy agendas and action plans for improving quality of life for young people in Rhode Island. Empowering youth to design and direct credible, focused research to inform a clear policy agenda has been central to Young Voices’ success at transforming urban youth into powerful advocates for their communities.

Young Voices received particular recognition for its work creating Providence’s first Youth-driven Policy Agenda, which included a 25-step Action Plan for improving the schools, police department, and community. The Action Plan was based on research with more than 900 youth. This year, building on that work, the youth of Young Voices chose to conduct research about the everyday experiences of students and teachers in Providence’s public high schools. This research will form the basis for a collective effort to transform the Providence public school system.

**Methodology**

1,685 high-school aged youth—21% of Providence public high school students---were reached through surveying and a series of 17 focus groups. In order to get a sense of teacher experience, and how it relates to student experience, 149 teachers - 27% of teachers in the target high schools - were also reached through surveys and focus groups. Youth from Young Voices created the surveys and focus group questions with guidance from staff at Brown University and RI KIDS COUNT. The youth independently conducted all research. After collection, research data was analyzed by an outside consultant hired by Young Voices to bring clarity to the research findings.

**Youth Survey and Focus Groups**
The methodology used in determining the student survey samples was random selection. 1482 surveys were completed. Any surveys with questionable validity were thrown out. The student sample closely reflects the demographics of Providence Public School students. When analyzing survey data, schools for which there was a response rate of over 10% of total school population were included.

To supplement survey results, teams of Young Voices youth and adult staff conducted 17 focus groups with a total of 202 youth participants. Focus group results have been used to define survey results and to gain deeper understanding of the student experience.

Young Voices’ survey and focus data was triangulated with existing research, primarily Providence Public School District’s 2007-2008 SALT Survey results and the PDK report (an intensive, 200-page independent audit of the entire Providence public school curriculum). There is a strong convergence of Young Voices’ research with these other data sources.

**Teacher Survey and Focus Groups**
The methodology used in determining the teacher survey samples was random selection. We did not collect any identifying information from teachers, out of respect for their anonymity, aside from their school. Teacher focus groups were also conducted, with a total of 19 teachers in two focus groups. These results have been used to further understand teacher experience.
Findings: Youth Survey & Focus Group Results

Teacher Effectiveness

Question: My teachers explain information clearly.

Survey Results:

Focus Group Results:
Participants responded that 44% of their teachers explain information clearly.

Comments Included:
• I like my teachers but sometimes I feel that I don’t really understand the words they’re saying because they don’t really speak English well. Other teachers move really quickly because they have to stay with the curriculum, so they’re moving fast. I just don’t feel adequate for the tests that we’re taking sometimes. (Classical)
• In history class there’s a teacher that comes in, sits down, picks up her pencil, does attendance, and that’s about it. She writes on the board, says “these are the notes for the rest of the week,” and all we have to do is to be quiet. Don’t make noise else you’re going to get written up. She doesn’t do anything, she doesn’t teach. I’ve been passing this class with a B+ now for no reason. Ask me anything about US History and I can’t tell you anything because I really don’t know what’s going on. And that’s a big problem because history is a favorite class for me, and if I’m not learning anything in history class, there’s no reason for me being there. (Mount Pleasant)
Findings: Youth Survey & Focus Group Results

Survey Results:

![Bar graph showing survey results]

Focus Group Results:

We tracked how often students heard the following statements in the classroom:

- “You’re not going to be nothing” - 35 times
- “Why don’t you just drop out?” – 42 (including one student who heard that statement from a principal)
- “Why do you come here?” or, “Why do you bother?” -53 times
- “I don’t care if you graduate/fail I still get paid.” – 32 times

In response to being asked if they had ever heard a teacher ask “Why don’t you drop out?,” one student furth ered explained the impact that statement had on him: “That’s why I dropped out.”

Focus Group Results:

Participants responded that 30% of their teachers motivated them, and 44% discouraged them.

Results were very different from the survey. Most participants said that teachers don’t do anything to motivate them. It is possible that the variation in results is due to the fact that we asked “encourage and motivate” in the surveys, or that the term “motivate” is unclear—some students, for example, talked of experiences that motivated them for negative reasons:

- I had a teacher who thought he was funny and every time I took a test he would put my test scores on the board for the class to see...but it motivated me because I didn’t want to seem stupid.” (Classical)
- Sometimes teachers threaten you: “If you drop out you’ll be a loser--you won’t go to college.” (Mount Pleasant)
- They say, “if you get this wrong people will laugh at you” (Classical)

There were a few, isolated examples of positive motivation:

- They listen and will help me when I need it and not blow me off. (E3 Academy)
- The teachers that I’m close with, I have a relationship with that I can talk to them so they motivate me. (Classical)
- After school help...it motivates you because they take time out of their day to help you. (Classical)

Students also spoke of being discouraged:

- If I don’t go to college I’ll be a crackhead. (E3 Academy)
- "If you don’t do the work, fine--be a bum in the street, work at McDonalds for your life". (Mount Pleasant)
- “It’s best if you just drop out”.
- "You’re going to be homeless".
- "You’re going to be eating ravioli out of a can for the rest of your life." (Mount Pleasant)
- I had a social studies teacher who called me stupid in front of the whole class “Oh, I didn’t think you’d know that answer because usually you’re pretty stupid.” And right there I was like “alright I’m kinda done going to school” and made me drop out.
- “If you want to fail, fail quietly.” (Classical)
Findings: Youth Survey & Focus Group Results

My teachers give me the help I need when I ask for it.

Survey Results:

Focus Group Results:
Participants responded that 49% of their teachers gave them the help they need.

Focus group comments were generally negative:
- She is always saying you can ask for help, so I always stay after... and she always says “we already went over this” and you can’t stop her during class. (Classical)
- Math teachers make you feel like you are ridiculously stupid all the time...she would stare you down until you didn’t want to ask a question and then most people ended up failing the class...then you’d feel like it’s your fault because you could’ve asked the question but then again she didn’t like people asking questions... Very intimidating. (Classical)
- Not my teachers – if you ask them a question because you don’t understand, they say you should have been paying attention and to look at your notes. (Mount Pleasant)
- If you’re a bad kid, stupid in class all the time, they won’t help you. (E3 Academy)

Student Disruption

Survey Results:

Focus Group Results:
Students widely acknowledged that student disruption is an issue. They also discussed feeling un-engaged, and/or lost in the classroom, which may lead to students being disruptive:
- They tell us what to do and you just sit there and don’t know what’s going on...they don’t explain nothing.
- You sit there because you don’t understand... and then when we ask them they say we should know it and don’t answer the questions.
- Sometimes if they explain things to you and you don’t understand you have to sit and do nothing – you don’t want to look stupid.
Findings: Youth Survey & Focus Group Results

Quality of Curricula

Focus Group Results:
- Most of my teachers, it's like: Ditto. Ditto. Book. Lecture. Ditto. Papers – do them or you get in trouble. And they don’t even teach. They hand you a paper with instructions, expect you to do it, and when you don’t they get mad at you. And they don’t talk. They just sit behind their desk and do nothing. I only got two teachers that really motivate the kids – English and History. My English teacher, we learn about Shakespeare, he makes us do plays in his class, so that’s cool because I get to act and it helps me learn. And my history teacher, we watch movies about educational stuff and he asks us – what did we learn about it? So I find that a good way. (Classical)

Question: I spend most of my time in class working on dittos.

Survey Results

- Always/Often
- Sometimes
- Rarely/Never

I spend most of my time in class working on dittos.

Question: I spend most of my time in class reading the textbook on my own.

Survey Results

- Always/Often
- Sometimes
- Rarely/Never

I spend most of my time in class reading the textbook on my own.
Findings: Youth Survey & Focus Group Results

Question: I spend most of my time in class listening to a lecture.

Survey responses align strongly with both 2008 SALT surveys and with the PDK audit:

The PDK Audit found the following:
- In Grades 9-12, of 321 course offerings, only 68 (21%) had curriculum guides. (p.81)
- Guides were of such poor quality that they could not serve their intended purposes of providing consistent content across classrooms and effectively assisting teachers in preparing lessons (p.88)
- Guides lack specificity as to objectives, assessments, resources, and teaching strategies (p.90)
- Policy documents expressed expectations of a variety of engaging classroom activities including cooperative learning, projects, and differentiated instruction. Auditors did not observe those activities in most classrooms. (p.112)

SALT Survey results:
On a scale of “never” (1 point), to “often” (4 points)
- The average response for how often students experience “Small Group Learning Activities”, and “Instruction Innovation and Variation” was closest to “Sometimes”
- The average response for how often students experience “Community-Based Learning Opportunities” was closest to “Hardly Ever.”
Focus Group Results:
Several themes emerged from these groups, which are embodied in the following comments:
- There are too many changes all the time. There is no continuity. They switch the curriculum every couple of years. Every time we get a new Superintendent, they want their own curriculum. We buy these expensive curricula, and then don’t even use it long enough for it to have an impact. We don’t even get a chance to let them work, or know if they work. These are expensive, all that money is being wasted. (“Read 180” is discussed as an example)
- Policy ideas are not asked from teachers or students. The district is top-down. There needs to be better communication.
- The budget problems are killing us. Class size is too high, too many teaching positions are being cut.
- The union overrides our decisions. Sites should be able to interview their staff, and keep people in the position they were hired to have. You just get your team together, and then someone gets bumped. Then you wind up with some random person who just gets placed there, and doesn’t even want to be there.

Alignment with PDK:
- Rapid personnel turnover has deprived the school system of continuity in leadership and staff expertise necessary to improve student achievement. The absence of stable leadership has constrained the department’s ability to pursue changes in the teacher contract that would allow hiring and placement of teachers in a way that was less reliant on seniority and would allow greater principal involvement. (p.45)
- The Central Office is not adequately staffed to perform curriculum management tasks necessary to improve student achievement. (p.36)

Access to Supplies
Survey Results:

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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strongly Agree/Agree</th>
<th>Disagree/Strongly Disagree</th>
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<tr>
<td>I have access to adequate supplies &amp; current textbooks.</td>
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<tr>
<td>I have access to supplies I could use to design hands-on project learning for my students.</td>
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Survey Comments:
Many teachers commented about spending their own money on supplies for hands-on project learning:
- We have limited supplies at our schools. Most of us spend our own money to buy additional supplies.
- I must go to Target and Staples and spend my own money
- I purchase any supplemental supplies and I often cannot afford to do so.
Findings: Teacher Survey & Focus Group Results

**Survey Results:**

The curricula we are currently using is effective.

I have access to professional development that helps me to improve my educational practice.

**Alignment with PDK:**
- Assessment is inadequate to effectively evaluate the curriculum and does not provide sufficient data for making sound curricular decisions. There are no system-wide assessments for 76% of the curriculum.
- Auditors concluded that the teacher evaluation process is inadequate in that it does not reflect the policy focus on accountability through measurable goals and results. (p. 53)

**Alignment with Youth Surveys and Focus Groups:**
- Both students and teachers strongly agreed student disruption negatively impacts the classroom.
- 60% of teachers also agreed to the survey question: “My students are motivated to learn.”

**Teacher Survey Comments:**
- Most teachers described the professional development offered by the district as “useless” or “irrelevant”. Some said they seek out other professional development opportunities (at Brown and/or RIC), and find those helpful.

**Survey Results:**

I’d like to be evaluated and get information about how to improve my teaching practice.

Classroom behavior impacts my ability to teach.
Implications & Recommendations

Research Implications

This research was largely aligned with data from both the 2007-2008 SALT Survey, and the PDK Audit. However, new data was revealed that was not available in these studies. In particular, much more information about the impact of teacher effectiveness on students is now known. This appears to be for three reasons:

• Extensive focus groups were conducted with more than 200 students, allowing for data and comments that cannot surface in a survey.
• Focus groups were conducted with more than 40 youth who had dropped out of school; input from these young people is lacking in most local studies.
• Youth designed and conducted the surveys and focus groups. They were able to create questions that made sense to their peers, and create trust for students to share difficult experiences. (In contrast, the PDK audit did not involve any conversations with students, although administrators, teachers, parents, and community members were all interviewed.)

If we really want to know more about the experiences of young people in our schools (and other environments), it is critical to conduct more research of this type.

Recommendations

Our research demonstrated that some Providence public high schools are effective at creating a positive learning environment for students. In addition, we found that one school, Times² Academy, had achieved both a positive environment and higher test scores (with the exact same student demographic. This is not surprising, as research has shown a strong link between higher test scores and a positive learning environment¹. Interviews with principals and teachers of these schools revealed certain elements that led to this success, and we strongly recommend that the School Department seek to implement these elements throughout the system, including:

• Forming smaller schools that have a palpable culture of high expectations for student and teacher performance, and a caring, personalized environment
  Schools that were successful in this area viewed all students as capable of handling college-level material. Teachers were expected to push youth to their highest level, and ensure they had whatever support was necessary to meet expectations.

• Supporting school leadership to select teaching staff that fit the mission of the school, and to retain those teachers over time
  Teachers, principals, and students all spoke about how lack of school autonomy undermines school success, and particularly identified “bumping” as a major barrier to stability. (In the case of staff reductions, the tenured teacher with the most seniority is able to choose a position and “bump” teachers with less seniority).

• Cultivating stable, strong school leadership
  Stable leadership was clearly an element of successful schools. However, the School Dept has routinely moved high school principals over the past couple of years, an issue raised by teachers in their focus groups. The need for stability at the District level was also often discussed.

• Being highly responsive to parents, with expectations for parent involvement in their children's education
  This was a key element to the success of Times² Academy. More communication with parents has been brought up repeatedly in community forums, including one recently sponsored by the Governor’s Urban Education Task Force. Parents have specifically requested a more direct communication and an open process for volunteering in their child’s school.

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