

Young Voices

students documenting school experience

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.

In 2008, Young Voices set out to capture information about the everyday experiences of students and teachers in Providence public schools. **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 have a balanced view of the classroom, **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 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.

Findings:

These findings align with other studies of Providence curriculum and school climate, particularly the SALT survey and PDK audit (a 200-page audit of Providence's curriculum)

In general, student experience in the classroom is not positive:

- Survey results indicated that students often feel teachers do not explain information clearly, or give them the help they need when they ask for it.
- Hands-on learning and connecting learning to real-life experience is rare. Use of "dittos" and students reading on their own with the textbook is prevalent.
- Focus group data also revealed that 44% of teachers make comments that students find discouraging.

There were exceptions to these findings:

- Focus groups indicated that there are, in every school, effective teachers who are skilled in their craft and dedicated to student learning; students rated 30% of their teachers as motivating.
- **Youth at schools with fewer students consistently reported a higher level of satisfaction in all categories**, including: receiving help; teachers being encouraging and more hands-on learning.
- The trends were significantly different for one school—Times² Academy.

On average, only 45% of students answered "always or often" to the statement "my teachers "explain information clearly"

52% of students answered "always or often" to the statement "my teachers give me the help I need when I ask for it"

When asked "I spend most of my time in class working on dittos", 83% of students answered Always, Often, or Sometimes.

Data was similar for the question "I spend most of my time in class reading the textbook on my own", with 71% of students answering Always, Often, or Sometimes.

The smaller schools in this study included Cooley, Hope, E³, and Times², all of which are part of a "reform agenda" of Providence Schools. The larger schools included Central, Classical, and Mount Pleasant.

82% of students at Times² said information was always/often explained clearly, and 89% said their teachers give them the help they need when they ask for it. 60% said that they spend most of their time in class participating in hands-on learning and applying what they learn to real life/relevant situation. And the sharpest difference was the amount of student disruption—only 20% of students said that "students disrupt class" always or often.

Results from the Teacher Survey and Focus Groups often aligned with the student data:

- Both teachers and students recognized that student disruption undermines the learning process, with both groups strongly agreeing it impacts the ability of the teachers to teach.
- Teacher surveys indicated that teachers often do not have access to supplies to design hands-on learning experiences, and often buy those supplies with their own money.
- Teacher comments indicated that the professional opportunities offered by the school district do not help them to improve their teacher performance.

80% of teachers indicated that classroom behavior impacts their ability to teach. 60% of teachers said their students were motivated to learn.

Only 40% of teachers agreed with the statement “I have access to supplies I could use for hands-on project learning for my students, and only 58% of teachers agreed to “I have access to adequate supplies and current textbooks”.

Implications:

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 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 hiring 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.
- **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.

¹ Blum, Robert and Libbey, Heather. School Connectedness – Strengthening Health and Education Outcomes for Teenagers. American School Health Association: Volume 74, Number 7. September 2004

