

Young Voices:

students partnering in school redesign

Student driven research in Central Falls High School,
with recommendations on school reform plan

May 2011

Introduction

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 conduct 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 order to fulfill their important roles as organizers and advocates, more than 85 youth across the state receive intensive, bi-weekly leadership training on a year-round basis.

Across the country, states are identifying their lowest-performing schools for turnaround. Last year, we created a model for how students could be true partners in the redesign of their schools. Young Voices worked with students at two RI high schools chosen for turnaround to ensure real student voice in the redesign process. With the support of the Nellie Mae Education Foundation, we provided weekly leadership training to students at Central Falls HS and Juanita Sanchez HS in Providence. The students met regularly with school administration. They also conducted research with the student body, getting their input on the schools' Reform Plans. The students then used this research to create an Action Plan for improving their school. These Action Plans will be the basis of student organizing at the schools over the next two years.

This report focuses on the research conducted by the students at Central Falls HS. For more than three years, Young Voices has trained youth at the high school in advanced leadership skills. The research summarized in this report is only a first step; its function was to serve as an engagement and organizing tool for the student body, as well as to form the basis of the Action Plan. The real work is going forward—as students push to realize the goals of their Action Plan, in partnership with school leadership.

Methodology

Students from Young Voices created the surveys, based on what they wanted to learn from their peers. They were trained to conduct surveys and led the survey process during advisory periods. Teachers and administrative staff at Central Falls HS accommodated Young Voices in collecting data, and allowing surveys and focus groups to be administered during the school day in advisory periods. After collection, research data was analyzed by an outside consultant hired by Young Voices to bring clarity to the research findings.

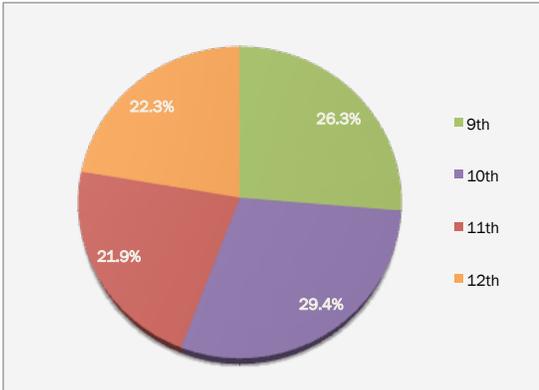
The methodology used in determining the student survey samples was random selection. Any surveys with questionable validity were thrown out. The student sample is similar to the demographics of Central Falls HS. A total of 494 surveys were conducted, an average of 61% of student population in Central Falls HS.

To supplement survey results, eight focus groups with a total of 100 participants were conducted at Central Falls HS and Guide to Success. Focus group results have been used to define survey results and to gain a deeper understanding of the student experience. Focus groups were co-facilitated by students from Young Voices and adult staff.

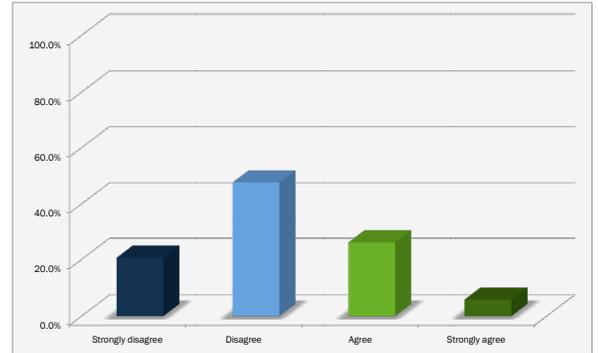
Not all survey questions have been summarized in this document. For a more detailed report please contact Karen Feldman at Young Voices (karenfeldman1@gmail.com).

Findings: Youth Survey

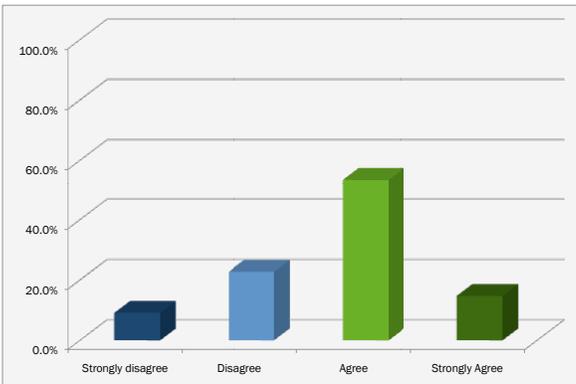
Survey Respondents, by grade:



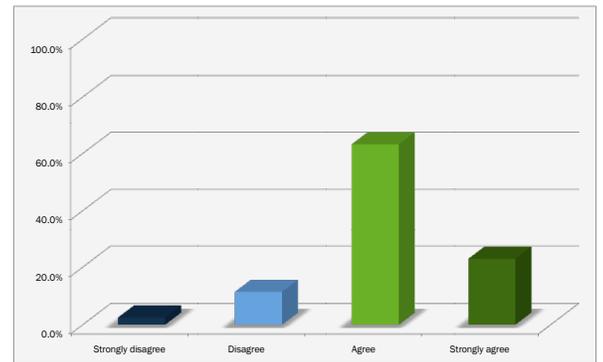
Most students in my school treat teachers with respect:



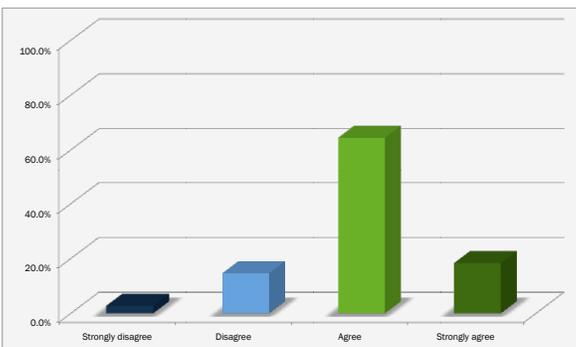
I am proud to be a student at Central Falls High School:



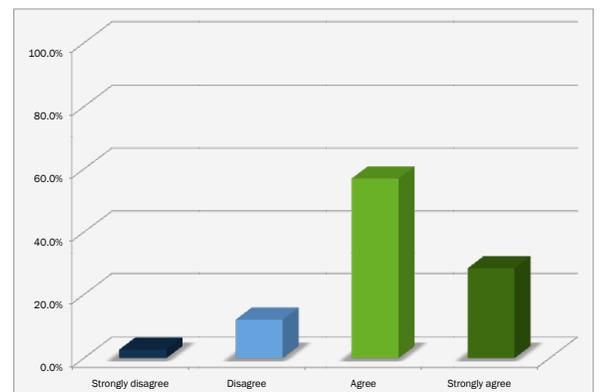
Most adults in my school treat each other with respect:



Most teachers in my school treat students with respect:

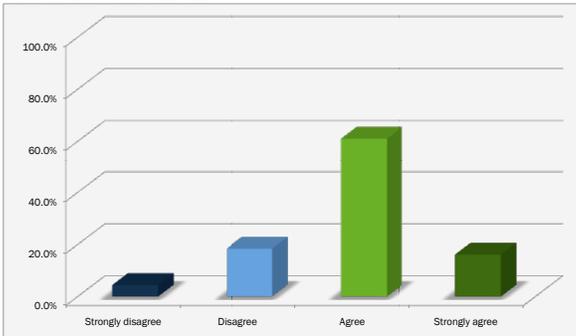


Most of my teachers give me extra help when I need it:

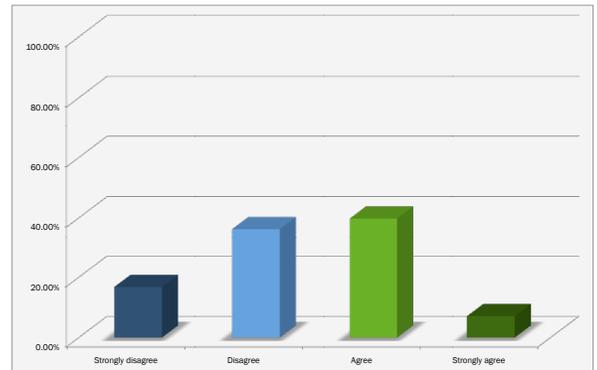


Findings: Youth Survey

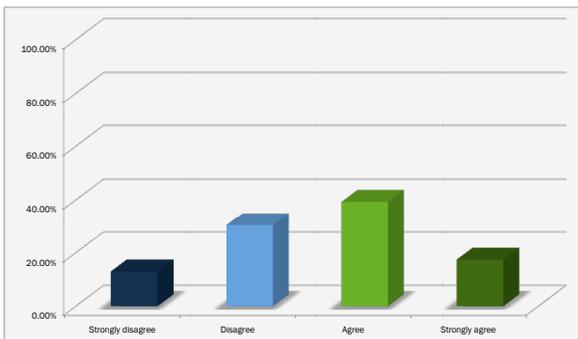
Most of my teachers use teaching techniques other than lecturing or writing notes on the board:



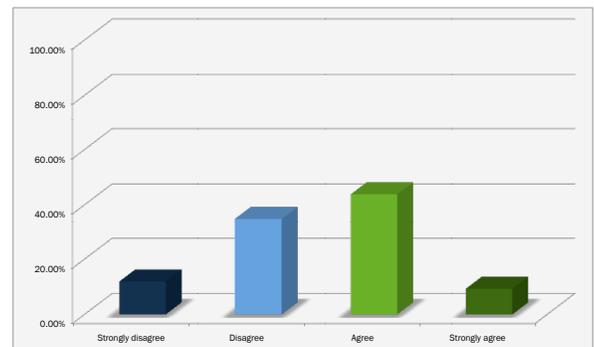
Discipline in my school is fair:



I feel that my opinion matters in this school:



I have access to the principals to speak my opinion:



Findings: Focus Groups

The focus groups had more mixed responses. Two possible reasons for these results:

- We think that the “most” used in survey questions causes students to lump everyone together.
- In focus groups we were able to ask more specific questions based on the survey results and get deeper.

Findings: Focus Groups

Comments on the Leadership Team

Students generally felt that the leadership team should be more available. Only 11% of students in focus groups answered yes when asked if they'd shared their opinion with a leader in this school like a principal.

"They don't make themselves approachable at all, I feel like there's no time to see them even if I did have something to say."

"One time I asked for the principal and they told me I needed to make an appointment – but she's the principal. If I need to talk to her, I should be able to talk to her at any time."

Comments on Students

"Respect is a huge issue here...in the hallways or the classroom, you don't see a lot of respect."

"I think it's the maturity level. We've been here long enough and know how teachers should be treated, well everyone should know that, but... We have that maturity and it makes a difference."

"They do it because they know they can do it, they've probably done so many stuff that they haven't gotten in trouble for and they're just going to keep doing it. They can't mature into not doing it if they're never corrected about it."

"Honestly, I think they should get harder on the lower classmen. In the beginning of the year they were putting the blame on us. I think they should really start focusing on the lower classmen – they are the ones disrespecting people."

Responses were negative in this area and called for stronger discipline.

This might be due to:

- Basic maturity differences between 9th and 12th graders; 12th graders were more likely to make these types of comments
- 9th grade was only added to the high school this year
- The beginning of the school year was a chaotic environment, with a lot of teachers absent. We think this has been addressed.

Findings: Focus Groups

Comments on Teaching and Learning

In focus groups students said that 36% felt respected by all of their teachers, 41% of their teachers could manage class effectively, and 65% of their teachers expected them to do their best in class. Many of the students spoke about knowing their teachers for a long time, adding to the feeling of trust.

“They always give us a second chance.”

“I think school’s just going to help our future no matter if the teachers are going to be here, or not here... It’s up to you if you want to learn, it doesn’t depend on teachers for your learning, it depends on yourself. If you decide to learn, you’re going to learn.”

“They will pull you out to the side and say, ‘hey, I know you’re a good student’.”

“In the past I had teachers that couldn’t control their classroom at all and it was like chaos, it was people doing what they want to do, people trying to teach at the board... and people like me who can’t focus. There’s a lot of things going on...and that’s not right for me.”

“They believe in us.”

“Most kids say the reason why they dropped out was because they didn’t think they was learning, they didn’t think they was getting prepared for the next level or getting ready to get out of high school...all they would do is come to class and just sit there and the teachers would just teach, they wouldn’t make it more active and they wasn’t be being pushed to their limit.”

“They open up to you and talk about their stuff too.”

“They talk about their lives with us, I feel like I can talk about my life too.”

“They keep things confidential.”

“I know some teachers that don’t like other teachers because they kiss up to administration and they basically just go with administration so they can look good in front of the administration and the other teachers don’t like that because they’re not really standing up for what they believe they just want to keep their job.”

“I like coming to school because it’s easy and the teachers, like mostly no teachers are here anyway so we just have a sub most of the time and we basically do no work in class.”

“Having subs it’s like having no teacher...it’s not that they don’t want to help, but they don’t know.”

“Oh, the subs they don’t talk, they basically sit at a desk and do what they do and give us work. So it’s like someone just babysitting us while we do our work.”

Many students felt substitutes did not adequately replace teachers when it came to learning.

Student Input into Reform Plan

In general, we agree with the three goals of the reform plan¹:

1. Dramatically increase the graduation rate and decrease the drop-out rate
2. Dramatically increase the percentage of students demonstrating proficiency in mathematics; maintain consistent improvement in ELA
3. Dramatically improve the culture and climate of the school for students, teachers, parents, staff and other stakeholders

We do feel that they could be improved, in the following ways:

- Advisories are a good idea, but in operation could be more effective and more productive.
- Better discipline and order would make a big difference in reducing drop-out.
- More hands-on learning and not just lecture style teaching methods would also help in reducing drop-outs.
- More authentic student voice is needed.

Action Plan

We are presenting this Action Plan to improve our school, and we will be pushing for its goals over the next two years. Our action plan has the following goals:

- **Improved discipline policies at the school**

We want to meet with school leadership on a regular basis to create more effective discipline policies, a more effective in-school suspension (ISS) system, and more support and structure for underclassmen.

- **Stronger academic standards and more variety of teaching methods**

We want more variety in teaching methods, including hands-on learning and not just lecture style. Learning in a variety of ways is more engaging to students and will keep them in school. We want to partner with teachers and school leadership to help this happen. We know this school year was unusual, but the high number of substitutes was hard on all of us. We feel substitutes cannot replace the knowledge and experience of an accredited teacher in certain subjects, such as math and science.

- **More student involvement in school redesign**

We need to find a way for more of the student body to be involved in school reform. A number of us are in many meetings, and we meet with school leadership on a regular basis, but most students did not feel they have enough of a voice.

¹ CFHS Mid-Year Report. February 2011

Acknowledgements

We would really like to thank all of the people who supported us youth to create this report. We could not have done it without you. We would like to thank the Nellie Mae Education Foundation (NMEF) for their support. Their financial support made this work possible. Special acknowledgement is also due to the Central Falls School Department and Guide to Success staff, who allowed us to hand out surveys and run focus groups during the school day in advisory periods.

We would also like to thank the following individuals and organizations:

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