

Young Voices:

Students partnering in school redesign

Student driven research in Juanita Sanchez Education Complex,
with recommendations on school reform plan

August 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, 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 Juanita Sanchez students who participate in the Young Voices training. This training, which is offered afterschool, is also known as the Principals Leadership Program. The students met monthly with the Principal, Janelle Clarke, who became so impressed with their work that she invited them to sit on the Executive Committee of the School Improvement Team. 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

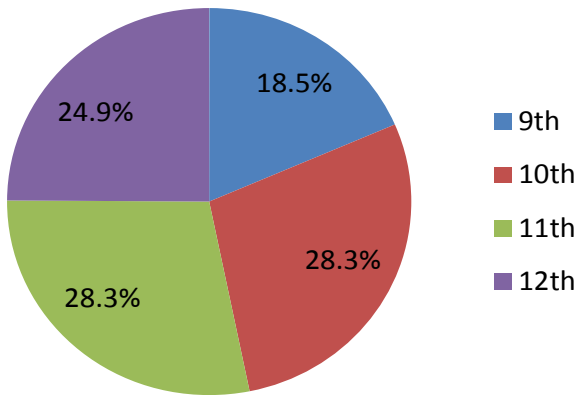
Students from Young Voices who attend Juanita Sanchez created the surveys, based on what they wanted to learn from their peers. They were trained to conduct surveys and led the survey process after school. In addition, the youth used their Young Voices meeting times for survey collection and focus groups. 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 Juanita Sanchez. A total of 376 surveys were conducted, an average of 47% of the student population in Juanita Sanchez. In addition, 90% of the students surveyed were students of Hispanic/Latino ethnicity.

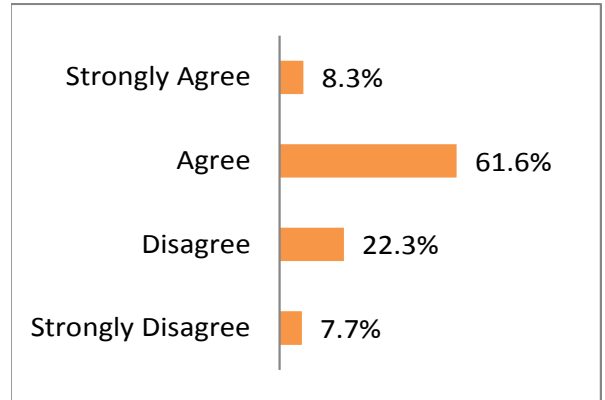
To supplement survey results, eight focus groups with a total of 64 participants were conducted at Juanita Sanchez. Focus group results have been used to define survey results and to gain a deeper understanding of the student experience. Focus groups were co-facilitated by students from Young Voices and adult staff.

Findings: Youth Survey

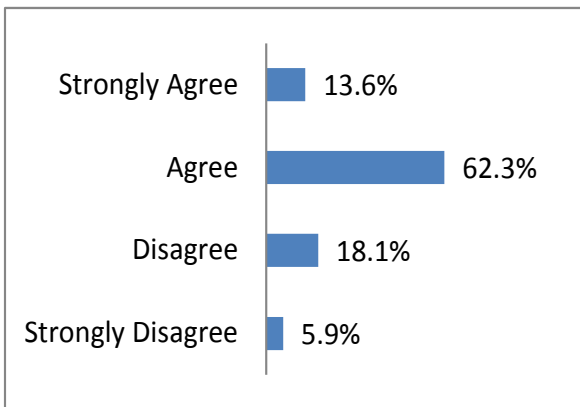
Survey Respondents, by grade:



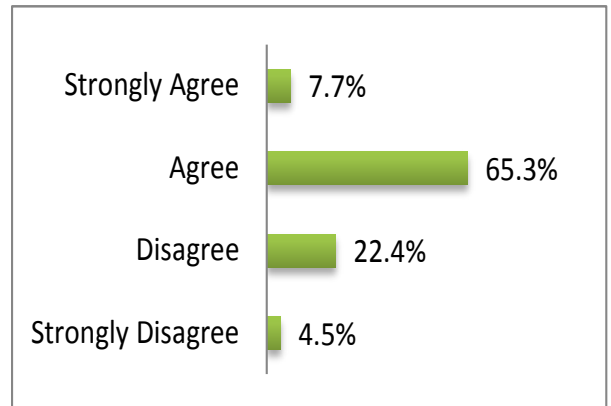
Most students treat teachers with respect:



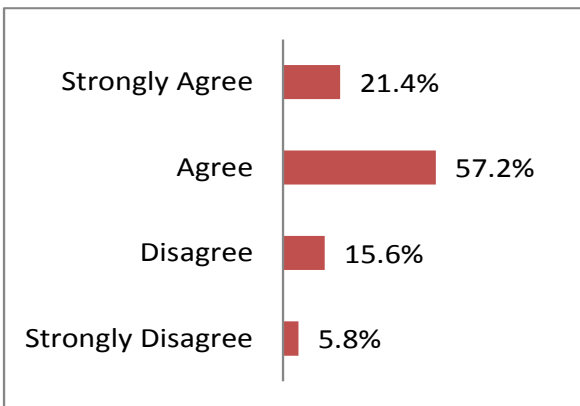
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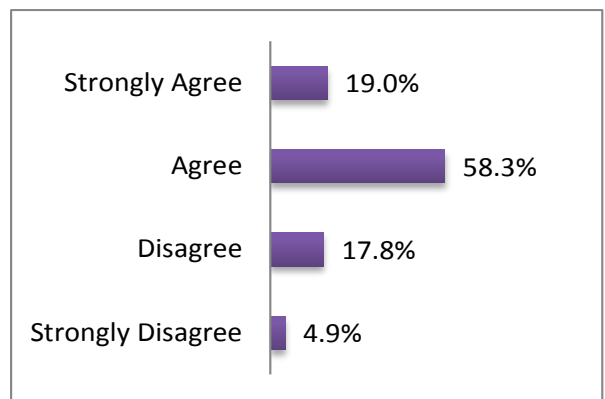
Most of my teachers are able to manage the class:



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

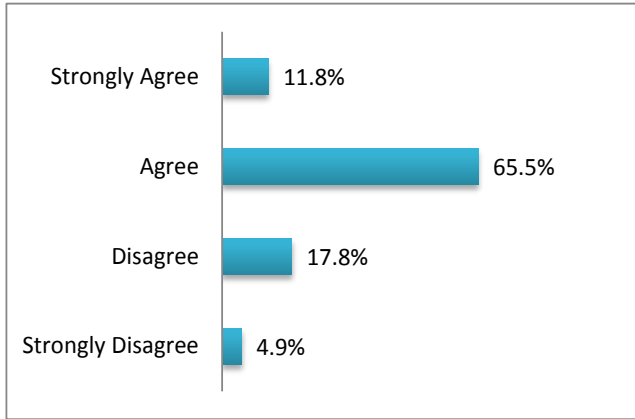


Most of my teachers challenge me to do my best in classes:

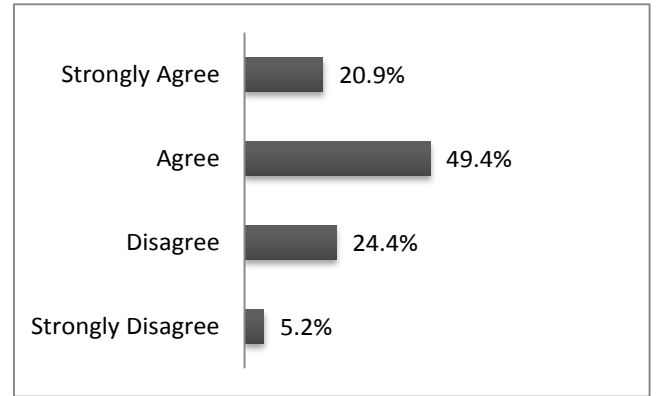


Findings: Youth Survey

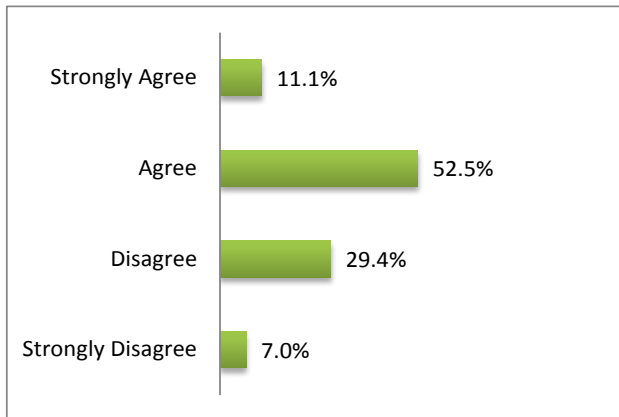
Most of my teachers use a variety of teaching techniques in addition to lecturing and writing notes on the board:



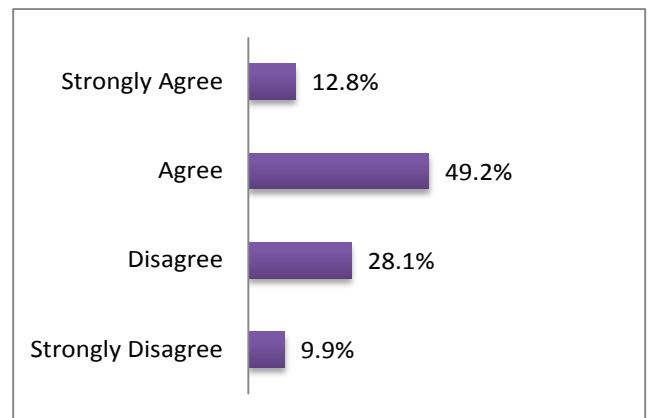
Afterschool Programs keep me interested in school:



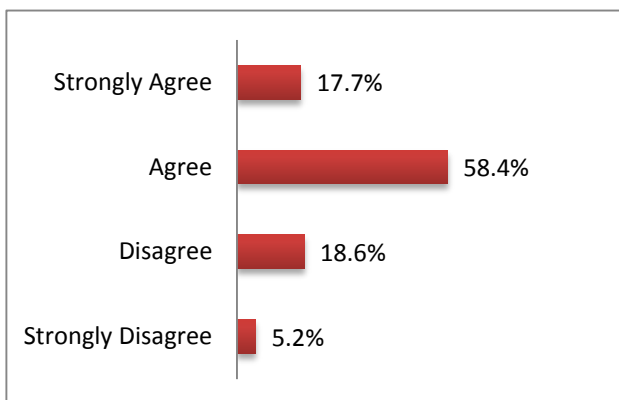
Student voice is recognized in our school:



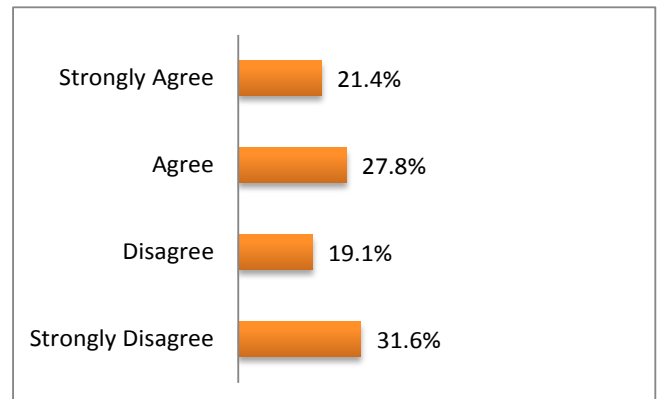
I have access to the principals to speak my opinion:



I feel that my opinion matters in this school:



I think uniforms is a great idea for our school:



Findings: Focus Groups

Comments on Teaching and Learning

"I had this computer class with this teacher that connected a lot. She teaches us how to work on our resume, gets us prepared for life. We do projects, find jobs and how much it pays. She is relating real life and how you would live. She is helping us understand how life would be like once you graduate."

"There are some teachers that break out of that certain curriculum they have to do to get kids engaged."

"They make me want to learn more....I get as much as possible so when I go out, I can have a good life."

"They explain things really well."

"The teacher gives us so much work . If we don't finish the work in class then they give that for homework plus home work."

"So for math, she shows us stuff and how we can use it outside of the classroom."

Students also talked about hands on learning

"It builds a bigger community, more friends, more teachers."

"I do my homework but I don't learn from homework. I learn from the classroom."

"It gives me a positive learning experience."

"It helps me not be a follower but a leader."

Students comments were overwhelmingly positive when it came to teaching and learning. Student emphasized that they wanted more hands on learning.

While discussing how many of their teachers connected learning to life outside the classroom, student responses were mixed:

- 22% reported 5 or more teachers did this.
- 44.4% reported 3 or 4 teachers did this.
- 33.5% reported 2 teachers or less did this.

Comments on Teacher Support

"They just keep asking us questions. My teachers keep asking what I want to do and they tell me if I want to do that, I gotta keep doing my work and they'll keep offering more ideas and stuff for me to pursue it."

"Helps me become a better person for myself and the people around me."

"Some teachers really don't care while others really really really do like telling you how to do your job better, are you doing the math, do you need the extra help. Some teachers even tell you to stay after school and some don't even give you that option."

"The better you do in class the more work support you get and the worse you do in class the more segregated or pushed to the side."

"I know its bad but I'm going out. I'm already graduating....Like the kids that sitting in the back, I'm one of them but if you not doing anything they should like implement the calling at home and stuff. They should be contacting the parents or something, they might care. They don't really do that now."

"They don't trust us. Both the student and the teacher need to have trust in each other. We lack that in this school"

"My teacher always says I could go to college."

"Keep up the good work."

75.9% of students feel respected by their teachers, and 78.6% report teachers offer extra help. Although focus group results were similarly positive, students did express a need for better communication between teachers and students, and increased communication between teachers and parents.

Findings: Focus Groups

Ideas on How To Prevent Drop Outs

"Maybe having a dance at the end of every quarter. Rewarding the student for their work.... Having more fun stuff to do in the school. A lot of girls have been complaining about not having softball. I like a lot of things that they don't have."

"Give more hands on activities. A lot of students are hands on learners, visual learners. If there's more hands on activities they may learn more and may be focused more in class."

"Teachers and Principals need to be more understanding."

"Even most people who drop out, even the teacher tried to encourage them to do their work, they would just drop out."

"Adding more activities like art that students enjoy and not just reading and writing"

"You can't go use the bathrooms, go to our lockers and class in 3 minutes. It's not our fault that we came late. Its because of the timing."

"If I didn't get it during class, I stay after class and ask the teacher for help. I then go to my locker before the next class and I get detention for being late."

"It's too strict. Instead of disciplining the instigator, they punish the whole group."

"A class that talks about their future."

"There are different things that affect a student from dropping out and you really can't blame the school. You have to factor in the home life and other issues the student maybe facing too."

"Maybe if the parents get involved in the kids school life."

"They should have a program to ask students why they want to drop out or discuss the issues they are going through."

"Uniforms cause then most students will come prepared and wouldn't have to worry about what they have to wear. Everybody will be the same. Nobody will be picky. Oh look she has a short skirt or something like that."

"Uniforms take the focus from dress code and students will be more focused on learning."

Responses reflect several drop out prevention strategies:

- Having a variety of classes and after-school activities that are hands-on, interactive, and fun will cause students to focus more on their education.
- A clearer and more consistent discipline structure needs to be administered.
- Improved communication between students and teachers will create a more productive classroom environment.
- School culture should be improved having all school activities like dances and pep rallies.
- Students were split whether uniforms will improve school culture.

Student Input into Reform Plan

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

1. Improve the quality of reading, writing and math instruction across the curriculum
2. Create a culture of high expectations, internal accountability, professional learning, and a sense of shared mission for all Sanchez students, teachers and staff.
3. Community connections, develop students' sense of engagement with the larger community and engage parent and local organizations with the mission of the school

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

- School day structure should allow time for students to access lockers in between classes.
- A clearer and more consistent discipline system would make a big difference in reducing drop-out.
- Implementing whole school group rewards would also prevent drop-out and help to unite the student body. All school activities like dances and pep rallies.
- The number of students who have authentic voice needs to increase.

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 structure of the school day**
We want to work with the principal to create an effective school day structure that supports students' needs while maximizing learning time. We feel this will lead to more consistent discipline policies.
- **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 work with the principal and teachers to achieve this.
- **More whole-school events and academic credit for relevant after-school programs**
We want more whole-school events. This will improve the climate and keep the students in school. We also want to earn academic credit for relevant after-school programs. We want to partner with teachers and the principal to help make this happen.
- **More student involvement in school redesign**
As part of the School Improvement Team, we will be more active in redesigning our school. But we also want to work with the principal to plan how to communicate more effectively with the entire student body. We need to find ways for more of the student body to be involved in decision making at the school.

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 goes to Principal Janelle Clarke who really took the students' work seriously, met with them monthly, and invited them to join the Executive Committee of the School Improvement Team.

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

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For more information on this research, contact Karen Feldman at Young Voices (karenfeldman1@gmail.com)

