Young Voices:
students documenting school experience
in Pawtucket & Central Falls Schools

June 2009
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, the youth of Young Voices conducted research about the experience of students and teachers in Providence’s public high schools. This research has formed the basis for a collective effort to transform the Providence public school system.

Over the past year, in an effort to bring this work to a statewide level, Young Voices partnered with local leaders in Central Falls, Pawtucket, and Woonsocket, offering them technical assistance to replicate the Young Voices model in their communities. The partner organizations were SCOPE/the Central Falls School Dept, Blackstone Academy, and YWCA Northern RI. Technical assistance included supporting on-site staff to conduct leadership training with local youth, and assisting those youth to conduct research in their communities. While Central Falls and Pawtucket are distinct communities with varying demographics and different school districts, we included them in the same report because a number of educational programs serve youth from both communities equally (such as Blackstone Academy and Blackstone Valley Community Action Program-BVCAP). The results from Woonsocket will be presented in another report.

Methodology

Staff from the partner organizations supported youth to distribute the surveys at local public high schools. The surveys were the same as those used in Young Voices’ Providence-based research. (Youth from Young Voices created those surveys with guidance from staff at Brown University and RI KIDS COUNT). 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.

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 the respective school districts (see p.3).

A total of 633 surveys were conducted, an average of 31% of student population in our target schools\(^1\).

Broken down by school, the percentages are the following:
- Blackstone Academy (111 surveys; 74% of student population)
- Central Falls (174 surveys; 21.27% of student population)
- Shea High School (164 surveys; 15.55% of student population)
- Tolman High School (184 surveys; 14.97% of student population)

The charts on the following pages show the results, with schools listed in alphabetical order.

To supplement survey results, 5 focus groups with a total of 68 youth participants were conducted at Central Falls HS, Shea HS, Blackstone Academy, and BVCAP. Focus group results have been used to define survey results and to gain a deeper understanding of the student experience. Where applicable, the survey and focus group data have been triangulated with existing research, primarily the 2007-2008 SALT Survey results

\(^1\) as reported by the RI Dept of Education (RIDE)
Findings: Youth Survey & Focus Group Results

District Demographics:

Youth Survey Demographics:

Blackstone Academy

Pawtucket

Tolman

Shea

Central Falls

Cenral Falls HS

The demographics of Blackstone Academy are placed here because they have students from both the Central Falls & Pawtucket school districts.
Findings: Youth Survey & Focus Group Results

**Survey Results:**

**Question: My teachers explain information clearly.**

- **Always/Often:** 100.00%
- **Some Times:** 20.00%
- **Rarely/Never:** 0.00%

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

- **Always/Often:** 100.00%
- **Some Times:** 20.00%
- **Rarely/Never:** 0.00%

**Question: My teachers encourage & motivate me.**

- **Strongly Agree/Agree:** 80.00%
- **Disagree/Strongly Disagree:** 0.00%

Focus Group Results

**Central Falls High School:**
Comments in these focus groups were mixed; with students having both negative and positive experiences. This trend varied a bit from the survey results. Students said that 67% of their teachers explain information clearly, and 60% of their teachers give them the help they need when they ask for it. 57% of their teachers motivate and encourage them, and 31% of their teachers say discouraging things.

“Sometimes I miss school and I have certain teachers who will tell me what I have missed, and tell me how to make it up. I really like that because I have teachers that when you miss class they just look at you like you’re dumb. Then they say ‘Sorry, you should have been here.’

“Most of my teachers don’t care, point blank, I just accepted it”

“I like the classes, like Biology and History but it is really because of the teachers, who really teach me about it”

“Some say we’ll never get anywhere”

“I don’t like it when I need help and they ignore me… sometimes I get lost and you raise your hand and they ignore you.”

“They all have their own way and they try to make it fun like my chemistry teacher – she explains really well and relates it to every day life, uses humor.”

**Shea High School**
Student experience in this school was also mixed, but generally positive. Students felt that 47% of their teachers motivated and encouraged them, and 18% said discouraging things.

“They come half the year and then they just don’t come anymore… they don’t care. They don’t take time afterschool.”

“It depends on the way the teacher is… it’s only some teachers. In chemistry they are working our butts off.”

“Most teachers go home after school and say if you don’t get it done it’s not my fault.”

“Cause some students are hard headed and its hard to motivate them, but the teachers I have like to treat all students equally – they don’t want to leave any students behind”

“Well it depends, because some teachers treat you mean because they want you to do the work and prepare you for college, and some teachers treat you mean because they don’t care.”

“I haven’t met any really negative teachers yet. There extremely annoying teachers but it’s not that they don’t care.”
Findings: Youth Survey & Focus Group Results

Blackstone Academy:
Blackstone Academy is a public Charter School for high school students from Central Falls and Pawtucket. Comments in focus groups were overwhelmingly positive. Students said that 83% of their teachers give them help they need when they ask for it, and 75% of their teachers offer them support.

“Here they definitely do. Like some of the kids don’t know what they have here. Here all they do is try to push you to do your best”
“Obviously different teachers act differently though.”
“Yeah, but even then they really try here...There is a teacher who comes to school early to help students who are falling behind and then he will stay after school to help you with your work”

Blackstone Valley Community Action Program (BVCAP):
This is a GED program for youth who have dropped out of Central Falls, Tolman, or Shea high schools. We felt it important to have the voice of out-of-school youth. Because the youth come from both school districts, however, it was difficult to identify which school they were talking about, unless they directly said the school as they were talking. These youth had a different experience than their peers; it was overwhelmingly negative. They said 8% of their teachers supported them, and 4% gave them the help they needed when they asked for it:

“At Tolman one of my teachers called me tubby, and I said don’t call me that, and he tried to hit me.
“One teacher at Shea told me that all I was going to be was a welfare mom.
“A teacher at Tolman called me a hoe...I was bending down to tie my sneakers, and the teacher said don’t bend down like that you look like a hoe, I said don’t call me a hoe and she said, that if the shoe fits wear it.”
They never would check my work. They would complain about us not doing the work and when we did it the teacher would put a check mark on it and say take it back. I’d say you did not even check this what am I supposed to do with this? The teacher would be like throw it away.” (school not identified)
“A lot of times I would ask myself if they cared and the answer was always no” (school not identified)

Alignment with SALT
In terms of school climate, SALT results were generally aligned (both Pawtucket schools were combined into one district). For example, students at Central Falls reported that teachers provide support 64% of the time, almost identical to our findings. Student responses in this report for Shea and Tolman are somewhat less positive than the SALT. Responses were similar to the SALT in terms of instructional innovation and variation.

Question: Students disrupt class.
Surveys Results:

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<tr>
<th>Classroom</th>
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<td>Blackstone Academy</td>
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Question: Student disruption impacts teachers’ ability to teach.
Survey Results:

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Findings: Youth Survey & Focus Group Results

**Survey Results**

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

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<td><strong>Rarely/Never</strong></td>
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**Question:** I spend most of my time in class working on dittos.

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<td><strong>Rarely/Never</strong></td>
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**Question:** I spend most of my time in class listening to a lecture.

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**Question:** I spend most of my time in class participating in hands-on learning.

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**Question:** I spend most of my time in class applying what I learn to real life/relevant situations.

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**Focus Group Results**

From Central Falls:
“**There is no variety, they only teach one way, which is stand up and talk at you for however long the class is**”
“He talks and talks and it bores everyone so we do our own thing.”
“Especially in math, she does the whole process out first instead of going step by step and seeing if we understand as we go. What that does to me is that I tend to get confused – I don’t know what is going to be on the test, what he just taught us or the older material.”
“We learned about the constitution and he tied it into how people get stopped for stupid reasons and he taught us how to get out of trouble by using the law the right way.”
“We do class debates. Sometimes the teacher will talk, then we will do an activity, then talk some more.”

Shea:
“We just do everything from the book.”
“We haven’t read one book in honors English – we read short stories. It’s like reading magazines. And the other class has read tons of novels.”
Research Summary

Because each school is structured differently, and serves a slightly different demographic, direct comparisons are difficult to make. Therefore, we have summarized the findings for each school separately.

Blackstone Academy
Across the board, student responses on surveys and in focus groups were very positive. Students experienced being supported by dedicated teachers, and being taught through a variety of instructional methods. The proportion of youth who reported that they spend most of their time in class participating in hands-on learning was very high. In fact, in all our research to date (in Providence, Pawtucket, and Central Falls), Blackstone Academy has received the most positive responses. Upon further study, we found several possible reasons for this:

• Blackstone Academy is small (150 students), and there is an intentional effort to create a personalized atmosphere
• There is an intentional effort to connect in-school learning with the outside world, particularly through CIP classes all students take during the school day (Community Improvement Projects).
• Teaching staff are very carefully selected and receive clear, thorough evaluations.
• Students choose to enter the lottery to attend Blackstone Academy, as with all other state Charter Schools. Staff did emphasize that Blackstone differs from other charter schools in that students, not parents, sign up for the lottery (most of the charter schools are for younger children), and that many students do not have a lot of parental support and arrive significantly behind grade level.

Central Falls High School
Survey results were relatively positive, particularly in terms of school climate, and instructional variety. Focus groups seemed to indicate that experiences were either very positive, or negative. For example, students said that 57% of their teachers motivate and encourage them (a fairly high number), and 31% of their teachers say discouraging things, which is 88% of all their teachers. Also, when students described their instructional experience, their comments depicted either best practice teaching, or ineffective teaching. We did not find much “middle ground.” Several possible reasons have been offered for these results:

• Significant effort has been invested through a collaboration with URI and the RI Foundation to restructure the schools, and this has resulted in a significantly improved school climate. Some teachers appear to be refining their skills through improved professional development opportunities. It is not clear if the other teachers need more professional support, or are resistant to the restructuring.
• Central Falls is a small community, with one middle school (and that principal of that middle school just moved to the high school). This familiarity could result in a more positive climate.

Shea and Tolman High Schools
Results for these two schools were almost identical. Student experience was mixed, with 70% of students at both schools agreeing that teachers encourage them, and 55% indicating that their teachers give them the help they need when they ask for it. 50% indicated that their teachers explain information clearly. Instructional variety at both schools was relatively low. The focus group comments revealed similar trends. The similarity of these schools could be explained by the fact that they are similar in size and student demographics.

Blackstone Valley Community Action Program
We felt it was critical to include the voice of students who had dropped out of our target schools, and therefore conducted a focus group at this program. As mentioned, the experience of these students was overwhelmingly negative. It is difficult to document exactly which school each youth attended and make a causal connection, but we did include quotes in which students named the school they attended.
Primary Support for this report was provided by the Rhode Island Urban Education Task Force (UETF). The UETF was convened to understand the challenges of urban education in the state and to recommend solutions. The UETF is being coordinated by the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University.

Additionally, the Rhode Island Foundation has supported our work to create a statewide youth movement through technical assistance to organizations across RI. A special acknowledgement is due to the Central Falls School Dept, Blackstone Academy, and YWCA Northern RI, our partners in building a statewide movement. It is the hard work of their staff and youth members that made this research a success.

We would also like to thank the following individuals: Warren Simmons, Ellen Foley, and Carol Walker, the Annenberg Institute; Denise Jenkins, Anna Cano Morales, and Alex McCray, the Rhode Island Foundation; Superintendent Fran Gallo, Christine Gingerella, Brandon Brown, and Andrea Merrihew, Central Falls School Department; Carolyn Sheehan, Blackstone Academy; Deb Perry, Nate Smith, Reza Clifton, and Deb Smith, YWCA Northern RI; Melissa Walsh; Maryclaire Knight; Tehani Collazo, Brown University; and Elaine Budish, RI KIDS COUNT.

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