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How Listening to Students Can Help Schools to Improve

In this article, findings from a study of 150 10th-grade students attending 10 Boston public high schools are presented. Data obtained from surveys and interviews with the students in the study are used to illuminate how student perspectives on their school experiences can be used to strengthen reform efforts. Themes such as teacher-student relationships, the impact of high stakes testing, concerns about discipline and safety, and student goals and motivation are explored. Implications for how such a research strategy can be used to assist efforts to improve urban high school are proffered to policy makers and school district leaders.

THERE IS NOW A BROAD consensus that our nation's high schools are not adequately serving the needs of students or society, and that they are in need of substantial reform. Indicators that many of the nation's high schools are in trouble have been evident for some time, including astonishingly high dropout rates, especially in urban areas (Harvard Civil Rights Project, 2000); widespread concerns about violence and safety (Newman, Fox, Harding, Mehta, & Roth, 2004); pervasive low achievement on most standardized tests, but especially in science and math (MDRC, 2002); and a wide and seemingly intractable achievement gap that corresponds disturbingly and predictably to the race and class backgrounds of students (Jencks & Phillips, 1998).

These indicators are not new, and in fact, several reports and blue ribbon studies have pointed to such trends to support calls for systemic policy intervention and sweeping reform (Cohen, 2001). Yet, despite the growing chorus of calls for change, until recently, the organization and structure of most high schools remained largely unchanged and trapped in traditions that had long outlived their purpose. Several critical studies pointed out that many schools were characterized by pervasive antiintellectualism, boredom, and alienation among students (Steinberg, 1996); organizational fragmentation combined with a lack of mission and focus (Siskin, 1993); and a curriculum that offered a smorgasbord of courses but little of the intellectual depth and rigor needed to

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develop substantive knowledge and higher order thinking skills. Further, the large, comprehensive high school, serving 1000 or more students, has been accused of breeding mediocrity and intellectual laziness, disorder, and delinquency, and an inability to provide a personalized learning environment for students (Newman, 1992). According to these critics, the modern high school was inspired by a *factory model* of education, in which hierarchical management structures, a burdensome and inchoate bureaucratic division of labor, and a control system governed by bells and arcane rules and procedures, prevented the typical high school from serving as the enlightened centers of learning that were needed (Wasley et al., 2000).

In the last few years, the problems facing high schools have gradually risen to the top of the education policy agenda. Driven by policy reports from the U.S. Department of Education (Lugg, 2005) and critiques issued by various private foundations and think tanks, a new willingness to address the problems confronting high schools has emerged. With this newly found sense of urgency has come a wave of reform with a focus on the organization, size, and structure of schools. With substantial commitments to this effort already, the drive to create smaller high schools is now sweeping the country.

There is some research to justify the push to create smaller schools and learning communities (Cotton, 1996; Page, 2002), yet there is also good reason to be skeptical about the recent rush to embrace this reform. Smaller schools have been found to offer greater safety, a stronger sense of community, and improved relationships between adults and students (Clinchy, 2000). Yet, the clearest evidence that making schools smaller may not be enough to make them better can be seen from the fact that there are already many small schools in existence, and not all of these are examples of academic excellence (Stiefel, Berne, Iatarola, & Fruchter, 2000). Moreover, the much maligned large, comprehensive high school has advantages that most smaller schools will never be able to replicate, such as an ability to offer more elective courses, particularly in foreign language and advanced placement; greater resources to serve the needs of populations with special needs (e.g., Special Education and English as a Second Language students); and a wider offering of extracurricular activities including sports, music, and theater.

To the advocates of small schools, arguments such as these are easily ignored. Proponents of small schools assert that gains in safety and student learning will more than compensate for any losses that might occur as a result of this change. Despite the fact that the theory of change guiding this reform is highly suspect (i.e., small schools + better student/teacher relations = higher student achievement), the effort to make high schools smaller has taken off and is leading to substantial changes in the American high school throughout the United States.

In an effort to contribute to the ongoing discourse over what should be done to improve the nation's high schools, this article examines how schools are confronting the challenges that beset them *not* by seeking answers from a well-regarded think tank or policy center but from students themselves. Drawing on research carried out at 10 high schools (both small and large) in Boston through a project known as Pathways to Student Success, the ideas and suggestions students have for how schools can be improved are presented and analyzed. Although no groundbreaking or previously unheard solutions are offered, the reader may be surprised to learn that students do put forward practical, common sense insights into why certain practices are ineffective, and why others should be considered. The goal of presenting these ideas here is to show that solutions to some of the problems confronting our nation's high schools may not be as out of reach as they have seemed, particularly if we have the wisdom and courage to listen to those who bear the brunt of our schools' failures.

Findings: Learning From Student Experiences

The major themes that emerged from the 132 students across 10 high schools are presented here briefly as a basis for the suggestions on how listening to students can be incorporated into school decision making that concludes this article. The themes that emerged from the students that have implications for improving high schools are: (a) relationships between students and teachers/adults, (b) the impact of high stakes testing, (c) discipline and order, and (d) student motivation and goals for the future. In the following sections, I analyze these themes and the lessons they provide to school reformers and practitioners.

Relationships Between Students and Teachers/Adults

Perhaps the most significant, yet hardly surprising difference, that emerged between students attending small and large schools pertained to the issue of anonymity. Whereas only 26% of the students at the large schools stated that their teachers knew them well and another 34% stated that there was an adult at school they could turn to if they needed assistance with a personal problem, at the small schools the percentages were 92% and 84% respectively. Opportunity for greater personalization in the learning experience of students has long been seen as one of the primary advantages of small schools (Wasley et al., 2000). Consistently, students cited personalization as one of the major advantages of small schools.

Although personalization is a key factor, relatively few students had ideas for how relations between students and teachers could be improved, though several did suggest that if their teachers got to know them better, it might help. However, at all of the schools in the study, students had a clear sense of how teaching could be improved. When asked to describe the characteristics of a school where they would be excited to learn, some of the following suggestions were offered:

- Teachers should be organized and well prepared for the classes they teach.
- Teachers should be patient and ask students if they understand the material. If they don't get the material being taught, the teacher should explain the material in a different way.
- Teachers should have a strong command of the material and a passion for the subjects they teach so that they can get students to be excited about learning it.
- Teachers should show respect to students in the same way that they expect to receive respect.
- Teachers should be firm and not allow students to get away with preventing other students from learning.

These examples of student voice speak volumes to school reformers and practitioners in clear, seemingly simple ways. But they provide evidence of the work to be done to help improve schools and the crucial role of students in creating an environment to foster sound relationships as a basis for their achievement.

High Stakes Testing

At the time of our study, the 10th graders were preparing for the state examination (Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessments of Skills, MCAS). This was the first time that the exam would be used to determine which students would graduate, and all of the schools in the study were under considerable pressure to prepare their students. Among teachers and administrators, some regarded the state examination as a fair benchmark of student learning; others were adamantly opposed to the idea of using a single test to determine whether or not a student should be allowed to graduate. Interestingly, the attitudes of educators toward the test did not correspond in predictable ways to student performance on the test.

Such sentiments about the MCAS were common among the students. Students in all of the schools overwhelmingly stated that they want their schools to prepare them to be successful in life, not merely to pass a test. They objected to the notion that a single test should be used to determine if they could graduate, and several argued that not enough had been done throughout their years in school to insure that they could pass the exam. When asked to describe one aspect of their school that they did not like, 36% of the students cited the emphasis on test preparation, even though the question made no reference to the test. Yet, many students acknowledged that certain aspects of the test were beneficial. For example, several students expressed the view that the state examination makes schools more accountable, because it forced them to make sure that their students were learning.

Discipline and Safety

Concerns related to discipline, safety, and order are increasingly common in public schools (Newman et al., 2004). This was also the case for many of the students in our study, but we found noticeable differences in the perceptions of students at small versus large schools. Students in the small schools were far more likely to report that they felt safe (94%), as compared to students at the large schools (46%). They were also more likely to respond affirmatively to the question "If I feel threatened by someone at school there is an adult I can turn to for support" (92%, compared to 38%).

Advocates of small schools are likely to seize upon these findings to support their claim that small schools are safer and offer a better educational experience to students. Safety and order are essential conditions in any learning environment, and it appears that the small schools in the Pathways study succeeded in creating a more personalized environment that contributed to students' perceptions that their schools were safe. Yet, although the small schools in the study were generally perceived as safe, students at some of the schools did experience discipline problems in the classroom that were not unlike those encountered in the large schools.

One of the questions students were asked to address is what they thought it would take to make schools safe and orderly. The following is a list of some of their recommendations:

- Make students who cut class attend Saturday school.
- Require students who disrupt a class to do extra academic work.
- Have administrators observe teachers in classes with frequent disruptions so that they can help them to become better at managing students.
- For kids who fight, find out why they fought before they are punished. If suspension is not necessary, make the students who fought work together to do something to improve the school.
- Ask parents and adults from the community to volunteer to serve as hall monitors.
- Require students who are rude and disrespectful toward teachers to write apologies and to do community service, including helping to clean the school.
- Create a panel of students to serve as a jury for students who break school rules. Provide them with training on how to hear discipline cases and advise them on the kinds of punishments that can be assigned.

These ideas might not seem particularly innovative or out of the ordinary, but the fact that they come from students themselves is important. Students recognize the need for safety and order in school, and many of the students interviewed wanted to see disruptive students dealt with in a firm manner. However, it is rare for a school to seek student input on matters related to discipline even though their buy-in is essential if schools are to succeed in creating an environment that is conducive to learning.

Student Goals and Motivation

Research on student motivation has shown that students who possess clear goals about the future and concrete plans for how they will achieve those goals are more likely to be successful in school (Mickelson, 1990). Students who understand that the hard work they engage in while in school will lead to greater opportunities after graduation are more likely to complete their assignments, even if they regard them as little more than busy work, and more likely to tolerate teachers even if they view them as boring. Students in the Pathways study who had clear plans about the future were also more likely to attend school regularly, more likely to become involved in extracurricular activities, and were less likely to get into trouble at school. Unlike their peers whose ideas about the future were ambiguous, the students with clear goals understood that good grades were important and they were more likely to work hard to attain them.

Yet, clarity about future goals and the motivation to attain them rarely comes from a student by himself or herself, particularly when that student comes from a family where there is no history of attending college (Steinberg, 1996). We found that the students who had the clearest goals were most likely to cite an adult—a teacher, a counselor, a parent, or a relative—as the source of guidance related to future aspirations. Once again, the students attending the smaller schools in the study, which typically provided more counseling and advising for students, had a clear advantage over the students in the large schools. Although high achievers at all 10 schools were generally more likely to articulate clear plans after graduation, even middle and low achievers attending the small schools were likely to have developed a goal that they intended to pursue after graduation.

How Listening to Students Can Be Incorporated Into School Decision-Making

Students may not have all the answers to the problems plaguing urban high schools. This does not mean that they may not have ideas on improving schools on a wide variety of issues, including school safety and student achievement. Students may very well have ideas and insights that adults are not privy to, and that could prove to be very helpful to improving schools if adults were willing to listen.

I saw this personally while carrying out research in five high schools in the Bay Area of northern California. I was trying to understand the causes of racial violence within schools that had been plagued by racial conflict, some of which posed a serious threat to the safety of adults and students. Prior to my involvement, all five schools responded to the problem in the same way—calling police after a violent incident. Despite the severity of the problem—several students had been seriously injured at two of the schools—the police publicly stated that they could not solve the problem because it was an issue that extended well beyond law enforcement, and they pointed out that it was neither cost effective or plausible to deploy dozens of officers to the campuses. Unlike the police, school administrators could not dodge their responsibility to address the problem. At a loss for how to proceed, the schools turned to me for assistance in figuring out what could be done. I suggested that we start by convening small groups of students from the conflicting ethnic groups to get their sense of what was causing the violence and to solicit their ideas for how to respond to the problem. These meetings turned out to be extraordinarily effective. Not only did the students have insights into what was causing the conflicts (most incidents started outside of school) that the adults were oblivious to, but they also had practical ideas for addressing the problem that included involving students in the implementation of solutions (Noguera & Bliss, 2001).

Given how poorly so many past reforms in our nation's high schools have fared with respect to delivering lasting improvements in student achievement and overall quality, it certainly could not hurt to solicit student perspectives on what they believe might be done to make their schools better from a variety of perspectives. Of course, a willingness to listen to students implies that adults actually want to hear what students think, that they respect them enough to listen and learn, and that they will be open to suggestions they might make. In schools where decisions about reform are made in a top-down manner by administrators with little, if any, input from teachers, it is highly unlikely that such an approach to listening to students would ever be embraced. Insecure leaders are likely to regard soliciting student opinions as an admission that they do not know what they are doing, and being exposed in that way would undoubtedly be more than they could bear.

Others who are more courageous and secure in their positions might recognize that one of the benefits of engaging students in discussions about the state of their school is to get them to take their own education more seriously. Too many schools operate under the false assumption that the quality and character of schools can be shaped by adults alone. In so doing, they assume that the actions and behavior of students are less important than those of adults, even though the decisions and choices students make about how hard to study, or whether or not to take their education seriously, have considerable bearing upon the quality of their educational experiences. A substantial body of research has shown that student norms and attitudes have influence upon the quality and character of schools (Steinberg, 1996; Valenzuela, 1999). The question is how can schools influence student attitudes and behavior so that they reinforce the importance of learning and positive social development rather than undermining it?

One part of the answer to this question is finding ways to include students, on a regular basis, in discussions about their school experiences. Such discussions can occur in formal settings, such as on established committees or decision-making bodies, and they can occur informally at the classroom level. The main thing is that they occur regularly and that adults respond respectfully to what they hear. Students can tell if adults are genuinely interested in their opinions, and if they discern that no one is listening when they share their perspectives they will quickly lose interest in a meaningless exercise. To be effective, it is also important that these conversations not be limited to students who have been hand-picked by adults because they occupy a leadership role within the school. It is important not to omit those who might know more because they are better connected to their peers, even if it means including students who are not models of ideal student conduct.

This project illustrates that students may sometimes have criticisms of the way things are done at their schools, and when invited to share their thoughts they may also say things that may offend some adults. This should not deter educators from listening to what students have to say. The best schools in this project utilized the input they received through the research to find ways to make their schools better. These schools show us that success is achieved not by their ability to implement a particular reform, but rather to the quality control they exercised in implementing the reform. Soliciting and responding to the perspectives of students can serve as another means of insuring quality control, and unlike so many other reform strategies-this one cost nothing. Given the importance of what is at stake in our efforts to reform the nation's high schools, it may be time to try an approach that allows us to learn about how to improve schools without expending additional resources, yet engaging those with so much at stake—students.

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