Youth Engagement, High School Reform, and Improved Learning Outcomes: Building Systemic Approaches for Youth Engagement

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This article explores what it takes to develop systemic strategies and structures that engage youth as coconstructors of their learning environment and experience. It looks at efforts nationwide to engage young people in educational change endeavors, draws on lessons learned from a national high school reform initiative, and addresses some challenges faced by educators and students attempting this work. Finally, it examines groundbreaking youth-engagement work in New York that has successfully motivated students to increase academic achievement and graduation, college-going, and retention rates.

Keywords: *youth; engagement; learning; systemic*

What makes a good school? Ask a policy maker, district administrator, principal, teacher, and student and you are likely to get five very different answers. But ask a student what makes him or her want to go to school and learn, then share that answer with a policy maker, district administrator, principal, or teacher, and you shift the focus of the conversation to concentrate on student motivation, needs, and interests rather than on policies, test scores, accountability measures, attendance, or behavior. This might very well be one of the major challenges in the next decade of education improvement: creating and implementing a vision of education reform that embraces both the call for high standards and accountability and a vision of nurturing and supportive schools that engage students and enable them to thrive cognitively, socially, emotionally, and civically.

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It is increasingly clear that learning to high standards cannot take place if students are in schools where they are anonymous, where they feel no stake in the life of the school and classroom, and where there are no shared expectations for responsible conduct by students and adults. It is also increasingly clear that learning to high standards cannot take place where students are bored, have no opportunities for experiential learning and civic action (be it civic education or service learning), or have limited opportunities for group and extracurricular activities. The challenge then is to create a vision of schools—middle and high schools in particular—where students' learning and growth are supported across all these domains.

A Broad Perspective: How Young People Are Increasingly Being Seen as Important Resources for Improving Learning in High Schools Across the Country

In this article, I provide a broad look at the scope and scale of efforts across the country to engage young people in educational change and reform endeavors. My work for the past 4 years as a technical assistance provider on national high school reform initiatives has afforded me the opportunity to spend time with educators, youth, policy makers, external community agents, and foundation executives, all of whom have been actively working to encourage and sustain various forms of youth-engagement activities. At the same time, I have witnessed the struggles inherent in this type of work. This article both highlights some of the work across the country as well as addresses some of the challenges faced by educators and students attempting this work.

The Disengagement of Youth in Schools and Society

Both within and outside the high school reform movement there has been increasing recognition that improving learning in high schools requires youth engagement—both in the process of learning and in the process of school reform (Forum for Youth Investment, 2005; Framework for Success for All Students, 2006; Pittman, Irby, Tolman, Yohalem, & Ferber, 2003). This recognition of young people as important resources for systemic improvement coincides with a parallel concern about the widespread disengagement of young people from the political process and of the need to reclaim them as active contributors to their communities (Burgess, 2002; Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Finn & Checkoway, 1998; Pittman et al., 2003).

Unfortunately, need recognition has often resulted in sporadic forays into youth engagement in education reform—often through programs targeting small groups of students or projects led by external organizations. This has left significant gaps in practical implementation knowledge at the school and district levels, the result of which is a lack of investment to build and sustain structures and practices to institutionalize youth engagement.

During the past few decades, efforts to improve schools have taken center stage across the nation, but youth rarely become involved in school reform in the United States, despite the fact that many reforms are intended to create more equitable and engaging educational programs for students (Olsen, Jaramillo, McCall-Perez, & White, 1999). But the evidence is clear. School districts alone cannot maintain the momentum and resources needed for systemic change. Some type of broader school–community alliance is needed. According to Hill et al. (2004) in *It Takes a City*, "the traditional boundaries between the public school system's responsibilities and those of other community agencies are themselves a part of the educational problem" (p. 77). And, as they suggest, if true educational transformation is to take place, we have to ask how can this community use all its assets to provide the best education for all our children?

Young people themselves are crucial assets in this equation. Therefore, engaging them in both improving educational environments and taking responsibility for their learning is an essential foundation for the success of education reform efforts.

Youth Engagement and Action Moving From Margin to Center

As young people around the country speak out, take action, demand accountability, and accept responsibility for their education and their schools, they challenge both traditional assumptions about the role of students in education reform and the role of adult-led reform efforts. Utilizing a range of insider and outsider strategies, meaningful youth engagement and action in educational change is beginning to push its way from the margins of school reform to the mainstream, effectively netting significant gains in the past several years (Fielding, 2001; Mitra, 2004; Rubin & Silva, 2003; Weiss, 2003).

Youth Rising, a 2003 in-depth study by Weiss (2003) of the Applied Research Center on the motivation, strategies, success, and challenges of an emerging youth organizing movement, found that educational justice was the issue most frequently addressed by the 49 youth organizing groups surveyed. Weiss indicated that the work of these groups and others like them have resulted in a "youth movement":

> In the last decade, young people have increasingly been mobilizing around their identity as "youth," crossing traditional race lines and issue boundaries in the process. Buoyed by a new crop of intermediaries and a handful of progressive foundations, the recent proliferation of youth-led and youth-focused organizations has even led to talk in organizing circles of a bona fide "youth movement." (Weiss, 2003, p. 6)

Nowhere is this youth movement more evident than in the strategy of youth action for educational change, as evidenced by the list of policy "wins" detailed in the *Youth Rising* study.

- In Chicago, African American youth actively support the rights of undocumented students, whereas Latino students join Black youth in their fight against racial profiling.
- In Los Angeles, students lead a campaign to redirect US$1 53 million away from paying for swimming pool filters at wealthy schools toward improving school facilities in South Central LA.
- The Boston Youth Organizing Project won US$1million for new textbooks for the city's public schools.

Youth Engagement: What Is It? What Does It Look Like?

What is youth engagement? There are many definitions and terms related to youth engagement that are used interchangeably: youth voice (Fletcher, 2005; Mitra, 2004; Rubin & Silva, 2003), youth development (Eccles & Barber, 1999; Pittman et al., 2003), meaningful youth involvement and youth participation (Fletcher, 2005; Hart, 1992); youth–student engagement (Forum for Youth Investment, 2005; Framework for Success for All Students, 2006; Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Klem & Connell, 2004); academic youth development; youth organizing (Weiss, 2003); personalization (Steinberg & Allen, 2002); and school connectedness (Blum & Libbey, 2004). Though each has their specific definition, at the intersection of them all is a sense of agency and empowerment for students.

The Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University (2000) offers up one definition of student agency:

> The power to understand, act on, and effect positive change in one's personal and social contexts; embodying the sense of hope and possibility (grounded in an understanding of social reality) that one can make a difference in one's own life, family, school, and local community and in the broader national and global community. (p. 2)

For the institute, the core of student agency is the development of a positive cultural and social identity and an understanding of one's history and relationship to the broader society.

Taking into account the development of student agency, several definitions of student engagement have been developed by practitioners to help frame their work and place it in the context of a learning environment. The Youth Development Institute (in press) at the Fund for the City of New York uses the following definition of engagement to frame its work in New York City with overage and undercredited youth:

> Engagement means "active involvement, commitment, and concentrated attention, in contrast to superficial participation, apathy or lack of interest" (Newman, 1992). Effective programs engage young people in a variety of ways, so that they are not just physically present, but intellectually immersed, socially connected, and emotionally centered. Above all, they help them gain a sense of control over

> their own lives and take an active role in shaping the programs and activities around them through their words and actions. (p. 1)

The Boston Student Advisory Council (2006; a district-wide student government body) together with their adult allies from the district and community developed the following definition:

> Student engagement is when young people are taken seriously as active participants and valued partners with adults in both their own education and decisions that affect the academic and social climate and culture of their learning environment.

If the goal of engaging young people is to empower them so they have more confidence and control over their lives in order for them to take responsibility for their learning, engagement cannot be a set of disconnected activities for small groups of students. Instead, engagement should be a well-thought-out set of strategies institutionalized at the classroom, school, and district levels and accessible to all students regardless of educational history and learning ability (Forum for Youth Investment, 2005; Framework for Success for All Students, 2006).

What does an engaged student look like? Traditionally, engaged students were defined as students who were in leadership positions in school government, involved in school clubs, or participating in other school activities. However, these tend to be only a handful of students (very often the same students), who generally have good grades, regular attendance, and few discipline problems. With this narrow definition, opportunities for engagement are limited and often inaccessible to most of the student population. Moreover, some forms of engagement do not lead to substantive change either on an individual or systems level (Eccles & Barber, 1999; Joselowsky, 2005).

Yet, there is no one way to engage young people in the learning environment and educational reform process, and, today, engagement strategies vary across schools and districts. In some contexts, youth-engagement strategies may be strong enough to stand alone as interventions, either in general, in particular locations, or in reaching particular ends. Whereas some strategies have netted substantive changes in education and the learning lives of students, others have ended up as stand-alone strategies with little or no impact on the overall learning experience (Joselowsky, 2005).

Rubin and Silva (2003) make a similar point in the introduction to *Critical Voices in School Reform: Students Living Through Change*, a collection of research articles that examines the link between schools' efforts to achieve equity among students and students' efforts to find purpose, meaning, and knowledge within schools:

> Despite a small body of research emerging on the significance of "student voice" in school practices and processes . . . embracing or empowering the voices of students is not a well-practiced approach to understanding or implementing school

> reforms. Within a growing wave of reform in public schools, calls for and claims of "student-centered" goals and "student voice" initiatives pervade the process and practice of school reform efforts. . . . Yet, more often than not, the student perspective is often represented in fixed and uncomplicated terms that undermine the true agency and diversity of students and student experiences. Consequently, students are treated as recipients of the educational product rather than partners in the educational process and reforms come and go without attention to the pressures, concerns and conflicts that characterize student experience. (p. 1)

Despite the best intentions and most well-thought-out strategies, individual strategies alone have not yielded substantive results. To be fully understood and realized, youth-engagement strategies must be seen in the context of reform and accepted as an integral piece of the reform and continuous improvement agenda. To be most effective when supporting young people's development and creating systemic growth and change, efforts to engage young people authentically in educational change and in their learning must take place at multiple levels and across multiple strategies, connecting the work young people are doing with larger systemic issues operating at the school, district, or community levels (Forum for Youth Investment, 2005; Framework for Success for All Students, 2006).

What Does It Take? Building a School System to Support Youth Engagement

This is not a small task. Around the country schools and districts have grappled with engaging students in meaningful ways through student focus groups, student-led research, district-wide student government, and student representation on school boards. More often than not, however, these strategies have remained disconnected activities for small groups of students who are not integrated into the overall reform agenda. This often results in situations where students' input is solicited but not acted on, which can further marginalize youth.

Although there are many districts and schools around the country that have made some commitment to young people as stakeholders in school-reform processes, just as many express challenges and resistance as they think about youth engagement as an institutionalized element of districts' ongoing work. Still, there are numerous reasons to believe that engaging students is a critical step in improving schools. Foremost, engagement will almost certainly improve the learning outcomes for those youth involved. More pragmatically, youth have it in their power to stymie school-reform efforts when they feel they have had no voice in the process. More positively, youth have also proven their ability to bring about educational change, which efforts around the country clearly demonstrate (Fine, Roberts, Torre, & Bloom, 2004; Joselowsky, 2005; Klem & Connell, 2004).

Until recently, in many schools and districts around the country, students have been viewed as recipients of education or "learning," consequently marginalizing them in the education-reform process. That perception began to change, however, through substantial efforts of powerful groups, including the Carnegie Corporation of New York's "Schools for a New Society" urban high school reform initiative.

Schools for a New Society: The Carnegie Corporation's Investment in High School Reform and Youth Engagement

In 2001, the Carnegie Corporation of New York launched an impressive US$60 million, 5-year initiative called "Schools for a New Society" (SNS) that, from 2001 to 2006, sought to reinvent urban high school education by building partnerships between school districts and their communities to create excellent opportunities for teaching and learning for all students. The seven SNS sites were Boston, MA; Hamilton County/Chattanooga, TN; Houston, TX; Providence, RI; Sacramento, CA; San Diego, CA; and Worcester, MA. Core partners were Houston A+ Challenge; Public Education Foundation of Hamilton County (Chattanooga); Boston Plan for Excellence in Public Schools and, also in Boston, Jobs for the Future, Boston Private Industry Council, and the Center for Collaborative Education; Hiatt Center for Urban Education, Clark University (Worcester); American Institute for Research (formerly New American Schools, San Diego); LEED Sacramento (Linking Education and Economic Development); and Rhode Island Children's Crusade (Providence). SNS challenged communities to reinvent all of their high schools and to redesign central offices to support them. High schools were thus both a target of change and a lever to change the operation of both the central office and the larger district (Framework for Success for All Students, 2006). As part of the grant's fiscal structure, Carnegie required districts to maintain core community partners that had worked with the school districts in the past.

Importantly, Carnegie's SNS made youth engagement an explicit goal of the change framework. Because of this focus, several of the SNS sites made significant progress in and commitment to young people as stakeholders in the school-reform process. Rather than relying on the traditionally isolated, compartmentalized approaches usually reserved for student involvement, several SNS sites sought to build systemic, inclusive structures that connected youth engagement to districts' overall reform agendas.

Despite the fact that youth engagement was seen as an important SNS element, developing successful and sustainable youth-engagement initiatives was one of the most difficult pieces of the work to operationalize in the seven sites (Framework for Success for All Students, 2006). Before discussing the challenges of the SNS sites in constituting their youth-engagement efforts, I will briefly describe some examples from the seven districts. It should be noted that each of the strategies below took place in a system where parallel district- and community-level strategies could be found as well.

- *Students and schools conducted surveys and research to gauge youth concerns and used the data to influence school policy*. In Boston, in 2004-05, the Boston Plan for Excellence collaborated with teachers and students of Brighton High School, university professors, and community leaders to develop "Research & Activism for Change"—2-year social studies elective that integrated participatory action research and concepts of critical theory and social justice. The goal was to engage students in addressing the problems in schools and in their communities that shaped their lives by building on their knowledge and experience and helping them develop literacy and research skills. In San Diego, all students at the comprehensive high schools were surveyed about the types of small learning communities in which they were interested. These surveys were used to determine the theme-based "small schools" into which these schools were later divided.
- *Open communication between students and educators was formalized either through meetings or an advisory model that personalized the learning environment and connected students to adults in the building*. All schools in Boston were required to develop school-based advisory systems. In Sacramento, students from Luther Burbank High School organized and facilitated their first Teacher Rally—a faculty meeting, student style. The purpose of the Teacher Rally was to promote the importance of teacher–student relationships on campus. Youth-led research had found that students at Burbank High School felt that the relationships between teachers and students needed improvement. During the rally, students discussed their work with youth-led action research, expressed the importance of teacher engagement in student activities, and spoke of the need at Burbank to build relationships between teachers and students.
- *Multiple school-based student-leadership structures were developed to reflect the diversity of the student body (academically, ethnically, and linguistically).* At Monument High School in Boston, with the support of external facilitators, the Student Council moved from an event-planning group to a policy-making group and has worked with the administration on such issues as tardiness and discipline policies.
- *All students had the opportunity to decide on what school-wide issues student leadership should address*. At the Boston Day and Evening Academy, students were elected by their advisory and served on a school-wide student congress. Before students voted on school-wide issues they consulted their peers by discussing issues in advisory.
- *Students and adults worked together to develop alternative, youth-centered disciplinary programs*. Students at McClatchy High School in Sacramento implemented a Peer Court program to include student voice in the school's discipline decisions.
- *Students were engaged in designing and implementing small schools or small learning communities*. At Boston's West Roxbury and Hyde Park High Schools, young people were involved in the review teams for choosing the designs for the new small schools for their respective schools and in the hiring of the headmasters.

At the Engineering School, one of the four new schools at the Hyde Park Educational Complex in Boston, students were engaged from the beginning in the conception and planning of the school. As members of the design team, they engaged in the proposal design and the hiring of administrators. In fact, it was a student idea that brought the school to fruition.

- *All students (with the support and guidance of adults) helped develop, manage, and assess their learning progress and learning goals.* Boston Day and Evening Academy coaches (teachers) helped students map out an Independent Learning Plan (ILP) to improve and develop core academic skills. Students were then regularly required to assess their progress and refine their ILPs accordingly. Several high schools in Boston, Sacramento, and Providence used end-of-the-year portfolios as a way to assess progress.

Though each of the strategies alone represents a starting point for youth engagement, to truly become embedded in the culture and practice of the schools, the SNS sites discovered that these strategies must be intentionally connected to and supported by broader systemic goals at the district and community level aimed at improving academic achievement, climate, culture, and personalization of the learning environment. In addition, the practices must be embedded in classroom practice and supported by community strategies to connect youth and families to schools and other learning opportunities.

For all of the above-mentioned efforts, individual school strategies—and the support of the high school principals—were essential in impacting the learning lives of students. But securing district support for youth engagement was also necessary to sustain and deepen the work and to access the necessary resources, human and fiscal. Examples of how districts supported schools to institutionalize youth-engagement practices included developing policies that supported student engagement such as subscribing to a broad definition of student success that included a range of academic and nonacademic indicators; creating positions dedicated to youth development and student engagement that aligned and connected youth-engagement work and structures across a district's high schools; developing policies that required students to assist in the development of new schools; supporting a district-wide student government, or some other representative student body, that meets regularly with the superintendent to share student concerns and ideas; allowing students to be members of the school board; and, embedding youth development and youth-centered approaches to teaching and learning in teacher and administrator professional development (Feist, Joselowsky, Raynor, & Nichols-Solomon, 2007).

Challenges

What does it take to authentically engage young people as coconstructors of both their learning environment and learning experience? How is this work connected to the overall reform agenda at the classroom, school, and district levels?

These are the questions that the SNS sites grappled with for the 5 years of the initiative as they tested a variety of strategies and methodologies that sought to authentically engage young people. At an intuitive level, adults knew that engaging students was a key factor to both individual and overall school success; yet, many struggled to engage students in meaningful roles or to find ways to connect student-engagement efforts to the larger reform agenda. Creating integrated strategies for increasing opportunities for youth learning and engagement in school and out proved to be (at times) an enormous task. Fundamental conceptual challenges were inherent in taking on a task of this scope.

In interviews with the seven SNS sites regarding their youth-engagement efforts, three overarching challenges emerged. First, though most sites made some commitment to young people as stakeholders in the reform processes—through focus groups, student-led research, district-wide student government, or student representation on the school board—these strategies often resulted in situations where students' input was solicited but not acted on, highlighting the tensions that arise when students move from passive participants (naming the problems) to active participants (wanting a role in solving the problems). (Framework for Success for All Students, 2006).

Second, the lack of an infrastructure to institutionalize youth engagement and the role of students as stakeholders in reform sometimes resulted from resistance from principals and teachers who did not know how to engage students on such an authentic level, and who often did not receive any training to learn how to do so. Add to this the lack of understanding of (and research on) the connection between student engagement and academic improvement, and youth engagement was sometimes pushed aside and treated as an add-on (Framework for Success for All Students, 2006).

Third, although at many sites leaders came to agree that the idea of youth engagement was an important component of the reform work, it did not have an "urgency" stamp or a clear link to the district-level work. In many sites, the work students did and the work that was happening at the school or district level were parallel processes, and it was a struggle to find a pathway to connect the two (Framework for Success for All Students, 2006).

Why These Challenges? Contextual and Policy Constraints on Youth-Engagement Movements

In the 500 pages of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation, the notion that students can help improve their schools does not appear once. Therefore, it is no wonder that in many schools students' levels of disenfranchisement and disengagement are tremendously high (Achieve, 2004; Blum & Libbey, 2004). In the current era of accountability, various studies have found that high schools struggle to engage students. Students often are left feeling that their schools' social environments foster neither healthy psychosocial development (McNeal, 1995; National Research

Council and the Institute of Medicine, 2004) nor academic development (Finn & Rock, 1997; National Research Council and the Institute of Medicine, 2004). These external pressures on schools appear to have created, albeit it unintentionally perhaps, a no-time-to-engage situation as administrators juggle an increasingly complex— and high-stakes—set of requirements and standards.

Yet, the accountability contexts in which schools now operate have also spurred a flurry of new reforms that can incorporate youth engagement as part of their work. The movements of parental choice, small schools, competency-based standards, and shifts away from counting "seat time" toward the need to demonstrate that all students are getting what they need to learn provide openings for a deeper understanding and enactment of youth engagement. They compel schools to recognize that students may be a central part of the overall success, or failure, of a range of initiatives being attempted across the country.

Part of the reason that these reforms are paying increasing attention to youth engagement is that research is revealing that, for students, context matters. The *learning environment*, broadly defined, is a critical factor in both motivating them and meeting their academic goals (Steinberg & Allen, 2002). The learning environment defined by students includes more than just classroom instruction—it includes relationships, relevance, connectedness, interest, challenge, and interconnection (Klem & Connell, 2004; Steinberg & Allen, 2002). Researchers and educators refer to these components of engagement broadly as "personalization." Young people who are engaged emotionally, cognitively, and behaviorally in their education are less likely to show signs of alienation, and engagement increases their connectedness to school (Fredricks et al., 2004). Increased school connectedness is related to educational motivation, classroom engagement, and better attendance, which are all linked to higher academic achievement (Blum & Libbey, 2004). These findings are encouraging more and more educators to have a renewed focus on the contribution of young people as viable partners in developing innovative solutions to improving the educational context.

Conditions for Success

So what does authentic youth engagement look like, and what would it take to institutionalize the role of young people as a critical feature of the reform agenda? To be effective (i.e., to engender action and impact student learning), youth engagement requires a combination of district, school, and community drivers. Crucial to the success of any youth-engagement strategy is the capacity for implementation. This begins with leadership buy-in and commitment, ideally at the school and district levels, with support and pressure from community partners. Without this level of buy-in, the ability for youth to access time and resources and effect substantive change is greatly diminished (Framework for Success for All Students, 2006).

In many SNS sites, leadership at multiple levels was key to ensuring that all student-engagement efforts were tied to action (Adelman, 2006). This meant superintendents, principals, teachers, and community members had to be committed to putting the needs of young people at the center of the reform and to creating multiple pathways for youth engagement, input, and decision making. Ensuring this level of commitment was helped when some part of the youth-engagement effort was housed within a school or district, but the school or district also had to support it (in dollars and in staff time) and ensure that structural reforms were established to support the youth-engagement strategies adopted.

What was also clear from the work in SNS districts and schools was that it was tremendously difficult to do this work alone. A range of insider–outsider strategies were helpful both to sustain and to deepen the work (Adelman, 2006; Framework for Success for All Students, 2006; Hill et al., 2000). External partners helped ensure depth, spread, and ownership. They could also push in places where insiders traditionally could not, often bringing an equity and access lens to the conversation that school or district employees were unable to use.

Without formal structures and sometimes external partners to align and help coordinate the work, tensions arose more often when difficult issues were raised by the youth or their adult advocates. It was therefore essential that districts and schools created structures that allowed these types of partnerships to develop, unencumbered by the typical bureaucratic constraints that often minimize the impact and role of external partners. This sometimes meant signing formal contracts or developing memoranda of understanding that gave external partners explicit roles in designing, managing, and implementing the work, and clarifying the roles and responsibilities of each organization and staff.

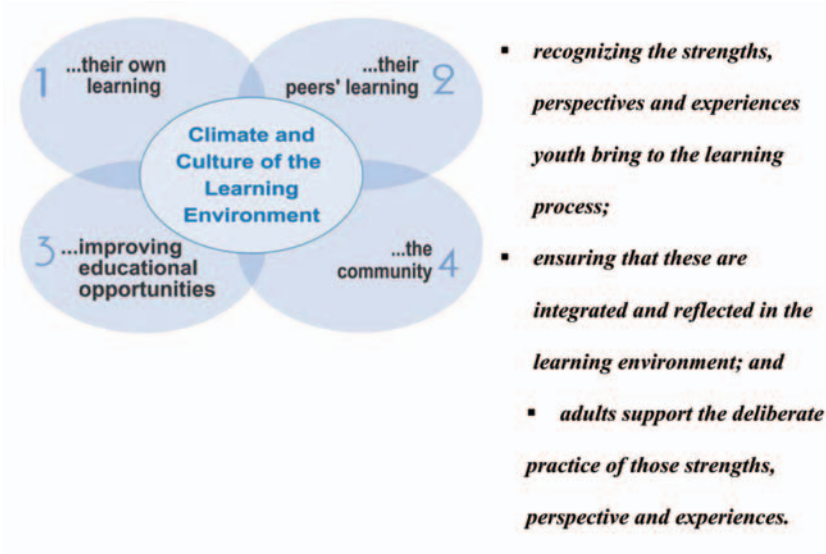
Youth engagement could begin at a variety of starting points (the individual, classroom, school, and district or community level) and could take on a variety of trajectories to embed and to institutionalize the role of young people. But making it a core value of the learning environment required that a key goal remain infusing youth-engagement strategies on all levels and aligning the work of external partners with that of the schools and districts (Forum for Youth Investment, 2005; Framework for Success for All Students, 2006; Joselowsky, 2005).

A Framework for Youth Engagement

The Forum for Youth Investment (2005), in their work with the Carnegie Schools for a New Society initiative, developed a four-part framework to represent the range of strategies for engaging young people in the educational experience (see Figure 1).

1. *Engaging youth in their own learning* requires a balance of challenging, relevant learning experiences that offer multiple avenues for student choice and responsibility through cooperative, project-based, and active learning. This includes opportunities to select content, set learning goals, ask questions, reflect on their

Figure 1. Range of Strategies That Youth Engagement Can Focus on in Reform



learning, practice communication and problem-solving skills, and assume leadership roles in the classroom.

2. *Youth engagement in their peers' learning* means creating opportunities for cooperative learning between students and empowering students to serve as positive role models, mentors, coaches, and conflict mediators. Such opportunities can include students' supporting struggling peers and students' assessing one another's work and progress. Creating these opportunities requires that adults provide the support and development opportunities young people need to successfully assume these roles. This connects directly to teaching and learning and requires structuring classrooms in ways that encourage interaction among students and provide multiple learning opportunities for students with varied learning styles.
3. *Engaging youth in improving educational opportunities* means giving young people clear opportunities to share responsibility for school and community reform and improvement processes aimed at increasing achievement for all students. This requires well-thought-out strategies at the school, district, community, state, and national levels that allow youth to partner with adults as leaders in the process of change or continuous improvement in their schools. These strategies can include youth representation in adult structures or youth-led structures and processes with well-defined roles and responsibilities for youth in creating, shaping, and defining policies and practices related to their educational experiences.

4. *Engaging young people in the community and civic life* can include multiple avenues, such as service learning, internships, community action research projects, and community organizing. This strategy connects school- and community-based learning experiences, creating opportunities for students to link classroom learning to lived experiences.

At the heart of all four strategies is the learning environment and the underlying beliefs, assumptions, and expectations about young people: how they learn, what they think, what they need from schools and adults, what they believe in, and what they are capable of doing. These values set the tone for how all members of the school community interact with one another, both inside and outside the classroom (Forum for Youth Investment, 2005).

Charting the Course Forward: From Tokenism to Authenticity

Much of the current movement around accountability has pushed the voices of young people out rather than bringing them to the table. But creating integrated, authentic roles for students in the reform and improvement process is easier said than done. According to Nichols-Solomon (2005), in a speech given for the Carnegie Corporation's Schools for a New Society, "balancing the urgency with the complexity of this work is the biggest challenge." There are inherent tensions between the need to improve and reform high schools and the desire to find authentic ways to engage key stakeholders in that process. For young people, the sense of urgency is immediate: They are in schools every day, struggling to find their way in institutions that often do not recognize or meet their needs as learners and as individuals.

The challenge—aligning youth voice and youth action with larger organizational and institutional agendas and decisions—is an area of continued tension. These same tensions are found at the classroom, school, and district levels, as schools and the systems that support them are rarely set up as democratic institutions where clear pathways exist between student needs and institutional decision making. Part of the difficulty is that youth engagement, though conceptually simple, is often difficult to pull off without intentional training for adults. According to Lesko (2001), author of the *Mega-Planner Toolkit*, an intergenerational guide to youth engagement, adults need help learning how to collaborate with young people just as much as youth need help adjusting to their transformed role with adults. This requires more inclusive and equitable models of youth–adult partnerships that bridge the power gaps that typically exist in schools and give young people clear opportunities to both share responsibility for their own learning and to inform school-change processes designed to improve achievement, climate, and culture.

To truly engage, relate to, and integrate young people into an organization, youth engagement must be conceptualized as a guiding principle of organizational operations in the same way that engaging adults in the organization is a priority. This

does not mean that organizational authority protocols need to be rewritten; rather, they should be reviewed to see if there are any substantive barriers to participation by young people, or other adults, in a specific activity or decision-making process. By making the process of youth and adult engagement a conscious organizational conversation, opportunities arise for organizations to reconsider their authority and program structures to identify where "rules of engagement" have been defined by default versus by considered and deliberate thought. It also provides an opportunity for young people and adults to better understand their organizations and how they can best contribute to their organizational missions (Alderman, Balla, Blackstock, & Khanna, 2006).

For young people, the most authentic learning and engagement happens when they are treated respectfully by adults and given the appropriate mix of support and freedom to assume responsibility and make decisions. Because engagement is developmental——for both youth and adults—continuous skill development for all involved is essential in creating and sustaining effective youth–adult partnerships. According to *The Youth Development Guide: Engaging Young People in After-School Programming* (Community Network for Youth Development, 2001),

> the ability of an agency or school to engage young people in meaningful participation depends on the organization allocating time for program planning and reflection, providing training opportunities for adults, and implementing a process for authentic program assessment and evaluation. (p. 95)

Through technical assistance and a series of hands-on workshops, most SNS sites came to agree that students need meaningful roles in the reform process. However, to engage them effectively, adults have to revisit their definition of student engagement and challenge their assumptions about leadership and power.

Lessons From the Field: How Can Schools and Communities Engage and Reengage Youth?

Adapted from *Promising Practices to Encourage Student Engagement for Young Adults* (Youth Development Institute, in press), what follows are key school and program principles for engaging and reengaging youth in examining and committing to their education. Developed by the Youth Development Institute at the Fund for the City of New York, in collaboration with service providers in New York City serving youth who have dropped out or are on the margins of high school, these practices were tested and implemented in several different New York City initiatives, including: Multiple Pathways to Graduation (New York City Department of Education), New Century High Schools Initiative (New Visions for Public Schools), and the Young Adult Capacity Initiative (Youth Development Institute), as well as free-standing sites.

Develop a welcoming environment in a community of support. Effective schools and programs are intentional about their culture and social organization they create. They give careful thought to the climate, norms and values, and roles and relationships between youth and adults and between youth peer groups. These learning environments can engage (or reengage) young people by cultivating a sense of belonging to a community that has high expectations of behavior and accomplishment, and that in turn provides a high degree of connection and support. For young people this often begins with the physical space, and a setting that allows them to feel comfortable and valued makes it easier for them to focus on their own growth. This requires keeping the space clean and orderly, free of signs of neglect and disrepair, and working with youth to make it safe and welcoming. Safety for young people is paramount. To engage fully, young people must believe that they can move about freely, without the threat of physical or verbal harm. They need to be in a place where adults care and where other young people are serious and friendly.

Connect youth with caring adults and peers. Successful learning environments establish formal systems of support and foster informal connections between adults and youth. This includes linking every young person to at least one adult in a structured and personalized way to formulate goals, monitor progress, and address academic and personal issues, and allocating substantial time into the weekly schedule for these one-on-one relationships; connecting youth to peer tutors and mentors; drawing in families; and gathering and celebrating with the community.

Give youth clarity about what they need to do now and a clear path to the future. To invest time and energy in the present, young people need to believe that there is a viable future. Successful learning environments are able to demonstrate to young people that what they do now can have a direct, powerful, and positive bearing on their educational and career opportunities. This requires helping young people develop and believe in a vision for their future and making the requirements for success clear by linking their current studies to future education and jobs. This may include developing education and career plans and outlining paths to graduation as early as ninth grade; introducing young people to work possibilities for the variety of jobs that are available; and using career-development activities that move them beyond stereotypes of entertainers, athletes, and dead-end jobs. It also means providing full supports to young people who are not currently pursuing the college track and providing alternative routes to good jobs in expanding sectors such as health and information technologies.

Develop essential and meaningful content. Young people need to know that learning can be exciting and relevant to who they are and what they can become. They need to have positive experiences to counter past failures and understand, and be convinced,

that what they are learning will prepare them to continue their education and get the skills they need for a satisfying job. This means seeking youth input on the content and delivery of the educational experience and giving them as much responsibility for their academic program as they can handle. This may include helping students develop portfolios of work and sharing their accomplishments with the rest of the class on a regular basis; giving students choice in selecting lesson plans, reading materials, and subjects to study; and helping them to take the lead in planning their schedules, determining their course of study, and assessing their own progress.

Encourage youth participation and voice. Meaningful roles and the power to make a difference can help young people develop a sense of efficacy and help them realize the power of their education to help others and transform the world around them. This can be done by making sure students (as well as staff and other adults) understand how their school operates and encouraging young people to make themselves heard by providing formal venues for youth leadership and input about issues of concern to youth, the school, and the community. This includes creating advisories or other mechanisms for young people to talk, reflect, and build self-awareness.

Conclusion

Whether practicing democracy, developing their own individual learning plans, organizing for educational change, or telling the stories of other students' work to transform schools, students have an opportunity to understand and to extend the impact—academically, developmentally, socially, and emotionally—that youth engagement can have both on individual students and on overall school success. Without an intentional focus by adults and school leaders specifically to make these connections explicit, however, the voices, needs, and actions of young people will continue to get overshadowed in the current educational policy environment. The only way to ensure that does not happen is to cease treating youth engagement as an add-on to improved learning outcomes but as central to student and school success.

To truly engage young people, schools and organizations need to recognize that engagement is not just a feel-good activity designed to boost student morale but a function of creating effective high schools that challenge, connect, and prepare young people for their lives beyond the school walls. As stated by the Youth Development Institute (in press):

> In the end, the path to student engagement starts where young people are and helps them chart a course that will take them where they need to go. On the way, the more they can find and use their voices to express who they are and what they want, the greater is the likelihood that they will seek and find what they need. Engagement is a habit of mind and heart. It is what we want young people to cultivate not just to get their diplomas, but as a lifelong way of being. It is

> what we want our schools and programs to foster with every aspect of their curriculum, organization, and culture. To engage young people requires of us what we ask of them: full commitment, a belief that it is possible, and a vision of a viable and productive future. (p. 10)

To achieve this recognition, youth engagement needs to be understood in the context of teaching and learning and used as a strategy to motivate and to engage young people in their learning by creating engaging classrooms and schools with a culture and climate that makes sudents want to learn, take initiative, and seek out opportunities to learn and to lead (Framework for Success for All Students, 2006).

Creating pathways for and maintaining a focus on youth engagement in the context of the extremely complex and multifaceted process of high school transformation is a difficult charge. It requires a dual focus on developing the capacity of both youth and adults to do this work. But it is an essential component of any reform initiative, and if the voices of youth are lost in the shuffle, reform initiatives run the risk of missing key indicators of success or failure (Forum for Youth Investment, 2005).

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