Students as Co-Constructors of the Learning Environment

Building Systemic Approaches for Youth Engagement

Case Study
**Youth Engagement and
High School Reform**
Sacramento and Boston
from 2000–2008

We are excited to share with you the inspiring stories of two school districts—Boston and Sacramento—that are changing their high schools through districtwide student engagement initiatives. These stories illustrate years of hard work, dedication and partnership by many young people, advocates, advisors, teachers, principals and district personnel. Each district, in its own way, developed a strategy to authentically listen to, partner with, and engage young people in ways that have allowed them to take leadership roles in improving their schools.

Boston and Sacramento are two of many districts that have invested in working side by side with students. Though often challenging, their commitment to engaging students and creating opportunities for youth voice has made a real difference: new student-centered policies are being implemented, adult attitudes are changing, and schools are beginning to look more like the places that students envision them and need them to be.

These case studies demonstrate that this type of authentic youth engagement requires both a broad support network and more importantly a few dedicated individuals who are able to advocate fearlessly for its inclusion. In Boston and Sacramento, these advocates have been adult champions who are skilled strategists, knowledgeable educators, and effective youth workers who were able to find that delicate balance of support and empowerment.

The experiences of Boston and Sacramento also suggest that meaningful, districtwide student engagement in school policies and initiatives requires a true partnership between a diverse group of young people—some of whom may be unsure about how to find their voice in the adult-dominated world of schools—and the adults who sit on school boards and traditionally create district policies. These case studies demonstrate that, with the appropriate amount of support and training, these young people, regardless of where they begin, will be able to step up, take action, and represent their peers by voicing their opinions and advocating for change.

Districts like Boston and Sacramento are creating permanent spaces for young people to have a voice in their schools, their communities, and their own lives. Both school districts have had many accomplishments despite the challenges they have faced, and they have been able to change policies and attitudes regarding the importance of engaging students in all aspects of their education.

The following district profiles provide an overview of the different paths taken by Boston and Sacramento as they sought to include and engage their students in policy decisions at the district level. Our hope is that they will inspire and impress you, and provide a snapshot of what is possible when we invite, engage, listen to, and work as colleagues with the students our high schools serve.

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Boston

Boston is a city with a long and rich history of youth organizing and youth engagement. However, at a district level, commitment to engaging students, although well intentioned, was often not coordinated and appeared sporadic. Historically, most of the centralized student engagement work was led by external youth organizations and occurred in pockets across the district. Due to uncoordinated efforts and districtwide strategizing, as well as a reliance on external funders, early youth engagement efforts failed to make a lasting impact in Boston.

The story presented in this paper shows how in a collaborative effort, organizations such as Youth on Board which is a project of YouthBuild USA, Boston Plan for Excellence, and Teen Empowerment used their resources, influence, passion, and commitment to young people to push the school district to move from rhetoric to real commitment to student voice. This is a story of partnership and collaboration; an example of how, with perseverance, determination and resourcefulness, youth and adults together can move a youth-centered agenda to a systems level. Boston's story is viewed across the country as a success and shows how young people, together with their allies and advocates, can push an agenda forward.

Despite a change in its long-term superintendent, Boston continues to implement a strong high school reform agenda, and the district continues to work closely with a group of dedicated external agencies to realize the goal of authentic student engagement.

Sacramento

Sacramento is a city in flux. Over the last 15 years, the population has almost doubled, bringing a wave of immigrant communities to a once homogenous town. In Sacramento the entry point for its youth engagement work began at the district level as part of the initial design of the district's high school reform agenda. In this school district, where there was no history of youth engagement in school, the primary challenge was developing an authentic rather than "token" student engagement strategy.

While intentions were good, giving young people substantive roles and responsibilities often collided with district culture and protocol. This is a story of the struggle to change the culture of a school district from the top down, and the challenges of turning a mandate into an authentic opportunity to bring students to the table and have their voices heard. It illustrates the complexities of moving a district mandate to both the school board and school level, and provides an example of what is needed to build a solid foundation in support of student engagement that can be sustained through changes in leadership, funding and district priorities.

Although the people who championed the work in Sacramento are no longer there, the structures and school-board level policies they built endure and thus are able to sustain student engagement at the district and, in some cases, school level.
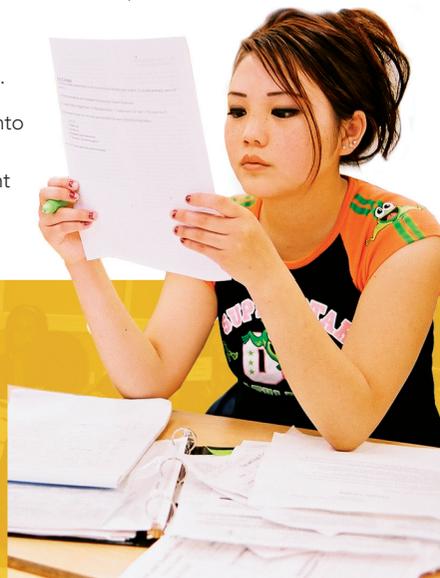
Acknowledgements

The opportunity to hear firsthand the stories of these dedicated individuals—young people champions, allies, advocates, parents, school board members, teachers, and principals has been a privilege and a true learning collaboration.

We are deeply indebted to our interviewees for their honesty and candor, and would like to thank the following people in each of the sites who contributed their wisdom and very precious time to support the development and writing of this paper.

I. Introduction

There are two ways to measure the success of high schools—in numbers and in attitudes. Either way you look at it, schools have not been successful, and young people are crying out for help. The numbers are stark: nationally, three in ten high school students drop out before graduation, and the rate in urban schools is substantially higher. Student attitudes about school are equally stark. According to the High School Survey of Student Engagement (HSSSE), completed by nearly 300,000 students across 29 states in 2006, more than half of respondents said they were bored in school every day, 75 percent said the material was not interesting to them, and over half said their school work did not make them curious to learn about other things. Only about 52 percent agreed or strongly agreed that they were challenged to do their best work at school.[1]

But none of this is new. Researchers have consistently found that high schools have failed to motivate students to develop and learn. "Unfortunately various studies have found that high schools are failing to engage their students, thereby providing them with neither the kind of social environment that fosters healthy psychosocial development (McNeely *et al.,* National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2002), nor one that is conducive to learning (Finn and Rock, 1997; Jessor et al. 1998; National Research Council, 2000)."[2]

Teachers themselves realize change is necessary. According to a national survey of K-12 public school teachers conducted by the National Center for Education Information in 2005, three out of four (76 percent) of public school teachers agreed that schools should adjust to the needs, interests and learning styles of individual students, rather than expecting students to meet the norms of the school. Nineteen percent—up from 15 percent in 1996 and 13 percent in 1990—thought students are the best judges of what they need to learn and when they are ready to learn.[3]

The reality is clear: far too many high schools are failing our students. The solutions, however, are far more complex, and require bold and innovative solutions to meet the shifting needs of a new generation of young people.

While much work has been done in the last several years to create systems of high schools that are able to help every student achieve at high levels, critical elements appear to be missing from the conversations and reform agenda—the input of students themselves. Despite a growing body of research that attests to the value of student engagement in shaping school practices (Mitra, 2004; Cook-Sather, 2007; Swaminathan, 2007; Rodriquez & Conchas, 2009), little data exists on how to go about effectively integrating young people into the education reform process.

Schools and districts have struggled to engage students in meaningful ways, trying a variety of methods, including focus groups, student-led research, districtwide student government, and student representation on the school board. However, more often than not these strategies are disconnected activities for small groups of students and are not integrated into teaching and learning strategies, district policies, or school practices. Students' input is solicited but not acted on, thereby further marginalizing young people and at times creating unnecessary tensions between youth and adults (Joselowsky, 2005; Forum for Youth Investment, 2004).

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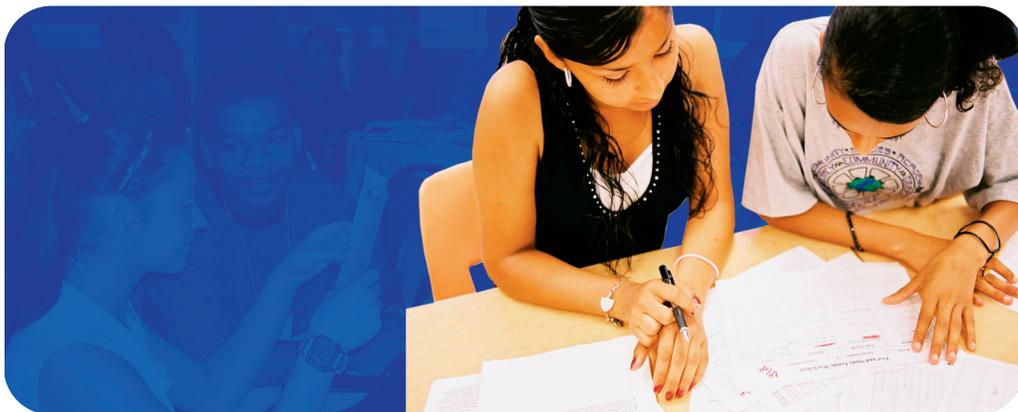
[1] Indiana University School of Education, *High School Survey of Student Engagement* http://ceep.indiana.edu/hssse/.

[2] National Research Council and the Institute of Medicine, (2004). *Engaging schools: fostering high school students' motivation to learn.* Committee on Increasing High School Student's Engagement and Motivation to Learn. Board on Children, Youth and Families, Division of Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press.

[3] The National Center for Education Information, *Profiles of teachers in the U.S. 2005,* www.ncei.com/POT05PRESSREL3.htm.

II. Student Engagement:
What is it? What does it look like? Why does it matter?

Research demonstrates that both engaging young people in improving educational environments and giving them responsibility for their learning constitute an essential foundation for the success of education reform efforts (Joselowsky, 2007). Over the last two decades, efforts to improve schools have taken center stage across the nation. However, while many reforms are intended to create more equitable and engaging educational programs for students, young people have rarely been directly involved in the decision-making processes of school reform. *(Olsen, Jaramillo, McCall-Perez & White, 1999)*. According to *Voices of Students on Engagement: A Report on the 2006 High School Survey of Student Engagement (Yazzie-Mintz, 2006)*:

> *Schools across the United States continue to spend considerable time and resources working to close gaps in achievement on standardized assessments. The data from the 2006 HSSSE indicate that there may be another type of gap that exists within high schools… the engagement gap. Further research will need to focus on the nature of the engagement gap, and its possible connection to the achievement gap. Addressing the engagement gap is an important first step toward engaging all students in a school community (p 8).*

What is student/youth engagement? There are many definitions, but at the intersection of them all is a sense of agency and empowerment for students.

The Annenberg Institute for School Reform (2002) 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.*

Under that definition, 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 (Joselowsky, 2007).

Taking into account the development of student agency, several practitioners have come up with alternate definitions to help frame their work and help place it in the context of a learning environment. It is these definitions of engagement that we use to frame this paper.

The Boston Student Advisory Council (BSAC is Boston's districtwide student government body), together with their adult allies from the district and community[4] 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.*

In Sacramento, the district used the following definition in its plan for high school redesign:

> *Youth participation in planning and decision-making at the school sites and [at the] district level.*

The Youth Development Institute (2007), formerly at the Fund for the City of New York and now at the Tides Center, uses the following definition of engagement to frame their work in New York City with overage and under-credited youth:

> *Engagement means "active involvement, commitment, and concentrated attention, in contrast to superficial participation, apathy or lack of interest" (Newman, 1992). Effective programs[5] 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.*

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[4] Adult allies included representatives from Boston Public Schools, Youth on Board, Teen Empowerment, Boston Plan for Excellence, Boston Youth Organizing Project, and Youth Build. Boston Student Advisory Council (2005). Boston Student Advisory Council: Guidelines and objectives [Brochure] Boston: Boston Public Schools.

[5] The practices described in this document have been developed in schools and in nonschool programs: thus "schools" and "programs" are used interchangeably except in instances where one or the other is more appropriate for the practice (Newman, F.M.1992. Student engagement and achievement in American secondary schools. New York: Teachers College Press.

Common to all these definitions of student engagement is the goal of engaging and empowering young people so that they have more confidence and control over their lives. In that way, young people can take responsibility for their lives and for their learning. Engagement cannot be achieved through a set of disconnected activities for small groups of students, but instead, happens through a concerted set of strategies, institutionalized at the classroom, school, and district levels, and accessible to all students, regardless of educational history and learning ability (Joselowsky, 2007; Forum for Youth Investment, 2005).

Moving from Theory to Practice

There are many school districts where there have been successes in making schools more responsive to the needs of students, as powerfully illustrated in Carnegie Corporation's *Schools for a New Society (SNS)* Urban High School Reform Initiative. SNS was a $60-million, five-year initiative, launched by Carnegie Corporation of New York in 2001to 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. For the first time, a major school improvement effort made youth engagement an explicit goal of the change framework.[6]

Because of this focus, several of the SNS sites made significant commitment to, and progress in, engaging young people as stakeholders in the school reform process. Rather than relying on the traditionally "soloed," compartmentalized approaches usually reserved for student involvement, the SNS sites sought to build systemic, inclusive structures that connect youth engagement to the district's overall reform agenda.

The following two case studies provide an overview of the different paths taken by Boston and Sacramento, two former SNS districts, as they sought to engage their students at the high school level. The case studies aim to:

- Provide concrete examples of the process and strategies used by these two districts and their community partners to begin to build authentic youth engagement structures at the district, school, classroom, and community level.

- Identify and examine the entry point for the work.

- Analyze the evolution of the work and the conditions that helped or hindered student engagement as each site sought to bring it to different levels of the education system.

While there have been numerous struggles, much has been learned and much progress has been made to both inform the work of the education reform field and the sites themselves. This has helped propel the conversation around youth engagement, high school reform, and improved learning outcomes from the periphery to center of the education reform conversation. While far from perfect, the story of the evolution of student engagement and the lessons learned in these two SNS sites provide vivid examples of what is necessary to begin to build systemic structures to meaningfully engage young people in their own education.

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[6] From 2001 to2006 SNS challenged seven communities to reinvent all their high schools and to redesign central offices to support them. 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.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 (also in Boston: Jobs for the Future, Boston Private Industry Council, and the Center for Collaborative Education); Clark University, Hiatt Center for Urban Education (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).

The SNS change framework presents a systemic theory for how districts can transform their high schools into equitable systems that ensure all young people access to high-quality education. Its core components are to reinvent urban high schools, redesign urban school districts, develop working partnerships, engage and mobilize communities to enhance capacity and support sustainability, and engage and empower youth as learners and leaders. Schools for a New Society (2006). A framework for success for all students. New York: Carnegie Corporation.

III. The Evolution of Student Voice in Boston

In June 2005, a new staff position of "student voice specialist" was created by Boston Public Schools (BPS) and filled by somebody from the community with an extensive background in community organizing and working with youth. This move by BPS's Office of High School Renewal (OHSR) seemed to signal a shift the in the highly publicized six-year high school reform effort that had been led by then Superintendent Tom Payzant. While youth voice and youth engagement had been present in pieces of the high school reform work in Boston, no district-level staff position had existed to coordinate and support the work, and no systemic plans had been developed to institutionalize the work that was happening in pockets across the district and at various schools in the city. It seemed, as was the case in many school districts around the country, that without a point-person at the district to shepherd the voices, concerns, and suggestions of students to the appropriate channels, adults would continue to solicit student opinions and input but rarely use that input to make decisions or alter practice.

According to Stephanie Sibley, chief program officer at Boston Plan for Excellence (BPE), a local public education fund that initially led the student engagement work as part of the districtwide high school renewal initiative:

> The compelling story [in Boston] has to do with how external organizations, including BPE, Teen Empowerment and Youth on Board used their expertise, resources, advocacy, influence, passion, and commitment to young people to push BPS to move from rhetoric to real commitment to student voice by allocating district resources.

The creation of the full-time student voice specialist position inside the district office was the first step in developing a system to coordinate, deepen, and develop new and existing youth engagement strategies across the district. Kathi Mullin, special assistant to the superintendent and head of Boston's Office of High School Renewal from 2001 to 2007, maintained that it was the advocacy of external partners and her conversations with students themselves that led her to lobby for a full-time position in her department.

In close collaboration with BPE, TE and YOB, the scope of the position of student voice specialist evolved over its first three years. YOB acted as the cofacilitator of the district-level work and worked in partnership with a citywide student engagement advisory committee comprised of community partners working in individual high schools around the city.

Boston Public Schools: The Roots of the Story

Boston is a diverse and dynamic city, and its 39 high schools reflect both the challenges and richness of its diverse student population. Serving 18,870 students, Boston's emerging portfolio of small schools, pilot schools, charter schools, small learning communities (SLCs), and exam schools[7] attempt to offer students a range of choices to meet their academic goals. Like many cities in the process of transforming their high schools, Boston's goals of closing the achievement gap, improving graduation rates, and engaging alienated students, particularly marginalized poor and minority students, began long before the current wave of high school reform.

In the 1970s, Boston was still a city divided, struggling to overcome the remnants of school segregation, which had left deep wounds and broken systems across the city. In an effort to ensure integration and develop equity in newly desegregated schools, a 1974 desegregation court order mandated and provided funding for the creation of BSAC, a districtwide student council made up of students from various high schools around the city, as a mechanism to incorporate student voice into the BPS desegregation plans.

Housed in the superintendent's office, BSAC by the late 1970s and 1980s had become mostly an elite committee of hand-picked students who did not reflect the diversity of students in Boston. It was staffed by a coordinator working one day a week, who met with about a dozen students monthly, each of whom received a small stipend of $100. Most of BSAC's work focused on lobbying for students to serve on the school committee and other relevant districtwide boards.

Broader efforts at youth engagement began to develop in the 1990s. Some of the efforts emerged with the creation of pilot schools, a program started in 1995 by newly hired Superintendent Thomas W. Payzant as a way of competing with charter schools. The pilot school program—which included an atypical agreement

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[7] Boston has three exam schools, which span grades 7 through 12. Students are invited to the exam schools based on a combination of their score on the Independent School Entrance Examination (ISEE) and their grade point average. Boston Public Schools (2009) Exam schools www.bostonpublicschools.org/exam.

between the district and the teachers union exempting the new schools from union agreements—was the first wave of restructuring the high schools into small theme-based models. It opened the door for innovation and development of alternative teaching and learning models. Much of this experimentation quickly proved effective and popular with many students, parents and teachers, and pilot schools began to outperform traditional high schools in teacher and student quality surveys.[8]

According to Dr. Payzant, the seeds of authentic youth engagement at the high school level "started when the pilot schools first opened in 1995. While not every pilot school had the same view about student voice and student engagement, many did. They were also the first schools that took it seriously, and in several instances some schools even had student workers behind their governing boards."

As a result of the strides made by the early pilot schools, Payzant and the teachers' union founded the High School Restructuring Task Force in 1997, which mapped out a series of strategies, such as small schools and SLCs, for the next wave of reform needed to meet higher standards. Many recommendation of the task force were voluntary and were designed to foster teacher engagement in reform and restructuring and to create a sense of inclusion and ownership among faculty, offering a high degree of freedom in their implementation. However, teachers and administrators, with their taxed and stressful schedules, often felt incapable of pursuing the full extent of these recommendations, and without additional staff or funding, most schools did not find the capacity to restructure of their own accord. Some schools, however, enlisted the assistance of community-based nonprofits to address in-school problems and buttress the work of teachers in implementing the task force's recommendations. It was in several of these schools where additional seeds for youth engagement were planted.

Community Engagement Efforts

In addition to the efforts under way at the pilot schools, Mayor Thomas Menino and members of the city council had long been staunch advocates of youth voice and youth engagement and had created mechanisms to foster the involvement of youth in city affairs. The Mayor's Youth Council, established in 1994, provides Boston's young people with an active role in addressing student issues. High school juniors and seniors from every neighborhood in the city are selected to serve as volunteer representatives and advocates for Boston teens. They develop outreach campaigns, inform Boston youth of existing opportunities, and listen to suggestions and make recommendations on how the city can improve opportunities for young people.

At the same time, there were several community organizations working in schools throughout the city of Boston, including Youth on Board (YOB) which is a project of YouthBuild USA, Teen Empowerment (TE) and the Boston Youth Organizing Project. However, while some of these organizations, like TE were already collaborating closely with and within schools to engage students in reform and relationship building, there was little recognition from the district, little funding, and little collaboration among these community-based, youth engagement nonprofits with each other and with BPS.

In the early 1990s, with funding from the Riley Foundation, TE began work across the city to engage students in activities aimed at addressing school climate and culture issues. Some of the earliest work was centered on incorporating student input into ways to ameliorate school violence and bullying. At Madison Park Technical High School, TE, with a staff of two, organized a group of 12 student leaders to develop a platform for the student body to advocate for changes in school violence. The contract with Madison Park led to a similar one with English High School in 1995 and 1996 and then a contract with Dorchester High School in 1997.

A New Phase of High School Reform: Student-Led Research

After the mixed record of high school restructuring in the mid-1990s, the issue took on new urgency at the end of the decade, in large part because of growing concern about high dropout rates and disappointing levels of student performance. Under the 1993 state Education Reform Act, the class of 2003 would be the first that would be required to pass a statewide test, the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) in order to graduate from high school, and preliminary results suggested that thousands of Boston students would fail to graduate under the policy. As a 2001 Jobs for the Future Report JFF)[9] concluded, "when the class of 2003 became the first to take the new high-stakes state exam known as the MCAS, only 40 percent will reach the "needs improvement" standard that would allow them to graduate two years later."

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[8] Ouimette, M., Tung, R. (2007) *Strong Results, High Demand: A Four-Year Study of Boston's Pilot High Schools.* Boston: Center for Collaborative Education.

[9] Almeida, C., Goldberger, S., Keough, R. (2001). *Benchmarks for success in high school education: Putting data to work in school-to-career education reform.* Providence, RI: The Northeast and Islands Regional Educational Laboratory at Brown University.

After a one year planning grant, in 2001, Boston was chosen as one of seven urban districts for Carnegie Corporation of New York's SNS high school reform initiative and given $8 million to build a "system of excellent high schools" for all Boston students. For the initiative, BPS partnered with several local community partners—the Boston Plan for Excellence (BPE), the Boston Private Industry Council (PIC), and JFF.

The Carnegie grant was instrumental in validating Payzant's initial restructuring efforts while supporting Boston's goal to bring systemic reform throughout the district. Moreover, by naming student alienation as a major area of improvement, the work recognized the critical role that student satisfaction and participation plays in producing authentic and progressive reform. Additionally, the theory of action used in the SNS initiative explicitly supported youth engagement as a core tenet of reform, allowing grant dollars to support student engagement programs.

As part of the planning year for the grant, BPE coordinated the student voice work and reached out to other youth engagement organizations that had been offering school-based youth engagement programs across the district to help make the case for why increasing youth voice was crucial to the success of Boston's SNS initiative. During the 2001-02 school year, BPE staff coordinated the student advisory council (SAC), members of which conducted action research around school attendance. This research was presented to the district in an effort to provide student input on the high school reform initiative.

With the Carnegie grant, BPS was able to invest more substantially in the development of deeper student engagement practices. However, because the school district chose to provide support through new efforts rather than support the ongoing successful efforts of TE, the Carnegie grant had the unintended consequence of creating competition for the development of student engagement strategies in South Boston High School. Over the next year, Teen Empowerment, while continuing to support school department efforts, decided to curtail its substantial student engagement efforts at South Boston High.

New Funding for Youth Engagement

With the support of the Carnegie grant, during 2002-03 and 2003-04 school years, BPE coordinated Student Researchers for High School Renewal, a research-for-action project that brought groups of students from each of the schools together to conduct surveys for a school climate report, which was then reported to the district. With the assistance of TE, BPE conducted a competitive interview process to select eight students from 11 schools across the district to develop surveys and collect data on student attitudes and experiences in their high schools. The student researchers surveyed 1,500 students and collected data on student-teacher relationships, peer relationships, and student perceptions regarding their school's expectations for high achievement, safety, and preparation for college, and other major issues affecting school climate. After analyzing the data, BPE wrote a report of survey findings for each participating school based on its students' perceptions. In addition, a report of aggregate findings was written and distributed in 2003 across the district.

This project was the first major contribution of research by students on student attitudes towards their schools and learning, and had a powerful effect on the district, demanding attention to issues affecting student engagement and the profound role young people can play in articulating and addressing these issues.

At the end of the first year, the students presented the preliminary data to the superintendent and others who made decisions on policy related to these issues, including the Massachusetts Bay Transit Authority (MBTA), the police department, and the mayor's point-person for education. The data showed that students felt the least safe at the subway and bus stations. As a result, the MBTA, which was very impressed by the data, involved students in STOP WATCH, the new safety initiative the agency was planning. Dr. Payzant described the positive impact of the project:

> This 12-18 month project was a very thoughtful school-by-school and districtwide analysis of data from 13 schools. It really got the attention of people who hadn't thought much about the student experience in high schools, and showed where it was positive and where it was not. It also was the first time students were involved in understanding how educational research is done.

Several high school principals used their school-climate studies to make the case for establishing student advisories and increasing college advising support. At the district level, school climate findings most notably shaped the design team composition for Boston's new small schools; student representation and authentic involvement were mandatory requirements for the formation of the new small schools. However, not all adults in the district welcomed or agreed with the student findings, and in several of the surveyed schools, principals and teachers vehemently disagreed with and even dismissed the students' work. This created tension in some schools and frustrated students who felt that their findings were well substantiated.

During the second year BPE picked two schools in which to do more in-depth work, including conducting focus groups on the data. For this work BPE brought YOB into the project as a cofacilitator, given its experience in developing action plans.

At the same time as the Student Researchers for High School Renewal project was underway, several other student-led research projects were taking place in schools across the district. In one of those schools, adults' response to the student research was less than favorable. "I think what happened with that initial class and those initial findings is that principals and teachers felt blind-sided by the findings," explained an interviewee who wished to remain anonymous. "They had no idea what data the students were going to uncover and having so much negative data presented—without their prior knowledge—put them on the defensive. No one here is to blame, but this experience really illustrates the need to engage teachers and principals in each step of the process, particularly if the process is housed inside of a school. It's a delicate balance working inside of the school system and requires engagement and buy-in on multiple levels."

While the above-mentioned student research project did not garner much action at the school level, on a district level it led directly to the development of the districtwide school climate survey, according to Dr. Payzant, the results of which helped shape future policy and attitudes related to student needs.

Fostering the Climate and Cultural Changes: 2003-04

The high school work in Boston continued to attract the attention of national donors, and in 2003, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation bolstered Carnegie's investment with a $13.6 million grant for Boston to join the New Schools Initiative and continue Payzant's efforts to break apart the larger schools. With JFF acting as the intermediary, the Gates-funded work supported the collaborations first formed with Carnegie's work and added the Center for Collaborative Education as a partner.

With the substantial support of Carnegie and Gates, Boston formed the Office of High School Renewal (OHSR) to formalize the reform begun with several years earlier in Dorchester, Boston, and South Boston High Schools and led by Kathi Mullin. According to the BPS website, OHSR was designed to serve "an entrepreneurial function, helping to identify how central [BPS] office functions can be carried out in ways that remove barriers and provide support to small schools and learning communities." This infusion of Gates money also created more opportunities for the district to invest in the youth engagement work.

From 2003 to 2004, OHSR, in concert with the BPE, JFF, and other partners, set about facilitating the conversion of several more high schools. During this time the youth engagement work began to spread across the district.

Based on its research, the student researcher project selected East Boston and Hyde Park high schools as sites to implement a set of interventions aimed at combating student alienation and improving student engagement. BPE and the student researchers contracted YOB to support this deeper student engagement work. YOB had been working in the greater Boston area for the previous 11 years doing youth engagement projects in and out of the schools.

Together BPE and YOB conducted student and teacher dialogue groups at these two schools and trained the student researchers to become dialogue facilitators, in an effort to open communication between students and adults. Leadership action committees were created in response to these dialogue groups, and as a mechanism to follow-up on the issues that had surfaced from the ongoing conversations. Students, teachers, and administrators were identified and trained to serve jointly on these committees.

While this work was truly a breakthrough, as it illustrated for many both what students were facing and what students were capable of, it also attracted a high degree of backlash; some teachers and principals felt ostracized and insulted by the research and felt as if they were being blamed for larger systemic failures.

Seeing Change and Making Progress: 2004 to Present—Developing Structures and Building Systems

YOB's collaboration with the student researchers at Hyde Park and East Boston led OHSR to hire YOB to develop coordinated student engagement strategies for the restructuring process at Hyde Park High School, and for TE to do the same at West Roxbury High School.

While TE had been instrumental in showing the district the importance of student engagement in dealing with issues of violence and other forms of dysfunctional behaviors, when it came to the restructuring process at Dorchester High School, the organization was not asked to participate until the process was well advanced and, therefore, TE was not able to provide much in the way of real student input into the process. TE's efforts were limited to helping the administration present the final plan to the student body. Although

this effort encouraged student investment in its success, student voice in this process was relegated to the sideline. It was because of these shortcomings in the process that the two newly converted schools (Dorchester and South Boston High) were showing signs of alienation and frustration among students and teachers amid the growing pains of adjusting to a new culture of small schools and learning communities that did not adequately take into account their input or respond to their concerns.

Most of the faculty and administrators of Dorchester, South Boston, and East Boston high schools had held their positions through conversion and were facing certain challenges in adopting new curricula in new settings that differed vastly from the traditional high school models in which they were trained and experienced. In other instances, teachers— owing to the collective bargaining agreement requiring a two-thirds vote in favor of conversion—found it impossible to agree and enact change. Missing from the first conversions were not only authentic student input and support, but also genuine teacher involvement and training. In addition, largely missing from the groundbreaking reports of the student researchers was documentation of teacher perspectives on the difficulties of engaging students. As dropout rates continued to rise and teachers grew either taxed or despondent, BPS became anxious to find solutions to revitalize teacher and student relationships and engagement with each school, while simultaneously pursuing reform and restructuring across the district.

This urgency, coupled with the lessons learned during the first conversions and the support from Carnegie and Gates, were the critical factors that enabled BPS and OHSR to begin to think about institutionalizing the practice of student engagement and develop structures to improve student-teacher-administrator relationships across the district.

Through its contracts with YOB in the Hyde Park restructuring and TE in the West Roxbury restructuring, OHSR was working to ensure the smoother transition and overall greater satisfaction of the students, teachers, and school staff both pre- and post-conversion. Using the data from the student surveys conducted under the BPE student researcher project, YOB and TE involved students in the design process of the future small schools, and ran dialogue groups to bolster awareness among the student body about both the challenges and positive factors of the conversion. Additionally, YOB and TE supported students to participate on the headmaster's search committees for each school and to serve on the selection committees to review and choose three of the five proposals for the new, small schools. Following the selection of the school design teams and the hiring of the new headmaster at West Roxbury, TE began working with the school's new leadership to plan ways to develop the capacity to involve students, teachers, and parents in creating a positive school climate and a high level of student and teacher engagement.

2004: Boston Student Voice Project

In September 2004, YOB received a three-year grant from an anonymous local foundation to support the Boston Student Voice Project, an initiative aimed at deepening and spreading the youth engagement work across BPS. Through this grant YOB was able to serve as a resource to BPS and community organizations, supporting student engagement work at individual schools and on a district- and citywide level. According to Kathi Mullin, "Youth on Board made a real difference. They were a primary player, sitting at the table, making things happen so that student voice became a reality in the Boston Public Schools."

In partnership with the three new small schools[10] that constituted the Hyde Park Education Complex and Monument High School, a small school in the South Boston Complex, YOB worked with students and key faculty to develop site-specific student engagement structures. There are now a variety of student engagement structures and student voice projects underway at each school, some of which YOB guides or coordinates and some that continue to exist independently of YOB. In three of the four schools, student engagement efforts have now become an integral and institutionalized part of school life. Although strategies are school-specific, at Hyde Park Education Complex there is a complex-wide commitment to student engagement across all small schools. Taking their experiences from the small schools, YOB worked with BSAC to take policies that were created at the school level and adapt them to the district level. Mandating and supporting meaningful student government in all high schools was one of the lessons that was brought from small schools to the district.

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[10] The three small schools that constitute the Hyde Park Educational Complex are the Social Justice Academy (SJA), The Community Academy of Science and Health (CASH), and The Engineering School (TES).

Monument High School: A Case Study

The accumulation of many individual student engagement strategies, such as student government, advisories, town meetings, and multicultural days, have helped change the climate and culture of many schools in Boston. Nowhere is this more evident than at Monument High School (MHS), a small school of 350 students in South Boston Educational Complex, which recently succeeded in making Adequate Yearly Progress in math (up from second-to-last in the district) and language arts for 2006. It was the first high school to exit the district "school improvement" list. The two major student engagement structures developed at MHS are student government and a new advisory group to the instructional leadership team (ILT). With the support of YOB, a larger student voice group that includes members of the student government, student advisors to the ILT, BSAC students, and the school site council student representative is also being formed. According to Jonathan Pizzi, MHS headmaster students now "own" the school and this brought about many positive changes in student attitudes:

> *We now have kids own the school in some real ways, in terms of governance, events, and instruction, and their relationships with each other and adults. With the student voice project, we've worked hand in hand with the Partners in Learning professional development program, creating a respectful environment. It's helped a tremendous amount. I think kids are much more positive, much more respectful. It's so much different than it was before we started with this. There are kids who were alienated that are now not afraid to come to us and ask a question in a respectful way; they don't just barge in. "Can we do this or that? What do you think about this?" They're not afraid to go to adults. They know we're here to help.*

In many of the reconstituted schools where students were engaged in the design and principal recruitment process, engagement has continued on multiple levels. At the Social Justice Academy, a small school of about 330 students in the reconstituted Hyde Park Education Complex, student engagement is at the core of the school's structure. Initially designed to have every student serve on a range of governing committees responsible for school functioning, the school had to scale back some of their student engagement ideas when it opened, but the school is still committed to engaging students as much as possible. Each week an entire period is devoted to committee meetings and advisories; committees meet once a week for 50 minutes and have two teachers acting as advisors. Twice a month, two student representatives from each committee meet with YOB staff for team-building activities and sharing of committee information.

"When you start to develop student voice, students begin to see themselves in this process as a group of people that really have a say in this world," said Mawakana Onifade, a curriculum specialist and school advocate at the Social Justice Academy:

> *Often in society young people are silenced for different reasons and their voices don't necessarily count. When we focus more on developing student voice in schools, it helps these students develop into the citizens we want them to be. Once you support student voice, it improves the school culture in a huge way. What I've seen this year around student engagement is that when given the chance young people develop themselves as leaders, and they feel more connected to the school, and feel they have a stake in what happens. Often times they can also be an advocate for teachers. Sometimes when we try to enhance student culture without asking the students, as adults it makes our work harder. If we engage students, a lot of times, it gives them something to work on, and then we can focus on other aspects of our job."*

The two other schools at Hyde Park Complex, the Community Academy of Science and Health (CASH) and The Engineering School (TES), included students from the outset of the design process, while also implementing schoolwide student engagement structures. TES focused on advisories and building a strong and active student government.

CASH has also made enormous progress; specifically, the school developed a student leadership team to conduct dialogue groups on school issues and organized a range of schoolwide events aimed at improving culture and building community. CASH was the only school in the district that allowed students to use "Friendly Feedback Surveys", which enabled students to provide feedback to teachers on their teaching in the classroom. CASH students also developed several signature events, such as annual "unity" and multi-cultural days to build school culture and grow leadership.

Also during this period, from 2004 to 2006, BPE developed critical research courses for credit at Brighton High School and the Social Justice Academy. The class, "Research and Activism for Change," was a year-long course that provided students with the tools to use data to develop action research projects. It was cofacilitated by BPE and a teacher. The class lasted for two years at Brighton and is on-going at SJA. In addition, another course based on the same principles was developed at the Boston Community Leadership Academy (BCLA), with BPE providing teacher development the first year. This course is now the senior capstone, and every senior in the school takes the course as a graduation requirement.

The Resurrection of the Boston Student Advisory Council

As described earlier in this report, BSAC was initiated as a mechanism to incorporate student voice into the BPS desegregation plans, but had become an under-resourced, and often weak, districtwide student government of mostly hand-picked students. However, with the creation of the full-time student voice specialist position inside the district office in 2005 and with support from a range of partners, including the close inside-outside partnership with YOB, BSAC has established a legitimate route to impacting district policy and practice and has become a diverse group of students who represent the broad spectrum of high school students across the city. "It took us a little time to figure BSAC out," stated Kathi Mullin, former head of the Office of High School Renewal:

> In the first couple years of the high school reform there was only one staff person working part-time with the students. A few years into the work, I realized that to resurrect BSAC and to energize the youth engagement work, we needed someone to pay attention to it full time, as I was only able to pay attention on the margins.

BSAC has also developed positive relationships with the Boston School Committee and with deputy super-intendents, headmasters, teachers, and key contacts at BPE and the Boston PIC. Developing these close relationships has helped BSAC make progress towards its goals of institutionalizing the role and input of students on all levels of BPS. The progress is clear from the record of its work at all levels of the system over the last four years.

For example, in 2005, BSAC worked with principals and teachers citywide to draft recommendations to revise the district's lock-out and tardy policy, which had had a long-standing adverse effect on student atten-dance and achievement. Using the slogan "We know you love us, we know you don't want to lock us out of school," BSAC's campaign illustrated how refusing students entry to schools limited their access to learning and convinced the Boston School Committee to rescind the blanket districtwide lock-out policy, and recom-mend that each high school work directly with students to develop an appropriate policy to address the issue of tardiness. The slogan and subsequent campaign were so effective they were featured on a local television blog, called "Eye on Education," in which two BSAC students debated the lock-out policy and highlighted the importance of student input in its restructuring. This policy "win" and subsequent publicity for BSAC also boosted its credibility with the superintendent and with school principals.

Another issue of concern to BSAC was the dropout rate. In the 2005-06 school year, BSAC developed and administered a districtwide survey on why students drop out. The most common responses were that students felt that their classrooms were not engaging and that they were not given enough support from their teachers or administrators to prosper. From this feedback, BSAC came up with several solutions to the dropout problem.

As a result of this work, BSAC was asked to serve as the youth advisory board to the Boston PIC and presented the results of the survey to PIC's Boston Youth Transitions Planning Group, which works to address the dropout issue in Boston. In response, the BPS Office of High School Renewal asked BSAC to prepare a list of student ideas for preventing or reducing dropouts. BSAC members also presented these findings on a local cable show.

Since its restructuring in 2005, BSAC continues to be significantly involved in school issues— affecting policy, transforming school culture, and legitimizing youth voice. For the 2006-07 school year, one of the issues on BSAC's agenda included reviewing the effects of school start time. After conducting informal focus groups with their peers around the issue of school start time, BSAC developed a report that explored the negative effects that the district's early start time could have on students' success and well-being. BSAC also con-tributed to a lobbying effort with the superintendent's office and the Headmasters Association to delay the school start time to increase student performance and satisfaction. This effort eventually grew into a formal presentation and recommendation (by both BSAC and the superintendent) to the Boston School Committee that school start 25 to 40 minutes later. Just days after the presentation, the school committee adopted the

"I never knew about student engagement until I got to high school. I didn't think students could possibly have a voice. Basically, I thought adults did everything. When I got to BSAC, I saw every-thing on a grand scale. I saw every single deci-sion-making process that adults do and how shhools work and how policies are passed. I learned how we could have a hand in it every step of the way."

Demetrius, former BSAC representative

proposal, which was clearly informed and influenced by BSAC's policy paper. This policy change was another significant win for BSAC and illustrated the power of an effective youth-driven campaign with hard data and powerful allies.

BSAC's work on school start time tapped into some larger, interrelated issues regarding time management and homework standardization. Many students voiced complaints to BSAC about the amount of homework they received, its lack of relevancy and the competing pressures of work and family life. To address the issue, BSAC organized a districtwide homework survey, developed a position paper on the issue and, after researching existing language about homework in the student handbook, initiated a campaign to have the superintendent codify a districtwide policy around the quality and quantity of homework.

To ensure that the policy was supported at all levels of the school and district, BSAC surveyed 770 students and got feedback from over 130 teachers. Fifty percent of students stated that the quality of homework assignments was not acceptable. Using student and teacher feedback, BSAC's campaign served to make homework a meaningful reinforcement of the curriculum that would increase students' understanding, rather than be simply a punitive task.

In the 2007-08 school year, BSAC continued to work on district-level recommendations while also beginning to tackle student-teacher relationships and direct student engagement. It began by producing a series of "Student Rights Cards" to create awareness of what students could expect from their schools. The cards covered topics such as homework, cell phones, punctuality, student government, physical education, student-teacher relationships, dress codes, metal detectors, and transportation. According to BSAC, "With the conflicting messages young people are often subject to through media sources, gossip, obscure or confusing language, and intentional misinformation, the goal [of these cards] is for all students to have an accurate understanding of what their rights and responsibilities are."

During this same school year, BSAC also ventured into the area of teaching and learning-based student surveys, which revealed that students would be more likely to absorb information if teachers valued their opinions more and if they had more opportunities to comment on how classes were run. In order to address this issue, BSAC studied several "constructive feedback" models in which teachers volunteered to be assessed by students. While this was a somewhat controversial issue, the teachers' union recognized that students have a vested interest in the curricula and the way their classrooms are managed and met with BSAC twice to examine the findings of the research; BSAC also presented their feedback forms to the school committee.

The district is now considering how schools might use these forms. While BSAC continues to struggle with this initiative—the teachers' union is naturally reluctant to involve students in the evaluation process— BSAC members recently met with the superintendent, who supported a pilot project at the Hyde Park School to implement a teacher-evaluation system based on BSAC's recommendations. This has helped build support from high-level administrators, as evidenced by the Headmasters' Association, which now frequently requests meetings with BSAC.

BSAC's role within the Boston School Committee continued to expand. For example, in 2008, the BSAC school committee representative presented a series of reports to the committee on school climate and other relevant issues. Both the representative and alternate now play an active role at all school committee and budgetary meetings, and are being mentored by prominent committee members. The presence of two young people at these meetings ensures that the public sees the face of youth at the forefront of district-wide decision making. The school committee also agreed that the BSAC representative deserves financial compensation for his or her participation. (Currently, the BSAC representative receives a scholarship stipend; while this is an improvement on the past, it is still significantly less than the amount of compensation that adult committee members receive.)

The inside/outside model of working both within the district and building partnerships with external groups to help build the capacity of students and staff has proven to be a highly effective model in Boston. While it has taken several years for this model to mature, the willingness of both the district and its partners to commit to the work and sustain it over time has enabled a culture of youth engagement to become embedded in the work of the district.

In an interview Superintendent Payzant recalled how he had come to appreciate the key role of BSAC in the last two years of his tenure, after BSAC was restructured. Specifically Dr. Payzant described the value of involving BSAC in shared problem solving rather than just having it be a "complaint" board:

> My relationship with BSAC ebbed and flowed during the 10+ years. My regret now is that I didn't pay more attention to BSAC earlier in my tenure, but during the last two years I was in Boston I really found out an awful lot from BSAC. I had always met with them at least once or twice a year, but I never sent signals that those meetings were designed to give the signal to the students—How would you liked to be involved?"—rather than what happens in a lot of professions—whether adults or students—"Here are things we don't like, these are our complaints, what are you going to do about it?" I was okay with that because it was an opportunity for them to let me know what they saw as problematic and what they thought was going well. But this is quite different from engaging them in shared problem solving around an issue of interest to both students and adults. Having a partnership with the recognition that ultimate responsibility rests with the adults but there really is value-added when students gather data, look at options for addressing an issue, and come forward with recommendations. That was the wonderful part of the last couple of years.

Formation of the Student Engagement Action Collaborative

Another challenge facing Boston (and Maria Ortiz in her position as the student voice specialist) was bringing coherence to the student engagement efforts across the district. As mentioned earlier, several community organizations had been operating independently across the district, doing a variety of student engagement work.

In an effort to align the work across the district and harness the expertise of the community organizations, the Office of High School Renewal invited all the organizations to an initial meet-and-greet dinner. Out of this initial meeting developed the Student Engagement Action Collaborative (SEAC), a citywide collaborative of students and adults whose mission is to promote student engagement and impact BPS policy and district reform. Co-founded by YOB, TE, OHSR, and BPE, SEAC now also includes the Mayor's Youth Council, the Boston Youth Organizing Project, the Hyde Square Task Force, Project Hip Hop, and DELTAS/Leaders through Education, Action & Hope. SEAC is co-run by OHSR and YOB.

Since its inception in 2005, SEAC has brought students and adults together to impact BPS policy and district reform, and to ensure that young people are at the center of decisions affecting their academic achievement. Much of SEAC's success thus far can be attributed to its effectiveness at building a coalition of dedicated youth organizations and youth organizers. SEAC's collaboration with the Boston Youth Organizing Project, the Hyde Park Task Force, and the TE has put new energy into the youth work across Boston, allowing organizations to share ideas, resources and best practices. SEAC has also taken advantage of the many resources of member agencies. In meetings, each group is invited to discuss funding opportunities, publicize events, and collaborate on various projects. This mutually beneficial system works not only to ensure that all participating groups are represented and heard, but also creates avenues for new partnerships.

SEAC's goals in the 2005-06 school year were to develop an operating structure and collaborate with BSAC to develop a definition of student engagement to be used by the district and all partner organizations. The resulting definition, "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," is now standard language in all student engagement materials across the district.

One of SEAC's major initiatives for the 2006-07 school year was to conduct a comprehensive survey to map student engagement work across BPS high schools. Prior to the initiative, this information was neither centralized nor coordinated. Together with BSAC's surveying of students on school climate, this mapping allowed SEAC to analyze how student-student, student-teacher, and teacher-administration relationships affected school climate. Based on these findings, SEAC determined that the state of student engagement in BPS high schools was, "on the whole, uneven, unclear, not systemic, and occurring at vastly varying levels."

SEAC partnered with BSAC to develop recommendations for the Boston School Committee to include student voice and engagement in its "six essentials," the critical objectives that all Boston schools are required to implement to improve student achievement. SEAC drafted recommended edits to the document and inserted language that supported shared leadership, student engagement in the classroom, student involvement in curriculum development and teacher evaluation, student input in the development of school-

wide behavior policies, meaningful involvement in school governance and decision making, and student engagement opportunities outside the classroom. SEAC members lobbied the school committee, the superintendent and other key BPS stakeholders to discuss and advocate for these amendments to the policy document. As a result of this organizing, relationship-building and lobbying, student engagement language was added to every section of the policy plan, including the statement that "Every school must have a youth voice policy." With the new emphasis on youth engagement, the six essentials will now hold schools accountable for developing action plans for youth engagement.

After this ground-breaking accomplishment, BSAC and SEAC conducted centralized trainings on youth engagement structures and SLCs. The first training examined the ideas of "adultism" and power dynamics within school communities, while the second focused on developing youth engagement goals and structures, and moving the agenda forward. A focus group was also conducted to ensure that SEAC was in touch with what students wanted and was moving in the right direction.

Assessing Progress: Institutionalization and Sustainability

The growth of student engagement policies, structures, and practices in the city of Boston are inextricably linked to the city's groundbreaking and unrelenting commitment to high school reform, as well as to efforts in the last decade to convert many large high schools into smaller, more personalized learning communities with relevant and engaging teaching and curricula.

However, what the story reveals is that the path to restructuring and the movement towards small schools did not gain full steam until both teachers and students were actively and authentically engaged in the reform and restructuring process. Kathi Mullen reflected on what it took to move student engagement from individual efforts to a more central role in Boston high schools:

> We had some "projectitis" when we first began the student engagement work. While we had some good experiments in individual classes, I think to get this work off the ground you really need to look at systemic pieces that move beyond one or two schools. You need to show the district that it is critical to have student voice engaged in key policy conversations and to do this you need to not only create opportunities for student to be authentically engaged but train them so they have the skills to engage in those conversations with adults.

While Boston's initial "experiments" with developing research-for-action classes might not have had the class-level impact hoped for by involved students and teachers, as described earlier in this report, they did lay the ground work for the type of critical thinking and analysis that was required of students to engage in high-level policy conversations. Stephanie Sibley, Director of High Schools for BPE, a partner with the district in the high school reform work stated:

> Two of the key successes of the work in Boston include broadening the awareness of student voice among school leaders and the community, and engaging students in key policy initiatives that were critical to the mission of Boston public schools. Having students work on doing research and helping solve critical policy issues affecting BPS really brought their creditability to the forefront and helped open doors across the district.

According to Kathi Mullin, two of the critical elements that helped create a platform to sustain the youth engagement work in Boston were having a champion at a high level in the district and protecting the funding for the position of student voice specialist:

> Sustaining key budgetary items is hard, especially inside a district when priorities and funding are always shifting. This work really needs a champion who can begin to lay the ground work for institutionalizing the work—this starts with funding and a dedicated staff position that will not be cut in a budget crisis.

However, Mullin noted that the work should not rest on the shoulders of one person and that building champions and allies at all levels of the central office and the schools is crucial to sustain momentum beyond the initial work:

> Having Boston Plan for Excellence, Teen Empowerment, and Youth on Board as on-going part-ners have been critical for moving this work, as without them we [BPS] would have become so insular- any bureaucracy would. They bring an outside, critical lens to the table as they really do understand youth development and I don't think school departments do. You really need CBOs as collaborators for this work; they bring fresh ideas and are able to push the envelope around issues related to student engagement and voice."

"My hesitation wasn't based on the negative thinking about getting students engaged; it was more the time allocation. The break-throught for me was moving it from various different groups of students telling me what was wrong, to the transforming work that presented solutions and showed us that students could help us see beyond the problem. This focus was really exciting, and allowed us to engage students in a new way and get them involved in key policy issues. Their data and recommendations actually made a differ-ence, and I used them in my decision making, in conversations with the school committee and finally in recommending policy to the school committee."

Thomas Payzant, former superintendent

Maria Ortiz, the student voice specialist also emphasized the importance of the partnership between the external organizations and the district:

Due to the nature of work around student voice and student engagement, one person cannot do it all. Some can be done internally by the Student Voice Specialist, but there is also a need for an external partnership to push where I might not be able to due to our policy changes. It's an important partnership model, because you want someone to be internal and have access to people, and knowledge to make informed decisions. However, an external partner can be objective about the work and help with visioning and push for changes that an internal employee might not be able to do.

Jenny Sazama, YOB co-director also testified to the importance of these partnerships:

YOB met frequently with OHSR staff and worked in close partnership with OHSR on all student voice projects, including BSAC. YOB also had regular contact with school headmasters, the superintendent's office, and the school committee. Building these types of relationships on all levels of the system was crucial to building and sustaining the work after Tom Payzant left.

According to Ortiz, the result of several years of inside-outside partnerships has been a substantial leap forward in youth engagement in Boston schools:

When I first came into this position I wasn't quite sure where student engagement fit in BPS. I had been working in the nonprofit sector for a [community-based organization] and based on those experiences thought it was similar to the CBO work I had done and was centered on student leadership in pockets of high school around the district. Now, based on everything I have learned, meeting with different groups of teachers, administrators, students, I see that student engagement and student voice is much larger, and ranges from policy changes to school-level practices, to classroom instruction, to various forms of student leadership. But the work also includes developing structures to support that work, in addition to changing the mind-set of the adults- teachers, headmasters, and central office staff. I think we have made significant stride in Boston and laid a solid foundation for institutionalizing student voice.

Boston Today: An Update

According to a BSAC survey taken at the end of the 2006-07 school year, despite the success of BSAC, SEAC, and various school based initiatives, interviewees—adults and students— still believe adultist attitudes continue to pervade many BPS decisions. However, the survey also revealed that young people now feel they have the legitimacy and the tools to tackle those beliefs and create an avenue to have their voices not only heard, but acted upon.

When it came time to hire a new superintendent in fall 2007, BSAC was told that, due to confidentiality issues, a person under the age of 18 could not serve on the search committee. Undeterred, BSAC organized a youth-only forum with the final candidates and the search committee .during the selection process, while YOB met with the mayor and members of the search committee to share BSAC's "superintendent criteria." When a potential candidate backed out, BSAC jumped at the opportunity to rally around its criteria, which ended up playing a pivotal role in the selection of the new superintendent, Carol Johnson.

When the new superintendent was hired, one of her first meetings was with BSAC. This meeting turned out to be the first of many; Ms. Johnson has often consulted and requested meetings with BSAC members to gauge student perspective. The importance of this youth perspective eventually led to the creation of the Department of Family and Student Engagement. The superintendent personally and publicly thanked BSAC for raising awareness around youth engagement and for bringing its importance to her attention.

In addition to the impact on specific school policies, BSAC has made significant strides in terms of solidify-ing its structure to ensure its continued efficacy. In the last year BSAC elected two presidents to manage internal and external affairs. Recognizing that BSAC would benefit from increased staff support, it requested that the superintendent's office require all headmasters to provide an adult key liaison at each school. The superintendent agreed, and the key liaisons now play an important role in recruiting and supporting BSAC members. To ensure that BSAC members are continually building their skill-sets and bases of knowledge, they participate in several trainings to foster their advocacy, planning, and organizing skills.

In conclusion, BPE's Stephanie Sibley stressed the need for ongoing efforts to maintain the district's commitment to youth engagement:

> *While we have made significant strides over the last several years, and there is evidence that there is shift in mindset about student engagement and the role of students (such as our ability to include student engagement language in the whole school improvement plan and the success and integration of student engagement structures across most of the small schools at the Hyde Park Complex), we still have much work to do." There have been so many changes across the district and we need more people to be our advocates as many of those folks are gone. It will take constant and continued work to educate the district on how powerful and valuable listening to students can be.*

Maria Ortiz and Jenny Sazama both attested to the power of their "partnership" model, which entails close coordination, good relationships, and joint projects but separate funding for the district position and the outside partner, Ms. Sazama stated:

> *Although we recognize the benefits of this opportunity to participate in systemic change from the top down, we also know that it creates challenges around maintaining a grass-roots approach, and makes it difficult to not become entrenched in the bureaucracy that often accompanies institutional support. An important distinction in our relationship with BPS is that we are not reliant on the district for funding; therefore we are also not beholden to its agenda. Our independence allows us the leverage to push for more controversial and powerful initiatives to further challenge implicit barriers for authentic youth engagement built into existing school structures.*

IV. Systemic Engagement in Sacramento

Martin Ramirez was a second year teacher at Luther Burbank High School in Sacramento during the 2006-07 school year. Under the leadership of Principal Ted Appel, Martin, a product of California public schools and the first in his family to graduate from college, was hired to teach the first-ever Latino Leadership Studies class at the school—a class that symbolized how much had changed in Sacramento high schools in the previous six years. The addition of this class was a direct result of student advocacy and student needs in a school that had experienced a major shift in student demographics and had undergone restructuring into SLCs as part of the districtwide high school reform initiative.

The Latino leadership class offered students an opportunity to learn about their culture, their identity, and their history in a safe, supportive environment, where they were able to talk and think freely among their peers. At first many veteran teachers at Burbank were opposed to what they saw as a class that separated students, but with time they came to see the value of such a class to reengage students and actually promote tolerance and understanding across cultures.

"This class taught me to look at my own culture and other cultures differently. It taught me respect and made me more open minded," said Arturo, a student in the leadership class:

> *It taught us to make a connection to ourselves and our communities. Before this class I never wanted to come to school. Now I understand how lucky I am to have the choice to come to school. I like the way Mr. Ramirez makes us think.*

During the school day, Mr. Ramirez teaches world history and economics, in addition to the Latino leadership class. After school his classroom becomes a hub for many struggling and alienated students, and he is a mentor to students having a hard time in and outside of class. Occasionally, he brings in yearbooks and graduation photos from some of his younger family members who have graduated from college. He hopes when his students see the pictures that they can envision themselves one day walking around a college campus:

> *They need to believe in themselves. They need to believe they can do something different. But they don't have anyone telling them they can make it to college, and they certainly don't have any role models showing them they can do it and how to get there, I believe repetition and examples can help them see themselves in that role so they are able to make an action plan for themselves.*

Ramirez's class is one of several offered during the school day or after school at Burbank to meet the specific needs of a certain student populations. And, according to Principal Appel, all have proved extremely effective in attracting and retaining often disengaged and transient students. "When kids find something they relate to they show up, and if it's interesting keep coming back," said one of the 11th grade students in Mr. Ramirez's class.

Originally a large comprehensive high school of 1,400 students, with high dropout and suspension rates, and commonly referred to as a "ghetto school" by its students, Burbank's teachers and principals have worked hard to shed the old image and rebuild both the structural and relational elements of the school. Beginning in 2004, the restructuring of the school into SLCs was the first step in reducing student alienation, improving student-teacher relationships, and building coherent areas of studies to reengage students. To date, Burbank is home to seven themed SLCs.[11] Principal Appel described the origins of student engagement efforts at the school and its challenges:

> From the outset of the reform there was a lot of pressure from the district to engage students. We did some great student surveys asking them what they needed, but the student population was transient and teachers were trying to balance building new SLCs with new teaching and learning mandates with this new idea of student engagement, but with no support or direct examples of it. What evolved at Burbank was a brand of student engagement to meet the needs of the changing student body and the daily pressures faced by teachers.

Appel described student engagement as happening in the school's SLCs "on a daily, minute-by-minute basis":

> It is integrated into our teaching methodology. Our goal is to empower teachers to interact with every student and help support them achieve their learning goals. When student engagement is talked about in terms of school culture, it's usually framed as students having a say in what adults are doing- influencing programs and policy of adult communities in the school. While there may be some areas where students can give input, in general this approach seems to set them up to become frustrated with the lack of movement on their ideas. We have found that for us, the place to start with student engagement is to encourage students to support positive behavior in other youth, to build communities in the SLCs with their teachers and other students, to discover their learning goals and interests, and to celebrate their successes.

Victoria Stolinsky, a teacher at the school, described the positive results of the school's engagement of students:

> We are much more student-centered now than before," said. "Yes, it's a tough balance to find, but we have definitely improved student-teacher relationships, and student-student relationships, and in general students feel much safer and more respected than before. I also think because of the SLCs they have more of a sense of belonging to something as they see the same group of students and teachers on a regular basis. However, to truly engage students and give them a voice at the school level-particularly in the face of all this reform and restructuring- is difficult and it takes time. But, I do think we have made much progress, thanks to the vision of our principal, who is able to think outside of the box.

While there is still much to be done to engage all students at Burbank, the school's administration and teachers continue to find their own way to translate district mandates into school-level realities for their students. "I think there are a lot of things happening in the school that are increasingly engaging to a range of students in their own education and helping them to be active in the community," said Principal Appel. "The result of which is that students feel like they belong here and they keep showing up. We just have to make sure we continue to pay attention to who our students are and what they need."

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[11] Burbank's seven SLCs are Criminal & Social Justice, Information Technology, Medical & Health Sciences, International & Environmental Studies, Public Services, Construction & Design and, Arts & Communications. American Youth Policy Forum (2007) Small learning communities/small high schools graphic display. Washington, D.C.

Sacramento City Schools: The Need for High School Redesign

City, County and District Context: Changing Demographics

Sacramento, the capital and seventh largest city in California, has been growing rapidly over the last 30 years, and now is home to close to half a million residents.[12] Some aspects of Sacramento's demographics have remained constant, such as the percentage of the population under the age of 18 since 1990—approximately 26 percent—and the percentage of individuals living in poverty, hovering around a fifth of the total population since 1990.[13] However, other demographics have been shifting—the percentage of white residents has been steadily decreasing, while the percentage of Asians, Blacks/African Americans, and individuals of Hispanic heritage is increasing. There have also been significant increases in the percentage of the population that is foreign-born and/or who speak a language other than English in the home.

As the city of Sacramento has changed, so has the school district. Sacramento City Unified School District (SCUSD) is now one of the state's ten largest school districts, with over 50,000 students and approximately 90 schools. Like the city itself, SCUSD is diversifying.[14] This is reflected in 2005-06 student enrollment (see chart). Of the 50,408 students enrolled during that year, approximately 28.8 percent were English language learners (up from 21.4 percent in 1992-3), and approximately 50 percent of those students were Spanish-speaking.[15]

District Enrollment

- 1.3 American Indian
- 21.2 Asian
- 1.2 Pacific Islander
- 1.2 Filipino
- 31.2 Hispanic
- 21.3 African American
- 21.4 White
- 1.2 Multiple/No Response

This drastic shift in student demographics over the last decade has created significant challenges for both the district and its teachers as they seek to adapt their schools and teaching methodologies to an increasingly diverse student body with varying language and cultural needs. And, as demographics shifted, high schools became overcrowded and test scores showed alarming failures, SCUSD leadership recognized that the city's high schools were in crisis. Fewer than one-third of the district's students were able to attend college, and the typical ninth grader received at least three "Ds" or "Fs" by the end of the school year.

In response to the data, parents, students, teachers, elected officials, and others came together and decided major changes were needed. In 2000, the district, along with their community partner, LEED (Linking Education and Economic Development), applied for a planning grant from Carnegie Corporation of New York to develop a high school reform agenda. If successful, the plan would result in a five-year grant that would allow the district to tackle its chronic high school failures.

Tasked with developing a plan to redesign their high schools, the district and community partners were expected to work collaboratively both within the school system and the community. Under the leadership of then-Superintendent Jim Sweeney, and with the support of the school board and in partnership with LEED, the one year planning period was used to develop a plan and create the conditions necessary to facilitate systemwide high school transformation.

What emerged from the planning process was a high school redesign strategy, called e21, which included both breaking up large high schools into SLCs and developing small autonomous schools. In 2001, Sacramento was awarded both the five-year Carnegie grant and a grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to embark on an ambitious plan to redesign its high schools.

At the center of the implementation plan were seven essential elements:

1) Small, caring and personalized learning communities;
2) A student-centered system with student supports and safety nets;
3) Student pathways to the world of work and post-secondary education;
4) Rigorous, relevant, standards-driven teaching and learning;
5) A culture of continuous learning;
6) Collective responsibility; and
7) Home-school-community alliances

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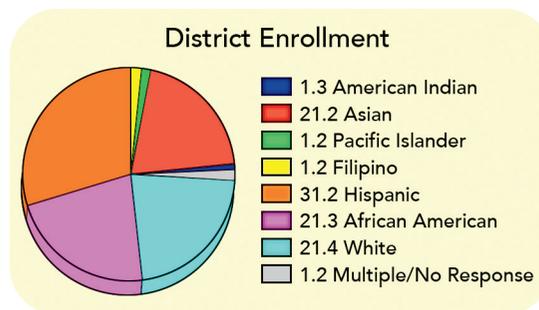
[12] Sacramento's 1990 population: 369,365 (U.S. Census Bureau, 1990); 2000: 407,018 (U.S. Census Bureau, Census 2000); 2006: 453,781 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006 Population Estimates).
[13] U.S. Census Bureau (2006) State and County Quick Facts: Sacramento, CA. http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/06/06067.html.
[14] Data obtained from www.ed-data.k12.ca.us./
[15] California Department of Education, Educational Demographics Office (language census, elsch06 5/1/07).

While youth engagement was not an explicit component of the seven essential elements, the SCUSD proposal did recommend four action steps to expand opportunities for youth leadership at both the school and district levels. These included 1) institutionalizing the role of youth directors at the district and the site levels; 2) establishing effective student advisory councils (SACs) at district and site levels; 3) ensuring broad student representation on district and site decision-making teams; and 4) establishing board policies to facilitate youth leadership.

What emerged from the Sacramento planning stage over the course of the next three to four years, during the implementation phase of the plan, was a set of structures and policies that laid the ground work for engaging students at the school and district levels These included 1) hiring a coordinator for districtwide student government and one adult high school coordinator for each high school; 2) monthly SAC meetings and weekly SAC executive board meetings; 3) active youth voice on various district committees; and 4) the development of Board Policy Priority# 2: Student engagement, development and "voice," which reads: *We will promote active participation of our students in the design and delivery of teaching and learning; provide opportunities for the students to play a leadership role in decisions that directly affect them; and proactively solicit students' perspectives in our decision-making.*

The Seeds of Youth Engagement

At the City and County Level

Youth engagement has always been a vibrant part of the social landscape in Sacramento county and city. In 2005, America's Promise and the Alliance for Youth identified Sacramento County as a winner of the first national competition for the 100 Best Communities for Young People. Sacramento County also boasts a dynamic youth commission[16] that reports directly to the county's board of supervisors on issues related to young people. Fifteen young people are selected from over 100,000 students who attend one of the county's 43 middle or junior high schools. The youth commissioners collaborate with local government to identify concerns of Sacramento County youth and to build a better community for Sacramento's youth.

Like Sacramento County, the City of Sacramento also sponsors a youth commission.[17] The young people who serve as representatives to the commission are selected from each of the eight districts within city boundaries and serve as an advisory group to the city council, providing recommendations on youth-related issues. As a city, Sacramento continues to make great strides towards developing an infrastructure to support the social and educational development of its young people. The list of nongovernment resources to support youth development in Sacramento is equally impressive.

At the District and School Level

By all accounts, youth engagement as a value in SCUSD predated the interest in pursuing a high school reform agenda. As discussed below, two of the primary structures for youth engagement had long been in place in Sacramento. In fact, nearly all those interviewed at the site and district level suggest that youth engagement had long been seen as a natural and essential part of restructuring schools. One former administrator stated, "[Youth engagement] was part of the non-negotiables for each of the high schools… I can't remember student voice not being there." Another administrator stated, "From the very beginning, students were strategically placed on those planning committees. What the outcomes were going to be, we had no idea."

From the outset, Sacramento included youth engagement as part of planning process for its high school redesign initiative. The definition used for this work was what one interviewee called an "activist definition" of youth engagement: youth participation in planning and decision-making at the school sites and district level.

To support this work, in 2000 SCUSD contracted the California Center for Civic Participation and Youth Development to solicit student feedback on the challenges and strengths of SCUSD district schools. Established in 1972, the California Center engages youth in the democratic process by providing opportunities for middle and high school youth to participate in civic education, leadership, and service programs that directly connect to local, state and federal issues.

"Schools and school districts are the most difficult and slow to change. There was a distorted picture of what kind of change was possible."

Jim Muldavin,
Executive director, California Center for Civic Participation

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[16] See www.youthcommission.saccounty.net/default.htm.

[17] See www.cityofsacramento.org/Youth-Development/new-youth-commission.cfm

According to Executive Director Jim Muldavin, this contract became legendary because people were not used to spending that much—$60,000—on youth engagement:

> The contract challenged people to truly invest in student engagement, to put a "monetary value on youth engagement…. There is a] willingness to pay this kind of money to engage adults or on other consultants but not with youth engagement. This is challenging work and needs the commitment of resources."

Less than ten percent of the funds went to the California Center; the bulk went to stipends for students and adults working on the project.

Despite the controversy around the contract, the grant terms were accepted by the district. The California Center hired a core group of 30 to 40 students, called youth directors, from a diverse range of backgrounds and experiences, to survey SCUSD students. With support from the center, the youth directors studied a broad range of educational literature, determined key areas of potential student concerns identified in the literature, drafted a survey, and distributed it to between 1,500 and 2,000 students across the district. The survey asked students to identify the best aspects of their school/district as well as its biggest problems. Results of the survey revealed students' interest in smaller classes, a flexible schedule, the use of youth-friendly language and a variety of teaching strategies in the classroom, and increased counseling and social supports in school.

At the end of the eight-month project, the youth directors and California Center staff drafted a proposal for how to proceed with high school redesign in SCUSD. This was presented to the superintendent and the school board in spring 2001. A major component of this initial proposal was to create more egalitarian, site-based leadership structures to allow a broader base of students to participate in decision-making processes at the school and district levels. [It was this recommendation that led to the creation of youth congresses at each of the school sites, as discussed in the next section.] While there was conviction at the district level that youth engagement was important in high school redesign, and although it was supported by consistent language in the initial redesign grant proposal and in the planning phases, it wasn't clear what provisions would be made for training or what plans would be implemented for making this vision a reality. No preparation was included for young people or adults. One interviewee stated:

> The youth development approach was beginning to take hold. [The district] liked youth development in the abstract but couldn't figure how to move it from the abstract to practice. Also, there weren't many models to draw from.

As a result, while the district adopted an activist definition of youth engagement, youth engagement as a practice tended to reflect what one interviewee called a "nice growth experience for young people" that was "helpful for youth down the road but not for the problems here and now.

However, Sacramento was not the only SNS site that struggled with how to make youth engagement a reality. One interviewee suggested that youth engagement wasn't seen as crucial by grantors either. "Grantees were not held accountable if they didn't meet youth engagement objectives." While the SNS request for proposals had included youth engagement in its considerations of high school redesign, there didn't appear to be much impetus to holding districts accountable for implementing youth engagement strategies.

Moving from Value to Practice: Structures of Youth Engagement

One way SCUSD worked to implement its youth engagement ideals was to utilize existing structures within the district to move the work.

In 1998, the SCUSD central office created a new division, Community, Health and Education Support Services (CHESS).[18] The objective of the CHESS unit was to provide the health and learning support services that children and families need for success. The CHESS division oversees much of the student engagement and student support work initiated by the district office through its youth development support services department (YDSS). YDSS provides support to teachers and school site administrators in creating an environment conducive to the achievement of academic and social-emotional, success for all students. In addition to the YDSS Office, the CHESS Division houses the student advisory council and the student board member.

"Having youth voice doesn't mean just having youth at a meeting nor does it imply that a couple of youth can speak for all youth."

Former student engagement coordinator

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[18] See www2.scusd.edu/CHESS_Division/home.htm.

While its exact formation date is unclear, SAC is a districtwide body that has been around at least since the 1980s.[19] In its early days, SACs membership was composed of students elected to the traditional student government on their campus.[20] Prior to the high school reform efforts, SAC focused on conducting districtwide activities (for example, suicide awareness week) rather than exclusively focusing on the promotion of student voice and participation in decision making.

When high school reform was undertaken across Sacramento, SAC was redesignated as the districtwide vehicle for student voice (as discussed below). And, rather than targeting those students who were in traditional student government classes, the decision was made to create alternate youth leadership structures (called "youth congresses") on each of the high school campuses and to recruit students from these alternate structures to take part in SAC. Part of the impetus for moving away from traditional leadership classes was the belief that by doing so, SAC could better reflect the diversity of the school district and recruit students other than the "popular" and usually over-committed students who traditionally participate in student government.

Youth Congresses

Youth congresses were entirely new structures developed as part of the high school reform effort in Sacramento. They met on a regular basis (determined by each high school) to discuss site policy or school topics. These discussions were then brought forward to the monthly SAC meetings.

In contrast to traditional student governments, which tend to focus on school activities, youth congresses focused specifically on high school improvement/redesign and promoting student voice. They were envisioned to be the student voice guiding high school redesign implementation at the campus level. Also, unlike traditional student government structures, participants did not need to be elected in order to participate in a youth congress. In many cases, this allowed for a greater representation of the diversity of the student body in terms of race/ethnicity, family context,[21] socioeconomic status, and academic achievement.

A 2006-07 youth congress student member explained, "Student government is a popularity game. I would have never gotten into it." In effect, youth congresses created a campus-based leadership outlet for those students who were interested in leadership but not in student government or who were not elected in their campus' student government elections.

> "High schools are like their own cities. [The principal is the mayor] and the "mayor" makes a big difference. Some get it, some don't. Some don't see the connection between their immediate problems and student voice."
>
> Adult interviewee

Each youth congress was supported by site-based adult advisors. Generally, the adult advisors were teachers, although sometimes they were counselors, school improvement facilitators, or athletic coaches. Depending on the campus, the adult advisor was selected or appointed by the principal, self-selected, or recruited by students. School principals also signed memoranda of understanding (MOUs) with the youth congresses promising to listen to students and to support both the congresses and the SAC. These MOUs proved to be beneficial in some sites where administration support for youth congresses and SAC waned.

During the early phases of the high school reform work, all campuses, including the charter schools and the alternative schools, had an identified youth congress, though participation and success varied from campus to campus. On the campuses where youth congresses were particularly strong, students were actively engaged with student voice and high school improvement issues. Some youth congresses, such as those at Hiram Johnson and Rosemont High Schools, helped to formulate and select the focus on SLCs and to familiarize and recruit incoming students into particular SLCs. Others, such as John F. Kennedy and Luther Burbank high schools, created and analyzed campuswide surveys to get a handle on student experiences and concerns. Still others, such as Luther Burbank and West Campus, organized dialogues about advisories and their powerful impact on both students and teachers. Finally, some schools, such as Luther Burbank and C.K. McClatchy, advocated for alternatives to suspension/expulsion as disciplinary options for students.

However, the turnover of youth congress advisors was a continuous problem. One youth congress member stated that she had three different youth congress advisors during her four years as a student at John F. Kennedy High School. Site-based youth congress work is labor intensive and time-consuming and financial support was inconsistent.[22] Advisors who thrived in this position tended to burn out quickly, and those less at ease with working with students in such a capacity had difficulty learning the ropes, particularly as there was little central office and site-based training and support available for them.

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[19] One of the teachers interviewed for this paper had graduated from an SCUSD high school in the 1980s and had been a part of the SAC.
[20] It is unclear if alternative schools existed at this time and/or if they participated in the SAC.
[21] I.e., students living in intact families, living with grandparents, foster children, etc.
[22] In some years, advisors received $2,000 stipends for their work, while in other years, especially towards the end of the SNS grant, they did not.

In addition, it was the advisors' responsibility to provide transportation for their students to attend the SAC meetings, but as most were also full-time teachers in addition to youth congress advisors, this proved to be a challenge. It was also difficult for them to manage permission slips and to find other teachers to cover their classes; and they were not reimbursed for driving expenses; nor were they allotted funds to utilize substitutes to cover their classes.

While the youth congress structure was intended to be more inclusive and a more meaningful way for students to participate in their local campus's decision-making and reform efforts, it wasn't always clear to some sites how the youth congress was to differ from student government, site councils, or other campus decision-making bodies. Indeed, some youth congresses were perceived as redundant, and there was criticism that they took the pressure off student governments to reconsider their structures and inclusiveness. In schools where youth congresses were not firmly rooted in larger campus structures, they were vulnerable to advisor turnover and lack of support from campus administration.

In schools that lacked formally supported student leadership structures before e21, the student voice function of the youth congress and the activities function of student government were blended into one. Blending posed its own problems, as the advisors were required to wear several hats in terms of promoting student leadership. Many advisors in this position found planning events and promoting student voice required different skill-sets.

Despite the various challenges facing the newly created youth congresses, the site-based attention to issues of youth engagement did seem to create some culture shifts on campus. One comprehensive high school teacher noted:

> What happens on a campus is your work becomes one dimensional. However, the attention to student engagement at my site created a structure and provided a model for me to interact with students in a new way. Now, when I am there at school, I need to be there for the students. And I saw other shifts too. I saw teachers eating lunch with students in their rooms, and teachers creating interpersonal relationships over a meal.

Advisories

In addition to youth congresses, advisories were intended to be the primary vehicles for moving youth engagement into daily practice on high school campuses. Although the actual implementation of advisories varied from campus to campus (i.e., some held them once a week, some twice a week, some every day), the basic structure was the same. A small, manageable number of students were assigned to an adult on campus (teachers, administrators and other staff). The advisor/advisee relationship was to be maintained for the entire duration of the student's high school career. The goal was that during the advisory periods each week, students and adults on campus would begin to forge meaningful relationships with one another. In addition, these adults would be responsible for monitoring the academic progress of their advisees and serve as points of contact for their advisees' parents.

Conceptually, advisories are a promising mechanism to simultaneously address several of the essential goals of high school redesign, such as reducing student alienation and improving student motivation and student retention. In practice, however, advisories were subject to a tremendous amount of resistance, and, on most campuses, they weren't implemented for much longer than a year.[23]

The most pronounced objections to advisories came from the teachers' union. From the union's perspective, advisories posed several problems. First, there was a lack of guidance as to what teachers were supposed to do with students during these advisory periods. No clear curriculum had been established, nor had teachers been provided training with regard to advisory. Second, some teachers were resistant to or uncomfortable with the expectation that they begin to form more personal relationships with students. The discomfort or resistance seemed to vary from a belief that relationship-building is outside the acceptable duties of a classroom teacher to the disbelief that, as teachers, they could effectively engage with students. One teacher from Burbank High School stated, "I can be a good classroom teacher but I can't empower students on those levels." The final issue of contention for the union was the belief that advisories resulted in extra work for teachers and that this extra work was not matched with financial compensation. As a result of the union's objections, the advisories were eliminated in the 2004 collective-bargaining agreement.

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[23] Advisories were implemented during the 2003-04 school year. They are still used at the small schools as the school charter contract allows these schools more flexibility in negotiating teaching terms.

Despite the union's objections, some teachers and students had managed to build strong relationships and were deeply affected by their experiences with advisories. One interviewee's account of a 2004 districtwide panel held on advisories suggested that audience members were so moved by student and teachers accounts of advisories that they became tearful. "It was an emotional affair. The sight of students breaking down got to all of us."

According to several interviewees both inside and outside the school system, the loss of advisories dealt a significant blow to high school reform in Sacramento. A district progress report cited the demise of advisories as one of the most significant setbacks of 2004.

This setback not only impaired the ability of schools to foster stronger relationships between adults and students and personalize the school environment, it also made it more difficult to track student behavior and success. Advisories were the structures set up to teach students how to read their transcript, plan their classes, plan for college, and so forth. Advisors were assigned a manageable number of students they could monitor their grades and behavior. They provided, for the first time in a long time, a way for parents to have a relationship with at least one adult on the campus who knew their child. With the loss of advisories, most of these benefits were lost without a subsequent replacement.

The Redesigned Student Advisory Council

> "If you are going to engage students and teach them to have a voice, there has to be a paid staff person devoted to that. The other side of that—and this is something we didn't do—that same person needs to teach the adults how to listen, how to allow, how to make room for student voice."
>
> Former student board member

While Sacramento's high school redesign initiative mostly affected students at the large, comprehensive schools or the small charter schools, every school, including the alternative schools, were invited to have students participate in AC. The inclusion of the alternative schools proved to be an important means by which to get feedback on the large, comprehensive schools (as many of the students who attended the alternative high schools had been unsuccessful or pushed out of the comprehensive high schools) and to ensure that a broad cross section of the district's student population was represented on SAC. There was a strong belief that the redesigned SAC would only be successful if it could tap into a broader range of the student population.

Prior to the high school redesign initiative, there was no full-time youth engagement coordinator (YEC) to serve as the SAC adult advisor. And, during the five years of the e21 high school reform initiative, the YEC position experienced a significant amount of turnover.

First, there was inconsistent support for the position. In its earliest stages, the YEC position was held by a district staff person, with 20 percent of her time dedicated specifically to SAC. After this person left for another academic position, the position remained unfilled for just over a year. In the meantime, SCUSD and LEED hired Bernie Davitto of Alliance for Education Solutions as a youth engagement consultant. Keenly aware that the YEC position needed a minimum of one full-time staff person to manage the youth engagement component of the initiative, Mr. Davitto, along with several student SAC members advocated with the school board, the district, and LEED for the creation of such a position.

LEED took the initiative to hire a full time youth engagement coordinator in March 2004. In June 2005, LEED's YEC left the position. In the fall of 2005, LEED hired a second YEC, and the district appointed a half-time district YEC. Both positions were terminated in spring 2006, and in October 2006 a district employee was appointed as YEC at 80 percent time.

Despite the high turnover of the youth coordinator position, SAC continues to serve as the main representative body of students to the SCUSD administration and the SCUSD Board of Education. SAC collaborates with the board and the central office on school-site and districtwide policy and works to strengthen student voice.

Due to the loss of youth congresses at some of the high school sites, current SAC membership is comprised of a blend of students from each participating high school's youth congress and/or from their student leadership classes. SAC meetings are a forum for students to voice their concerns, both in regards to their school site and to districtwide policies. The SAC executive board has eight positions, five of which are elected: student board member, president, vice president, secretary, and treasurer. The three additional student representatives—one for marketing, one for communications, and one as a historian—are appointed by the elected SAC board members.

In 2006-07, the SAC structure included four committees, three of which were directly aligned with the district's strategic plan and pre-existing central office committees. Three of the task forces include academic, nutrition/lunch, and school safety. The fourth committee, school recognition, did not have a district committee with which to partner.

Student Board Member

The SCUSD Student Board Member sits with the SCUSD board during all public and private meetings, with few exceptions.[24] The position was made possible by California legislation that made provisions in the state education code allowing for a student representative to serve as a school board member. The legislation was optional, and school districts were not mandated to create student board member positions. Students in school districts without a representative could generate a petition that could compel their school districts to create a student board member position; however, in SCUSD, this type of mobilization wasn't necessary, as the school district created the position willingly.

The student board member has an "advisory vote" on all decisions being made by the SCUSD School Board; while student board member votes become part of institutional memory through the board minutes, their votes are not included in the final results that determine particular outcomes. At the start of the e21 initiative, school board members considered giving full voting rights to the student member but were unable to implement this idea, as state legislation prohibited it.[25]

However, the willingness to entertain the idea of giving student board members voting privileges reflects the district's general receptiveness to student voice and participation in decision making. And even without an official vote, there is some evidence that the votes of the student board members influence the voting of adults on the board. Jerry Houseman, current School Board Second Vice President and a school board member since 2004 stated: "I base many of my votes on what the students want and what they think is the correct direction. And I believe it's affected the other board members, also."

The student board member is elected by the SAC membership, and he/she acts as the intermediary between SAC (and the larger high school student body) and the school board. The connection between the student board member and SAC is invaluable for both the student board member and SAC. Each provides a vital connection with the other's constituency.

For example, the student board member helps get SAC on the board's agenda—no easy feat. During her tenure during the 2004-05 school year, student school board member Michelle Parilo was able to secure ten minutes on every board meeting agenda for SAC. Sometimes this time was used by the student board member to update the board and the community on SAC activities or to make a formal presentations; sometimes this time was used by school sites to present on their site's efforts toward increasing student engagement at their campus.

At the same time, through the student board member and SAC, the school board can solicit feedback on a particular problem, recruit student participants for board/district committees, and relay messages to the larger high school student body. Beyond providing a regular channel between the board and SAC, and by extension the school sites, the regular agenda time during board meetings maintains a necessary and consistent focus on student engagement. This focus undoubtedly influenced the district's policy priorities in its 2004-06 and 2006-08 Strategic Plans, which clearly support and advocate for student voice and engagement.

Students who serve as board members don't necessarily receive explicit training and support for their new position. Generally, there is an overlap of one or two board meetings where both the entering and the exiting student board member interact. However, there is no formalized process for familiarizing students with their new role as student board members or for training the adults who are or will be working with these students. Because the students who serve as student board members tend to be seasoned leaders and possess developed leadership skills, the lack of training hasn't appeared to result in significant problems for the students' participation in board member discussions and events.

However, student board members confess that the job is extremely taxing when combined with all the other responsibilities students have, especially as juniors and seniors. Students serving as board members could undoubtedly use training and support in order to fulfill their obligations as board members and to further hone their leadership skills and manage their time between board, school, and other responsibilities. While students receive a district-paid cell phone and an office space, there are no other financial provisions for student board members. This could have implications in terms of the types of students who could fulfill the obligations of student board member (i.e., students who have significant parental support in terms of providing transportation and/or who don't need a part-time job are more likely to participate.)

"I remember often thinking that student engagement was a reform initiative in and of itself. Rather than changing the structures of how students are moved from one class to the next, from one grade to the next, student engagement changes the fundamental nature of how students interact with their campus and with the adults on their campus."

Former youth engagement coordinator

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[24] E.g., disciplinary personnel issues.
[25] Because school board positions are elected positions and, in general, student board members are not of legal age to participate in citywide elections, there was no option to give SCUSD's Student Board Members voting privileges.

Assessing Progress: Institutionalization and Sustainability

Sacramento's Challenges with Youth Engagement

The experiences with SAC, the youth congresses, and advisories highlight three fundamental challenges to the effective implementation of youth engagement in Sacramento: (1) the lack of training and preparation for adults, (2) the lack of training and support for young people, and, (3) the difficulty of changing school culture. Each of these three challenges is discussed below.

"Adults Need to Walk the Talk": The Role of Adults in Youth Engagement

In Sacramento's "Site Reflection and Sustainability Review" paper on the high school reform initiative, published in March 2007, the authors note the importance of professional development:

> *Through the struggle to include youth engagement as an integral part of the Initiative, it has become increasingly clear that professional development [should] center on youth development, asset development, and youth-adult collaboration, [and that these] should be offered on an ongoing basis (p. 36).*

While the paper is not explicit in stating to whom this training should be provided, interviews with students, teachers, administrators and district personnel suggest that training of adults would be beneficial at all levels. A former student, reflecting on her experiences at McClatchy High School states:

> *Administrators get stuck in their day-to-day lives, making all the decisions. Students had to go to administrators rather than vice versa. It was a real challenge to mobilize faculty and students to come together.*

The lack of training for adults may reflect a larger general attitude of the district toward incorporating students into the decision-making fold. The expectation is that students will do a majority of the pursuing, adapting, and learning to participate in decision-making process on their own or that students who are invited to participate already possess developed leadership skills. This assumes that adults (board members and superintendents) already know how to work with student leaders and that the student will already know how to participate in these adult-dominated environments.

Specifically, according to several interviewees, adult board members and central office staff could use training and support in working with the student board member and the students who participate in the board/district committee meetings. While many adults in these venues express an interest in and support for student voice, there is still confusion about what it means to really listen to youth voice. In addition, interviewees also noted that the meetings do not always facilitate youth participation because of when and where they are scheduled and the overuse of jargon that students do not understand.

A former youth engagement coordinator emphasized the lack of adult clarity around authentic youth engagement and the pressures this lack of clarity put on her as the YEC.

> *Especially in an environment where adults do not always understand what it means to authentically involve students, there are times when there is a tension between being the 'youth person' to the adults and being the 'youth person' to the students. Adults that may not understand what it means to involve youth in a genuine way have the tendency to see the "youth person" as a "bank for youth". In other words, if they need some students, they go to the 'youth person' to get them. They may not see the value or necessity of involving young people in the pre/post processes or the necessity for building ongoing relationships with students. In these cases, student participation is often an afterthought or sometimes even a rubber stamp on what adults have already decided they want to do.*

The Role of Young People in Youth Engagement

Just as there are challenges for adults in engaging young people, so too are there challenges for young people. Beyond the logistical challenges of finding transportation to meetings and attending meetings that conflict with their obligations as students, it is sometimes difficult for students to engage in decision-making processes that have been historically dominated by adults. One youth engagement coordinator stated that a major part of her job is to be "honest with students, to help them learn the politics. I know the system and I teach them how it works, who to talk to, how they should talk to them, what their strategy should be."

> *"In many respects, this change could be perceived as much more threatening than whether or not the campus is broken up into SLCs or has two lunches. This is not intended to downplay the importance of structural changes but to emphasize that changing the way adults regard students on school campuses requires a different and perhaps more intimate type of self-reflection than adjusting to a new classroom or a new bell schedule, a type of self-reflection that forces adults to confront their perceptions, biases, and fears surrounding young people."*
>
> Former youth engagement coordinator

A student member of the SAC's Executive Board emphasized the difficulty in being a student leader in this kind of initiative. "It's entirely different than being the president of a club. There's no time for training. You just have to catch on." Another SAC executive board member stated that they easily spend 25 hours a week on SAC-related activities and projects, and lamented, "We should get credit for this."

In the March 2007 "Site Reflection and Sustainability Review" report on progress of the high school reform, SCUSD identified one of the key challenges to youth engagement:

> A gap still exists between youth voice and school policy. Youth groups need to develop a
> better understanding of educational programs and policies (p. 35).

While adults should recognize their critical role in translating educational policies for young people, this report highlights an important limitation for young people: understanding the complexity of creating and implementing school and district policy.

Interviewees recognized this lack of knowledge on the part of youth, but were quick to emphasize that sustained financial and staff support for youth engagement would help young people to overcome this barrier. School board member Jerry Houseman stated:

> When SAC had full-time support, it was really going, a winning outfit. Now they are on their
> own much more than they were. The SAC isn't as strong as it was. Youngsters do not have the
> support and they need it. They can come up with some great ideas but they do need some
> consistent support, the adult support.

Beginning of a Culture Shift at the District Level

Youth engagement has been one of the district's top priorities since at least 2004, where it appeared in both its 2004-06 and its 2006-08 strategic plans.[26] During the 2004-06 school years, the primary means by which SCUSD worked to promote student engagement, development, and voice was through training campus staff and administrators in the "youth asset development" model. The district's emphasis on asset development and the connection between asset development and student engagement is highlighted in the March 2006 progress paper.[27] However, the district's 2006 progress report concluded that these efforts did not necessarily result in youth involvement in decision making or stronger connections with adults.

In response, the district reinterpreted student engagement in 2006-08. Under the heading "Policy Priority: Student engagement, development and 'voice,'" the 2006-08 strategic plan states, "We will promote active participation of our students in the design and delivery of teaching and learning; provide opportunities for the students to play a leadership role in decisions that directly affect them; and proactively solicit students' perspectives in our decision-making." While the priority itself remained the same from 2004-06 to 2006-08, the more recent plan represents a fundamental shift in terms of how student engagement is understood by SCUSD's central office. The shift—from a focus on training adults on the principles of asset-development to a focus on incorporating students into decision-making processes—may indicate a fundamental culture shift. Also, significantly, in the 2006-08 strategic plan the district outlines its intention to spread student engagement to the middle school level.

Informal interviews with district personnel provide further evidence of a culture shift at the district level. When several members of the superintendent's cabinet and central office staff were questioned as to whether districtwide youth engagement efforts would continue, the response was "unquestionably." A spokesperson for the assistant superintendent of the CHESS division stated that the district is looking for funds "to support a youth engagement coordinator for next year and beyond." An associate superintendent of one of the district's learning support units suggested that youth engagement has become so embedded within the culture of the district office that it has became a "source of embarrassment not to have students on district committees."

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[26] In both plans, policy priority 2.0 is listed as "Student engagement, development and voice."
[27] www.scusd.edu/administration/StrategicPlan04-06/StrategicPlan.htm.

Sacramento: An Update

Despite the leadership changes in Sacramento, both at the superintendent and central office level, student engagement and active youth voice remains a strong and viable part of the district culture. As of the writing of this paper (January 2009), SAC remains a vibrant and active mechanism for student voice and engagement at the district level, with an average of 45 students from 13 sites. The council meets monthly, and its executive board meets weekly to manage the work load. SAC representatives now sit on several school board committees, including committees on safety and violence prevention, health and nutrition, and youth graduation, and SAC members meet regularly with committee board members.

A primary avenue of engagement now is student ambassadorships. Ambassadorships consist of teams of six students from the participating sites, representing their school site, the district, and the community. Student ambassadors are members of the site-based youth congresses, and the chair person for each school site ambassadorship is a student from the SAC Executive Board. This allows information to flow back down to the school level and up to the district level.

The ambassadorships are organized as follows:

1) **SCUSD Community Leadership Ambassadors**
   This group of students has the widest focus, working with state and community agencies, as well as city and county offices on youth-related concerns and relevant issues, as determined by the student representatives.

2) **After School Leadership Ambassadors**
   This group of students has a districtwide focus on issues relevant only to SCUSD high school sites and participates on the school board's Safety and Violence Prevention Committee.

3) **School Site Leadership Ambassadors**
   This group of students has the most defined focus and assists in planning the small school youth forums and SAC leadership camps, and reviews school-site nutrition/lunch concerns.

At the school level, student engagement structures and practices vary across the district; however, in most schools, youth congresses still remain in place, although they do vary in capacity and scope. Yet, despite the variation across the schools, the ideas of student-centered high schools and youth voice have become part of the culture, and, for many teachers and administrators, these ideas are central themes in conversations about teaching and learning and school climate and culture.

SAC students continue to give monthly reports to the board, and the super-intendent's cabinet asks questions of SAC students. In addition, the SAC advisory board was recently invited to meet with middle and high school managers for their input on some pending issues.

According to one district employee, while the environment in Sacramento still has many challenges, youth voice and the student-centered curriculum, particularly at the district level, have greatly added to the richness of the dialogue and the improvement of student morale, while ensuring that student needs and concerns help shape the future direction of the district. This district staff person stated:

One thing that has changed is that at a school board level everyone expects to hear the student's point of view, and many board members count on that to help them decide their vote. Now that's progress.

V. Lessons Learned/Critical Elements

While neither Boston nor Sacramento has fully institutionalized or perfected systemic youth engagement, these school districts are in the vanguard of urban districts around the country doing this ground-breaking work. Their efforts represent those of a small number of districts nationwide that have managed to infuse elements of systemic youth engagement both at the school and district level.

Their hard work—much of it based on trial, error, and pure determination— over the course of the last six to seven years has generated important lessons on what to do, what not to do, and how to build a foundation for the work. Whether working from the top down or the bottom up, this list of lessons—which include structural, relational, and political pieces of the work—represents the critical elements necessary to begin building systemic, districtwide youth engagement structures or connecting already existing strategies and structures to a larger, systemic, student engagement agenda.

Lessons Learned/Critical Elements

1. **Building a foundation for systemic youth engagement** across a school district requires a coordinated campaign, employing multiple strategies simultaneously, executed by a range of partners both inside and outside the school system.

2. **Systemic youth engagement requires buy-in and support** from the superintendent and school board/committee and multiple champions inside and outside of the system to support and push the work. This means the inclusion of youth engagement as a districtwide policy at the school board level and it gives leverage to move and fund the work.

3. **While the institutionalization of student engagement as a district-wide policy** is a necessary and key goal, student engagement practice and structures require central office and school-level support and buy-in from teachers, principals, and central office staff in order to be operationalized and sustained. This means actively engaging all staff in the process and developing an atmosphere of community-building. Only when all members of the district and school are fully invested in a student engagement agenda can the agenda move forward successfully.

4. **Effective youth engagement strategies must work** to create and allow time for culture change. Creating a cultural shift begins with building close relationships and trust at all levels of the education system. Specifically, maintaining frequent individual contact with allies and potential allies proved to be the linchpin of success in both Sacramento and Boston. Personal relationships lead to personal change, which through constant lobbying can lead to greater social change.

5. **Effective youth engagement needs the consistent commitment of staff time** and financial resources, both existing and potential. If the institutionalization of authentic youth engagement is to truly become an operative goal, achieving it will require new combinations of resources and dedicated staff working together in more effective ways. A full-time staff person at the district is essential, as is having a designated person at the school site.

6. **An insider-outsider partnership model is critical** to both moving and sustaining a youth engagement agenda at the district level. Intermediary organizations and other "outsider" community-based organizations (ones that are not entrenched in district bureaucracy) offer enthusiasm and a fresh perspective to help to energize in-school staff; as well as ensure that student engagement initiatives become and remain a priority at the district level. Because of their flexibility and their ability to serve multiple advocacy, technical assistance, fund-raising, research and evaluation roles, an "outsider" can push the work in ways an insider might not be able to. Conversely, working in partnership with an internal staff person is critical to developing legitimacy in the district, to align with district policies and priorities, and to impact institutional cultures and practices.

7. **Effective youth engagement advocates need to be flexible** and resourceful and teach young people how to be this way: This means employing multiple strategies simultaneously, committing to long campaigns without clear end dates, and ensuring that all involved parties are following through on their responsibilities.

8. **Effective youth engagement needs ongoing and meaningful training** of young people and adults. Ongoing training on multiple levels is crucial as school systems are not set up to stimulate and support authentic engagement and interaction between youth and adults. This training should occur at the school, district, and school board levels. Topics could include tangible skills such as effective youth-adult partnership models, basic skills training, and organizing methods and advocacy techniques, as well as broader themes such as confronting adultism. These trainings can take the form of workshops, retreats, seminars, or meetings and should be conducted by both young people and adults.

"The accomplishments aren't always concrete at first. It takes time to build a foundation, to try and change a mind-set, a culture."

De Doan, 2006-07
Sacramento student
board member

"Part of my responsibility was to teach adults how to work with students in a new way. This requires a some-what different skill-set than working with and engaging young people. In many respects, you need someone that can play both sides of the fence and code-switch when communicating with adult school district staff and with young people."

Former youth engagement
coordinator, Sacramento

9. **Effective youth engagement requires finding a balance** between making time and creating spaces for young people and adults to meet during school hours and giving young people opportunities to meet and act on their own. At the same time, the importance of trusting young people to have ideas and act on them without interference from adults is also crucial. Adult allies should offer support when needed, but also know when to step back and allow young people to grow as individuals.

10. **Youth engagement initiatives must develop more creative ways of measuring accomplishments,** including mechanisms for self-assessment and opportunities for feedback from outsiders and "critical friends." Developing measures of success is crucial to both the ongoing support and funding of youth engagement measures. Multiple mechanisms for measurement must be developed at the district, school, and community levels. Youth and adults should work together to develop both quantitative and qualitative measures. Community members, parents, law enforcement officials, and other involved parties should also be given a platform to reflect on how the initiatives are affecting the community at large.

11. **Effective youth engagement strategies must include pressure releases** to prevent youth and adult burnout. Many young people are balancing various forms of oppression (racism, poverty, violence, etc.), as well as managing tremendous social pressure. Trying to effectively build a movement, maintain momentum, keep organized, and fulfill the many roles that they are sometimes expected to play can be a trying experience, especially if they have no comfortable space to work through their feelings. Support groups, organized social activities, staff appreciation events, and even shared meals can alleviate some of the pressure and help both youth and adults break down the barrier of isolation. This leads back to effective relationship-building and greater social change.

12. **Effective youth engagement initiatives need to incorporate ongoing student recruitment** to account for the changing demographics of the student population and/or turnover in youth participants. A recruitment plan should involve specific outreach methods to all students, not just traditional student leaders. Recruitment should also be clear about commitment, as well as guidelines for selection and rejection.

Recommendations and Conclusion

To truly engage young people, schools, districts, and the organizations that support them 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. 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 engage young people in their own learning by creating engaging classrooms and schools with a culture and climate that makes students want to learn, take initiative, and seek out opportunities to learn and lead (Joselowsky, 2007).

According to Klem and Connell (2004), student engagement and improved academic outcomes are clearly linked:

> *Regardless of how engagement is defined, research indicates that higher levels of engagement are linked to improved academic performance in school. Student engagement has been found to be one of the most robust predictors of achievement and behavior in schools, a conclusion that holds regardless of whether students come from families that are relatively advantaged or disadvantaged socially or economically. Students who are engaged are also likely to earn higher grades and test scores and have lower dropout rates"* (p.5).

Engaging students requires a commitment from all levels of the education community and necessitates a dual focus on developing the capacity of youth and adults to work both individually and collaboratively. Creating pathways for and maintaining a focus on youth engagement in the context of low test scores, high achievement gaps, and under-performing high schools might appear to be a difficult charge, but it is an essential component of any school reform initiative. If the voices and input of students are ignored or lost in the shuffle, any intervention or reform initiatives run the risk of missing key indicators of success or failure. A renewed focus on the contribution of young people as viable partners in developing innovative solutions might be just the antidote we need for deep, lasting educational change.

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