

Motivation for Learning

Youth Voices for Educational Change

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A Discussion Among
High School Students at the
Council of Chief State School Officers
1999 Summer Institute

Alyeska, Alaska

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Contents

Introduction	1
Participants	2
Relationships	4
School Climate	6
Respect	8
Learning and Teaching	10
Reality-Based Learning	12
Agenda for Change	14

The Forum for Youth Investment

The Forum for Youth Investment was created to increase the quality and quantity of youth investments and youth involvement by promoting a “big picture” approach to planning, research, advocacy and policy development among the broad range of national organizations that help constituents and communities invest in children, youth and families. To do this, the Forum commits itself to building connections, increasing capacity and tackling persistent challenges within the youth fields.

The Forum offers its members tools, intelligence, training, international perspectives and individual supports. It creates opportunities for youth investors to come together in neutral forums to tackle persistent challenges such as shaping public perceptions of young people and strengthening the links between preventing youth problems and promoting youth preparation and development. It helps identify, facilitate and broker relationships among members, offering them new lenses for looking at old issues, supports to turn the ideas into action and vehicles to reflect back on lessons learned. It works to ensure that the information, tools and insights generated by the Forum and its members are shaped by and useful to local communities and practitioners. It asks members to contribute commentary, products and time toward the creation of a shared information base. All this work is done in full partnership with Forum members, with the aim of increasing collective learning and action on “big picture” issues — issues that cross traditional sectors and lines, and which are beyond the capacity of any organization to tackle alone.

Introduction

Each year, the Council of Chief State School Officers hosts an institute for the educational leaders in all 50 states. In 1999, CCSSO asked the Forum (then IYF-US) to help bring the voices of students to this event — to help them hear firsthand what young people need and want from the nation's high schools.

Following are highlights from the conversation that resulted.

There is a pressing need for new voices in the national dialogue on school reform. These are the voices of young people themselves — students struggling, succeeding, or falling through the cracks in our public schools. Young people of all ages deserve a place in all of the discussions and decisions that impact their schools. But student input is especially critical at the high school level, as this is the place where they often turn off and have the option, as they get older, to walk off. We need their input if we are to create high schools that meet student needs and support student learning.

By inviting students into their midst, the Chief State School Officers acknowledge that young voices need to be heard even at the highest levels of educational decision-making. We at the Forum sincerely hope that this important step is followed by many others as educators, parents, students and community leaders look for ways to re-invent the nation's schools.

The Process

The conversation that follows is the result of a process of phone interviews, face-to-face meetings, and individual reflection. Merita Irby, the Forum's Deputy Director, spent time talking with each of the students involved in the panel, learning about their experiences in and visions for America's public high schools.

The day before their presentation, the student participants came together for a conversation — an open discussion about what makes schools work, what motivates students, and

how they learn. Merita acted as facilitator as the students shared their stories, determined the messages they wanted to get across, and set an agenda for the following day.

During the presentation itself, the students shared parts of this discussion — repeating and amplifying the stories, priorities, and visions they had talked through the day before. The informal flow of conversation brought out both their individual voices and the common themes across their experiences — shaping a clear set of goals for America's schools.

The Content

What motivates students to learn? This was the primary question addressed by these young people. Through their diverse voices emerged several important themes. Certain words and phrases — relationships, recognition, responsibility, school environments — came up again and again. We learned two things from these conversations: 1) Students are as concerned with results as adults — they want to learn; and 2) far more than a narrow focus on academic standards is necessary in order to improve high schools so that sustained learning can occur. Don't let the section heads fool you: The students' emphasis on relationships, roles, respect and reality does not contradict the policymakers' emphasis on rigor, rules and required exams. Many educators affirm that these are, in fact, the means to achieving the high standards set. Enough said.

The words that follow do not need further interpretation or synthesis. They speak with a clarity of their own.

Acknowledgements

We would like to give special thanks to the people who made it possible for students to take part in this process: Cindy Brown and Rhonda Munford from CCSSO, and Becky Judd at the Alaska Department of Health and Social Services, who worked with her contacts to identify the students. It was their hard work that made this event possible.

— Karen Pittman
Executive Director, Forum for Youth Investment
Senior Vice President, IYF

Participants....

The students taking part in the discussion represent the range of Alaska's schools and public schools nation-wide — urban schools of more than 1,500 students, along with alternative schools with barely 80 students. They also represent a range of student interests and backgrounds — from artists to over-achievers to school drop-outs.

K8 Brown

I am 17 years old and have gone to four high schools — a small school of 300 students in Arizona, 2 large schools (over 1,000 students) in Virginia, and now Service High in Anchorage, which has 2,000 students. Next year I plan to go to Stellar High School in Anchorage. I had to participate in a lottery to get in.

I lettered in cross-country my freshman year in Arizona. I have many jobs during school and now work for the Anchorage Youth and Parent Foundation in the POWER (Peer Outreach Worker Education and Referral) program. I have two ferrets named Mary Jane and Weasel. When I get older, I plan on being a nurse. My mom was a construction worker on the Alaska pipeline for 14 years, but after I was born we moved to the lower 48 and have lived in many different states. We have also traveled to Europe. But I have also lived in Covenant House and been homeless.

Maia Butler

I am 15 years old and a sophomore honor roll student in honors classes at West High School, a large public school with a lot of ethnic diversity. I am an outreach worker for the POWER program. I was a foster kid, but I am now living on my own with a roommate.

Cameron Dorsey

I'm 17 years old and have been out of school and living on my own for two years. The last school I went to was Whaley High School, a small, violent school, pretty much for people who like to get in fights.

Right now I'm involved in the Anchorage Youth and Parent Foundation in the POWER program. We give kids advice on what they can do about school and other problems. I'm ADD/ADHD, which means that people need to use different ways to get my attention. It takes a little bit more to get me to apply myself — a little task seems too boring, and a big task seems too far away. I have to want to do something to do it.

Grace Dushkin

I attend Burchell High, a small alternative school that I enjoy more than the other larger schools because they involve me more here. I was able to help decorate for the prom and be involved in the Peer Outreach Program. This school focuses on the needs of the kids. I also have a second job as a hostess at Colony Kitchen. I know what I want out of life and I'm going to get it.

Chris Hoffmeyer

I go to Bartlett High School (about 1,500 kids). My family is military, so I get around. I run a computer literacy program here in Anchorage because I feel that technology is going to play a large role in the future. I am also on the Youth Commission for the city and Spirit of Youth. I work with an ABC-affiliated TV station to produce news stories on youth doing positive things in their communities. Also, Spirit of Youth helps pick news stories to be aired.

Carolynn Laliberte

I have a three-year-old son and I live on my own. I recently graduated from an alternative school (Burchell High School) and received a four-year scholarship to the University of Alaska where I plan to major in juvenile justice and psychology. I have also attended a traditional high school. For three years I have worked for the Peer Outreach Program, which teaches HIV and AIDS awareness. This job has opened opportunities for my future career, which I hope will be a combination of counseling and criminal justice – possibly at a juvenile detention center.

Sarah Lewis

I am 17 years old and a senior at Polaris K-12 Alternative, a small public school modeled on Socratic learning. Due to the educational direction students are able to provide for themselves at Polaris, I also take classes at the University of Alaska-Anchorage and East High School, a large traditional high school.

Arts activism, political activism, youth organizing, social justice, feminism, educational reform, environmental issues, racism, gay/lesbian rights, human rights and anti-homelessness are some of my more prominent passions. I plan to attend a liberal arts college after I graduate high school, and then explore the world.

Matt McCarron

I go to Burchell High School. I have been to only one other school, which was a lot larger than Burchell. My current school has only 200 students. The teachers are on a first-name basis. We don't have any extracurricular activities. And we believe in a very strict zero-tolerance rule. I am currently holding two jobs, going to school, and passing with good grades. I am in the Peer Outreach Program, which helps teens and gives them information about AIDS and other topics.

Merita Irby, Facilitator

As a classroom teacher, ethnographer and advocate, I have worked to ensure that youth perspectives and action are a part of educational and community change. After teaching in Central American and U.S. schools, I worked with student ethnographers on a five-year study of urban youth organizations. This work culminated in *Urban Sanctuaries: Neighborhood Organizations in the Lives and Futures of Inner-City Youth*, co-authored with Milbrey McLaughlin and Juliet Langman. Another by-product of this work was *Listen Up!*, a video-film targeted at decision-makers that I put together with a team of young people. Through work with Karen Pittman at the Center for Youth Development, the President's Crime Prevention Council, and the Forum for Youth Investment, I have had the privilege of working with young people across the U.S. and around the globe to ensure that their issues, ideas and solutions are a part of key discussions and decisions that affect them.

Relationships.....

Question:

How does knowing your teachers affect what you learn in school ?

Matt • In our school, the teachers become your friend more than just your teacher. When I went to a traditional high school for about two or three years, I became friends with a teacher, and I was singled out as teacher's pet just because I was his friend.

After a while I didn't like the traditional high school, and I left. I got into correspondence study, and I didn't do anything because I had no motivation. I didn't have anybody pushing me. I had paperwork, and I didn't know how to do it. There were instructions, but I'm not very good with instructions on paper. I'd rather have somebody explain it to me and help me out.

So I found my way to Burchell High School, and I met up with the teacher that I had become friends with at the traditional high school. He became my advisor, and he singled me out, because we had been friends for about four years. At Burchell High School, you aren't a teacher's pet the moment you talk to a teacher – because you *have* to check in every Friday. You have to talk to your advisors. If you want to change your class, you have to talk to them.

Merita • One thing you talked about yesterday is how teachers need to strike a balance between knowing you and always being in your face. How can they do that?

Matt • When teachers get on a one-on-one basis with you and become your friend, if you're having a rough day, they'll say, "Hey, buddy. What's up?" and they'll talk to you. If you don't want to talk to them, they totally understand and they'll leave.

Some students have a better relationship with other teachers, so they'll change their advisors.

Merita • What do better relationships have to do with learning?

Carolynn • I've been on a committee, a Common Solutions Committee, which is trying to improve schools. Even some of the parents we had on the committee were basically saying that school is an educational environment, and any type of home problems students have should be left to the parents.

That may sound true, but if you want students to learn, you have to do all you can to help them learn. And if they're having home problems, their ability to learn will be affected. I believe that if teachers are at least able to understand what students are going through, it will make a big difference in their education.

Some students like it when teachers are in their face, others don't. I think some teachers need to learn to be more real. Some teachers just basically treat you like a normal person, have a casual conversation. If somebody looks upset, you can tell, and if they want you to back away, you can sense it.

In our school, any type of problems we have – whether we need a job, or we broke up with a boyfriend, or our friend is pregnant, or we think we might have an STD, any type of issue you could think of – we know there's someone at our school we can tell who will give us a referral to a place where we can seek help.

And any of these issues can definitely impair your education. At a traditional high school – at least the high school that I went to – if I had any type of problems, school was the last place I thought of. My home life wasn't really helping me find a job or cope with any emotional problems I was having. I was just slowing failing school.

But if you want students to learn, you have to do all you can to help them learn. And if they're having home problems, their ability to learn will be affected.

But when you get to our school, all the teachers do is lift you up constantly. Any problem you can think of, you could find a resource there.

Chris • At my school, I wouldn't want to bring up any of my problems with my teachers. It feels as though I'm just one more person in the assembly line going through the classes. The teachers act like, "This is my classroom. You do it my way, and you'll learn it, and you move on."

If you come back the next year and say, "Hey, how are you doing?" they'll say, "Who are you?" The teachers are trying to get you through as fast as they can. They don't really stop to get to know you.

Merita • How can you avoid getting lost in a large school?

Sarah • It's not really humanly possible to ask a teacher to personally care about 1,500 or so students, which is what they see every day. My mother is a teacher, and she teaches in two large elementary schools, and she is expected to learn 1,100 kids' names. The difference between someone who is in your face and a friend is friends honestly care about you. Your best friend can't be in your face, because you know that they're honestly caring about you. It's part of the environment for any healthy relationship – they're just checking up on you.

Merita • Maia, you were telling us a story of the last semester and how it's possible not to get lost in the larger school – and that it's not just the teachers who can help.

Maia • I go to a big school and we have a variety of different types of teachers. There is the type of teacher that doesn't talk about any-

thing, but you come in and they say, "Sit down and get to work." The class is boring, and you just sit there and do whatever, and they're not somebody that you feel like you can talk to.

But there are also teachers who are nice and sit and talk to you and say, "How's your day?" The security guards are really friendly people who you can talk to. When you get in trouble, it's not that big a deal because they're nice about it.

I was having problems at the end of the year. It seemed like at that point in my life everything that could go wrong for me was going wrong. I didn't know who to go to. I was about to fail out of every single one of my classes,

and the person I went to talk to was the person who does attendance.

I ended up sitting there in his office for two hours and telling him everything that was going on, and he helped me with so much. He helped me get my classes back in order and get my work done. He set me up on a program where I could do my work at home and come into school to do the tests. He asked his sister if I could stay with her for a little bit, and let me borrow \$5 to get something to eat that day. I could just come and talk to him whenever I needed to. I don't think I'll ever forget him because he did a lot for me.

It's nice to have teachers and adults in the school that kids feel like they can go to when they have problems. I think schools need more of that.

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School Climate.....

Merita • You had a lot to say about the range of schools that you attend and the difference that size can make in creating positive learning environments. What's needed for a motivating learning environment? And what do you want to tell the Chiefs about what big schools can learn from small schools in creating places where students want to learn?

K8 • At some of the smaller schools I've been to, I found out it was a lot easier to find a connected environment, and that could be good or bad depending on the school environment in the first place. At larger schools, you tend to just be one in a million — sometimes you can get maybe 75 detentions, and they don't even know it because they don't keep track of them or they lose your credits. Bad things happen because there are too many students for them to keep track of and control.

Next year, I'm going to Stellar High School. It only has 300 students, and it's a very different environment. I think, with a smaller school, it's easier to have a trusting environment because there are no locks on the lockers. There aren't any bells. There's no detention. There are no security guards. It's easier for the students to trust each other. It's just a more laid back environment.

Carolynn • I agree with her that smaller school environments are a lot more close, especially between teachers and students. I went to a traditional high school, with about 1,500 students, and teachers were very distant, almost like they were in another state. They didn't know me, I didn't know them, and when I went to school, I felt no connection. Even if I had a problem, the thought of even going to them would not cross my mind. The conversations they had weren't normal, casual conversations — they were always about academics.

At the smaller schools — at least the school I go to — all our teachers are more personal with the students. They have more of a chance, because it's smaller. Each teacher has about 20 advisees. Each teacher has a role as a counselor.

And we have to check in with our teachers every Friday, talk about what we've done, and

Question:

The Chiefs are really responsible for all the schools — big as well as small. What concrete recommendations do you have for creating motivating environments for all students?

make goals for the week. Even though the students are in a more compact area, they get to know each other, and not so many people stay in their own little cliques. Even though there are still cliques, everybody has a type of personality, but they've still kind of combined in a sense because we all have to work together just to make our school work.

Chris • That's a lot different than the school I go to. I go to Bartlett, and there are about 1,500 students in that school. There are five counselors, and it comes out to 300 students per counselor. When you first start the year, if you want to change your schedule because they put you in some pretty lame classes, you've got to wait in line. You might have to wait a month, a month and a half. By the time they get to you, you know, their excuse is, "Well, sorry. We're already so many weeks into the school year. You can't change it."

It becomes quite difficult making any change in your schedule, or trying to take your education into your own hands.

Sarah • There are people who can find their way through traditional schools, but there are so many people who can't.

I go to a large school for one class every day, because I go to a small school that doesn't offer all of the classes that I need. I'm so glad I get to leave after an hour every day. I can't tell you what a liberating feeling it is. Walking through the halls, it's really scary to see all of these people who have no idea what they're doing there, who are totally lost and don't know why they should find something out, find people who they can trust, get an education out of that system. It doesn't work.

In a lot of high schools there's an entire authoritarian structure. Students are not

people. They're babysitting charges. You don't get looked at; you don't get respected. People glare at you. There are security guards in these schools. They carry guns. It scares me. I don't like being in that environment. That is not a safe environment for me.

I'm not afraid of being physically harmed. But that's not safe for the person that I want to become and the things that I want to do. And it stems from the fact that adults don't respect teenagers or youth. There are examples of the stereotypes to back that up, but not everyone is like that.

Merita • The Chiefs are really responsible for all the schools — big as well as small. What concrete recommendations do you have for creating motivating environments for all students?

Chris • I think that smaller schools need to be advertized. For instance, we have an alternative school here, Polaris, and I just learned yesterday that it is not a private school — it's an *alternative* school. If you just get the word out that there are options besides these giant schools. And maybe it would help to survey the students and parents to see what kind of environment they do prefer.

Sarah • Creating those options, not just educating about the other options, is what I think really needs to happen. I have never seen an example of a large school that can do it for everyone. I don't think it exists. I mean it's just too easy for people to get lost in there. I mean big volumes have never worked that way.

Merita • One of the things you put on the table yesterday was making teachers counselors in a way. Do you think that would work in a large school?

Carolynn • Like Maia was saying, the person she found wasn't even a teacher. If all the teachers could be like that, it would be nice, and that doesn't mean they have to go take psychology classes.

I'm not sure the solution is even necessarily to know every student in every class you have. Whenever you see someone, just say "Hi, how are you? Good day."

And if you see somebody getting harassed,

you could come in and stop it. If you see that somebody looks sad, you can say "Are you okay?" It's not necessarily knowing everybody, just being friendly.

You might not even know a student, and they might come up to you and say, "I need to ask you something."

And you might be thinking, "Wow, I don't even know you," but if you said "hi" a week ago, they may have thought, "Oh, wow, she's friendly. So I'm going to go talk to her because she's the only teacher that I really know."

Little things like that are easy to accomplish. I'm sure all of us are friends. I'm sure we have a brother or sister, a husband, a wife, a friend. So we all know how to do it — how to be friends. Just make sure you're doing it with everybody and not just the jocks or the really smart kids or the kids that are so shy you want to be their only friend, but with everybody. Just that sense right there will give them a reason to want to come to you with a problem.

If you can't handle that, you could always refer them or assist them in another way. You don't have to be afraid of giving the wrong information. Just be a friend.

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Respect.....

Chris • Most teenagers are involved in many other activities beyond school, whether it's a sport or advisory commission or youth employment project.

You want to help out the community by being in these programs, but at the same time, your schoolwork will suffer. So if there's some way we might be able to get credit, or get some help from the schools . . . I know it's required for college, but it should go beyond that. You should get some credit and appreciation.

Maia • Last year I did a program in my school called Work Experience. You can spend an afternoon in the classroom talking about your job, or you can have three classes in the morning or the afternoon and then work the other part of the day.

You have to be in special education classes, or have missed out on classes the past year, to get into the program. But there are three spaces per counselor for students who are in normal classes. I managed to get one of the spots, even though I was in honors classes. I would go to school all day, have all my classes, and then also work in the afternoon, and I earned a full elective credit.

It wasn't because of the specific job I did, but just working. There are programs, like Chris said, that give you extra credits for working.

Merita • When you have these other kinds of roles, do your teachers see you any differently?

Cameron • I walk around, talking to people, and they seem to have a little more respect for me just because of my job. I think it's pretty cool, like a fringe benefit.

Carolynn • When I go into any high school, because of my outreach work, the teachers treat me like I'm an adult, like I'm their friend. They'll see me and say, "Oh, how have you been? How's your son doing?"

If they could treat everybody like that, it would make a big difference. When I see a teacher, I don't see him as a teacher — I want to go talk to him and see how he's been. Yet I am just the same as any other student.

Question:

You have talked about adults treating you differently because of the activities that you're involved in. Can you tell me a little bit about that and why you think that is?

My job is teaching HIV and AIDS awareness, but it doesn't make me any different as far as what I like to do, what kind of music I listen to, or who I hang out with. I'm just like everybody else. Yet they see me as something else because I'm out there doing a good deed.

Merita • K8, Matt — you've both pointed out that there can be a downside to the recognition. Can you tell us about that?

K8 • For me, it has advantages and disadvantages. Cameron and I will be walking in the mall, and the security guard might come up to us if we're wearing something inappropriate. All we have to do is flash our Outreach badge, and they say, "Oh, okay."

But at school, they expect you to be a really smart person who follows the rules. So half the time I don't even tell my teachers about my job because they just have these high expectations, and when they get a piece of my writing that wasn't what they thought it should be, they'll mark it a lower grade. But if they think I'm a person who doesn't really do much, they'll think, "Wow, that was actually a good try."

Matt • Everything that we're talking about involves favoritism. It will always be there — if teachers see a student and recognize that this student is working — they may have a kid, they may be holding a job — they're going to say, "Wow, this student is doing really well for their age." They'll go to pick the student out.

And then when that student lets them down by failing a test, or gets upset and has suicidal thoughts, the favoritism comes in again and they're not likely to give them any slack.

Merita • Yesterday you all talked at length about favoritism. Tell us more.

Matt • Favoritism involves jocks. It involves the smarter kids. A lot of students are trying harder and harder to be the favorite when really it is not right. Teachers shouldn't favor anybody. Even if they don't memorize their names, they should know the students they have in that class for that year. They shouldn't single out four students in three classes or something.

K8 • I've noticed something. I started in band in fourth grade, at a very small school. Eventually I moved to Virginia, and was in Virginia's honor band. I was the worst clarinet player there, I promise. I was like the third back, and there I was horrible, and I moved up here, and I made first clarinet. And then I realized something. We were practicing all of these great songs, and we weren't very good at them, but we could kind of make it sound the same. But we only had one concert the whole year. And band was my favorite thing to do.

I took up band as my main goal, and I had to drop out. We weren't doing anything. I wasn't going anywhere.

We would go to a competition and win, but we wouldn't be announced over the intercom. Then, after football games, they'd announce, "So-and-so scored so many points for Service." And we were thinking, "Well, what about us?"

It was the same with the art program. They had a big art show, and it wasn't even announced. But they always managed to announce the sports.

Maia • With sports there's the group of kids that are always involved. From junior high all of the way to the end, one girl ran track and she was so great, and then in high school she sets all of the records. Or a football player who was always the quarterback. Then everybody wants to be in sports, because sports is what's

the coolest. All of the football players sleep in class, but still manage to stay in football.

And all of the cheerleaders are the cutest and everybody wants to go out with them. What about the people who can't play sports? And what about people who aren't cute enough or skinny enough or can't dance well enough to be cheerleaders?

They can do other stuff, but they don't get the same recognition, and it makes people feel bad because they don't know where to fit in.

Sarah • Here is a really good example that happened recently. The large high school that I

go to for one class is East High School, and the music department won a Grammy. The Grammy Institute decided to take the top five high schools from the entire United States and award Grammys to them. East High School was number one.

It wasn't in the newspaper, didn't get put on the intercom. Nobody knows about it.

About a month later, a group of seniors from East did a senior prank, and it caused a couple thousand

dollars worth of damage. It's still in the papers. There are still political cartoons comparing East to the state legislature.

That's a really good example of what things get publicized and what stereotypes are put into place. East was working its way up to being a respected school again. Boom, right back down at the bottom. If you talk to anyone about East, people have heard of that prank. It's the first thing out of their mouths. But they don't even know about the Grammy.

When I go into any high school, because of my outreach work, the teachers treat me like I'm an adult, like I'm their friend. . . If they could treat everybody like that, it would make a big difference.

Learning and Teaching.....

Question:

What can we learn about teaching and learning from all of the activities you're involved in outside of school?

Merita • Let's shift now and focus on the concrete aspects of learning. You all talked a lot yesterday about the importance of teaching in a way that uses all of the senses, and that recognizes that there are lots of different learning styles.

Chris • Everyone has their own different way of learning. But teachers come in, give it to you, deliver the information one way, their way or no way. It's not as effective as multi-sensory learning. If you could teach it, if you could read it in a book and then perform the task in a science experiment, people can learn a lot easier, and they will retain it much longer.

Grace • It's really important to have a variety of ways of teaching. I can't comprehend it all. I'll read a whole book and won't get anything. Oral things that the teachers will say, I'll understand. I don't have to read about it.

With videos and visuals, I can actually see it and I can understand it. Some kids are like that, and some might need to read a book to understand it. If you just use a variety of ways, it's a lot easier to learn.

K8 • I'm a little different when I learn things. I learn things easily in biology because we do dissections, and we look through microscopes, and I can remember things like that.

I can't remember the

book, though. I don't remember much about that.

Matt • Some people learn slower than others. Some people can catch something and it's in their brain; they can remember it.

Some people it takes them a week, compared to a day, and people think they're slow when it's only maybe that one subject that they're learning slower than their other subjects. They may be good in math, but not good in history. That's where different teaching techniques in one subject come in handy. Personally, I've learned all of my teaching techniques for presentations from my teachers.

At our school, I remember almost everything that was taught. This last semester was my first semester there, and it is almost like it was yesterday. They'll focus on one thing, and then they'll teach it four different ways so that everybody grasps it. Then they'll do a test, and if you fail the test, they won't say, "Well, okay. That's marked down on your grade." Instead, they'll say "You're having a problem with Question 9. Let's look into this."

That's also connected to teachers having time for the students. Otherwise it's a brainwashing session, with teachers just saying, "Here's the work. Either you learn it or you fail."

Carolynn • I don't think I can remember anything that I learned at my first high school. If I had to do something, I found my paper, I looked up the answer in the book, and I wrote it down. Did I remember what I learned? No.

A lot of teachers will find an assignment, give it out, see if it's correct or incorrect. They don't seem to care if their students are actually learning.

I think all of us are kind of like teachers — we go out and we present to

Each time we do a presentation, we get something from them that we bring to another presentation. It could be like that with every teacher if they just put their own ideas and imagination into it, trying to think of different ways to educate.

people, and we're teaching them, and when we present, we can see people out there nodding their heads like, "Yeah, we understand that."

We want to know that they're hearing and understanding everything we say. So we do a lot of activities, keep them focused. We use lots of visuals. We have posters, we give them handouts. We'll do anything we can to try to hit all the varieties of learning to put out our message because we think it's important enough. Teachers need to believe in what they're teaching, and want to actually teach students to learn — not just to get a good grade.

Chris • That's where staff comes in. The teachers have to be very versatile. They have to be able to survey the situation and decide which way would be the best way of delivering the information.

Carolynn • The teachers probably enjoy it more anyway. I know that when we go to work, we may be tired before we get there. But as soon as we get there, we're talking and talking. Each time we do a presentation, we get something from them that we bring to another presentation. It could be like that with every teacher if they just put their own ideas and imagination into it, trying to think of different ways to educate.

Sarah • I know lots of schools where you get your schedule printed out, and then you have to go stand in the lines to change it. I agree that students should be able to choose their own classes and different ways to learn.

Students need to be brought into the structures of their schools. We had a problem at our school where the school's name was changed. Students weren't consulted. It's a small issue, but it's *our* school. We go there every day, and we're just as much a part of it as the teachers and administrators are. Students need to be in the administration of their schools. They need to be on the school board. That's something that directly involves superintendents.

Reality-Based Learning.....

Question:

How can we make teaching more relevant to your experiences and your hopes for the future?

Carolynn • My understanding is that high school should prepare you for college or get you ready for a future career, but a lot of things that we do in high school don't teach us anything.

At our school, though, you have to learn how to do your taxes, and it's not just book work. They want you to really do your taxes; what you have to do when you get a job; how to make a proper resume; how to do a mock interview. It's not just kids who are in business who are doing resumes and mock interviews. It's every student there.

We have parenting classes, life skill classes, basically all real life things that are actually going to help you. When I'm doing these things, it makes me feel more like an adult. It makes me want to be more professional. It makes me want to get good recommendations on my resume. It makes me want to be more adult and be responsible — because I see that I'm coming close to the point where I have to take charge and be an adult.

At my traditional high school, it seemed like having a job was ten years away. I thought that when I graduated, my high school diploma would mean that I would get a job or be able to get in college, because high school is supposed to be preparing me for that. But you really have to take it into your own hands. Yet it's hard to expect a 14-, 15-, 16-year-old to do that without help from teachers.

Grace • You begin to see things differently when

you get into a job like ours. You realize that there are lots of dangerous things out there, and no one knows about them. Nobody knows that there are so many different types of STDs. You can't remember them all, and nobody knows how to protect themselves. You just get a different point of view on things.

If we're going to learn anything in school, it should be more of the stuff that we know now. Because if we knew then what we know now, we probably wouldn't have done a lot of things we did!

K8 • In the POWER program we work with a lot of people who think that suicidal thoughts are normal. They have them constantly. It's nothing to them. Sex is nothing. There's no consequences to it, and being hit by their father is normal for them.

There are also a lot of my friends who think this too — and drug abuse, there's nothing wrong with that for them either.

Reality-based for me would mean something for these students. They really need someone to talk to, and they don't know these things aren't normal, that you can get help. We should have a program that lists what happens when you have sex. If you feel this way, you could go here. If you need STD checks or something, these might be some people to talk to.

And they end up dropping out of school because they think they're strange, and they think, "Well, if I'm not normal anyway, how

can I graduate?" I mean, there are family problems to keep them from even going to school sometimes. Addressing their needs is what reality-based means to me.

Merita • So finding ways to help students figure out how to deal with the real things going on in their lives is important if schools want students to feel like they belong.

I see that I'm coming close to the point where I have to take charge and be an adult. At my traditional high school, it seemed like having a job was ten years away.

Maia • Yeah. For some students it's hard to fit in.

Merita • Cameron, you were telling us that you want some kind of real training that's going to get you into a real job.

Cameron • Yeah. Because the classes that are reality-based don't always work well, either. I was going to go to a travel school and get certified to be a travel agent. Before I went, I got two of my friends enrolled. They tore through the classes. They were probably the best students. They had all the work done. They're teaching them the Sabre system for scheduling and everything for flights and things they use at airports, but they didn't fit in with the class. They weren't — conformed, I guess, exactly to the class. So they eventually got shrugged off, but they still took a loan for education out of their name for \$5,000.

And I was going to go, but I decided not to because what the school did was illegal. They took the \$5,000 in my friends' names, and they taught them the wrong things, the way the things are supposed to work. Things didn't go at all as they were supposed to.

One person who worked there got fired, and now there's a class-action lawsuit that's supposed to be started. I just want to be able to get into one of these places that I know that I can trust to learn and get certification that I can use and it's going to be worth something.

Merita • Chris, can you talk a bit about how computers fit into this idea of reality-based education?

Chris • I've noticed in high schools that there isn't very much emphasis on computers and technology. I teach a computer literacy program in Anchorage, and from my experiences I would say by the year 2004, if you don't

There are lots of dangerous things out there, and no one knows about them. Nobody knows that there are so many different types of STDs . . . Nobody knows how to protect themselves.

know how to use a computer, it will be like not knowing how to read.

I mean, you all have e-mail at your office, and that's the best way of communicating back and forth between each other.

But in my school, there are about 20 computers for 1,500 kids. There's no way that everyone is going to be able to learn how to use them.

You could view computers as educational enhancement tools. Maintenance

doesn't cost much, just the initial buy. And if you get some students that are interested in computers, they could actually maintain them for you.

Merita • You know that by experience. Very briefly, how many computers have you put out there through the computer program that you run?

Chris • I've put out, let's see, over 120 in the last two years on a \$20 budget. That's all I've had, 20 bucks for the last two years.

Merita • And who do the computers go to?

Chris • They go to kids, anyone in the community who doesn't have a computer, who needs a computer for school work. It costs them nothing. All they have to do is show up, do some community service, and be willing to listen to what I have to say.

Merita • Otherwise known as the training course.

Chris • Yeah, I don't just go and babble! All of the equipment we have is donated by federal agencies or individual agencies, and we repair it and put it back into the community.

Agenda for Change.....

Question:

What is your highest-priority recommendation for school improvement that the Chief State School Officers can bring back to their states? How would you rank it on a scale of 1 to 10?

Cameron • Schools have to become more compatible with their students — so that the students trust their teachers. Otherwise, the things they learn in the school are just going to be irrelevant when they leave school.

Merita • And on a scale of one to ten, how important is that?

Cameron • I want to say ten, but —

Merita • I would agree with you there.

Matt • I think that the role of work in high school is really important. I believe that would be a ten. If students get out of high school, and if they haven't had a job while they're students because they don't have time for it, and they don't learn how to write a resume or type on a computer, they're not going to be able to get a job.

Carolynn • I think teacher and student relationships are my highest priority. And if you don't know how to do that, have students help you — not just honor roll students or student government or jocks, but have everybody get together and figure out how you can build more teacher-student relationships. I'd rate it a ten.

Grace • I think keeping the extracurricular activities like auto classes and swimming — any kind of extracurricular activities that kids might want to do in their future to make

money. Everyone wants to be something different. No one is going to be the same, not everyone will be a lawyer. Keep extracurricular activities because, who knows what students might become? I rate it a ten.

Merita • Everything's a ten. All right.

Chris • I think that the school districts should avoid getting involved in politics. Politicians do help sometimes, but quite often they hurt us, the students, in the way they look at taxpayers. Sometimes there are more taxpayers whose children are going to a certain school — so politics says that they should get more money. Not necessarily. I rate that a ten just because it affects the students, the teachers. It affects everybody.

Sarah • I'm not just going to do one. I've got three. I'd say that student involvement, size, and funding are the three most important ones. One thing I didn't get to talk about here is arts funding, which is just as important as the computers. I'm sorry. We've had a lot of problems here. Schools are not allowed to choose whether they want a technology teacher or an art teacher. Two of our schools have no art programs. Two of our schools have no music programs.

That can't happen. I mean, it's just as important. People forget that and we're losing arts in our society, and it's not a good thing. That's an 11.

Merita • Maia.

Maia • I think what's really important is the different teaching styles. Some teachers are just used to teaching how they teach, and then the kids come up with questions and leave with the same questions because the teachers told them the exact same thing over again. Teachers need to make sure that they have different ways, visuals, whatever they need to make sure that the students get what they need and really can remember it. The point in going to school is learning, and teachers need to make sure that their students are actually learning. I think it's extremely important.

K8• I think that nobody can be successful until they've pulled their life together, and school should focus on emotional health as well as education. I rank that — I don't know — just nine or something.

Carolynn• I rate it ten.

Merita• Those were our general recommendations, our big picture. But we also talked about what each of the Chief State School Officers could do to hear from other young people in their states about their opinion on issues like these.

Chris• One of the best things you can do is go back to your state and talk to your superintendents. You should look at each separate school district to try to get a wide range of students, and talk to them. See what their issues are. See what the most important thing is for them, and see what works, what doesn't work.

And then once you get information, look at ways of changing the school district or the teachers or skills or funds.

Merita• So otherwise —

Matt• Use surveys if you have to. A survey asking what the students are interested in.

Sarah• Not going to happen. People aren't going to fill it out. That is a good idea, but what's an even stronger idea is to start forming youth forums. You could start with youth caucuses, just venting what's wrong with the school systems, even go into smaller groups finding solutions, and then you start incorporating the students into the actual groups and treating them as equal members of the institutions like the school board and the individual school governments.

Students need to be brought into the structures of their schools, into the decisions about what's going to happen. We actually have a student liaison between the schools and the school board that sits on the school board meet-

ings. They don't get a vote, but they at least get to sit in, and they get their opinion asked sometimes.

Make student government something that's actually not just to shut the students up. Make it actually make a difference in the schools.

Merita• And we talked about surveys being something that even could connect in with that — so that student government actually can hear.

Matt• Well, at our school, we do a survey just about every year. And it covers just about everything. The teachers could make the students fill it out. I mean, they could take about ten minutes or so of a class and just hand it out.

Merita• So as you can see, we really are glad that you invited students to come and listen. We think it's important to keep up the momentum you started to build here — and keep listening as you're going back to your states and doing your work.

Thank you.

Agenda for Change

Students' Top Priorities

1. Relevance
2. Work opportunities
3. Relationships
4. Extracurriculars
5. Taxes and Politics
6. Arts funding
7. Teaching styles
8. Emotional Health

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