

# Students Speak Out.org

A SOCIAL NETWORK FOR YOUTH CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

*Combining skilled offline leadership with the power of the social networking platform to engage young citizens in policymaking.*

BY KIM FARRIS-BERG & SARAH GRANOFSKY

We spin our wheels in this nation trying to 'make' teens achieve certain social goals, all the while failing to ask teens what might motivate them. We want teens to "get involved" and contribute to the public good, but underestimate them, providing mostly superficial and meaningless civic engagement opportunities. Yet these are the young people who will go on to govern for our democracy and produce for our commonwealth. Psychologist Robert Epstein, at University of California San Diego, in *The Case Against Adolescence* explains our actions and the consequence: Adolescence infantilizes young people. Deny them serious responsibilities, keep them out of real work, give them virtually no contact with adults, tell them they have no function except to be schooled...why would we expect them to be prepared for democratic participation?

In 2007, the Citizens League—a nonpartisan organization building civic imagination and capacity in Minnesota—launched *StudentsSpeakOut.org* (SSO) to demonstrate teens' competency and willingness to participate if given the opportunity to take part in, even lead, public discourse. Teenagers want and have time to participate in public discussions. Yet limited transportation and unavailability from 9-5 prevents them from conventional

participation. Where teens do participate, adults often question their competence or use teens to validate their own theories. With the right tools to understand and influence public process, however, teens could on their own time and from their own homes, schools, or community centers produce authentic, credible and useful information for problem-solving.

Since May 2007, Citizens League has tested, via SSO, whether social networking software like Ning could be manipulated to be a "right tool". In 2007-2008, Minnesota teens worked on SSO to have genuine and unique input on issues like bullying and alternative education programs. They presented their findings at a Minneapolis Public Schools teacher training and to the chair of the education policy committee in the Minnesota House of Representatives. Later, in partnership with the organization *Education|Evolving*, SSO expanded to Milwaukee, where teens are using SSO to provide insights on two issues of their choosing: identifying qualities of effective teachers/teaching and effective disciplinary strategies.

Indeed, there are benefits to using social networking platforms like Ning:

- If well-moderated, social networking spaces allow for discussion of issues, sharing of ideas and development of thought, amidst teens and adults from all kinds of schools and backgrounds who are working collectively and constructively to define problems and solutions.
- Social networking, especially as it happens with Ning's design, is viral: that is one new member can invite multiple new members, and each of those new members may invite multiple new members. In its first two months, Milwaukee SSO had over 100 members. In six months, it had over 400.
- Anyone wishing to involve young people in policy and program design could become a member and ask teens to participate in their work. Mayor of Minneapolis R.T. Rybak joined the Minnesota site to ask teens to inform his Youth Violence Prevention plan.
- With project management, outputs are, to an extent, organized and visible to everyone. *StudentsSpeakOut.org* posts are a constantly developing online public library of teen input on various policy topics.
- Teens want to join. Social networking is familiar to teens, and highly localized online networks are socially appealing. Teens who join for social reasons can be converted to participate in issues-discussions, particularly when they sense adults are listening.

If SSO were merely a place to post and collect ideas, then Ning would be sufficient. But SSO is more than a Web site: it provides a much needed "public space" where people can gather to work out common ground solutions to common problems. This involves a behind-the-scenes, human-led, problem-solving process. Through the process, teens not only provide authentic input, but their thinking about complex issues becomes more so-

phisticated. They learn the value of their personal civic engagement and they experience the process of solving public problems. Those who choose to get more involved develop skills such as: moving from complaining about an issue to doing something about it; gathering input to understand the ideas of like-minded people and potential opposition; building common ground; forming and testing hypotheses; reporting results persuasively, and more.

CITIZING!, A NEW PLATFORM, CHANGES THE DYNAMICS OF "WHO" HAS INFLUENCE IN A DEMOCRACY, ALLOWING TEENS TO BUILD AND RUN PROCESSES THAT PRODUCE INFORMATION, SOMETIMES WITH ADULT COACHING, BUT WITHOUT ADULTS HAVING CONTROL.

Also through the SSO process teens make a difference in their communities. A group that decided to address safety in Minneapolis Public Schools designed and led a two hour teacher training on bullying. Teachers who attended told SSO evaluators that they were surprised that students developed and led the 2-hour module including facilitation of the discussion among the professionals. Yet students were effective in changing the perspective that "skills" are necessary to prevent bullying the classroom to "relationships" are necessary to prevent bullying in the classroom. The students' presentation also increased teachers' respect for the



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A SCENE FROM A RECENT SSO MEETING.

possibilities for an electronic forum such as *Students Speak Out*. This was important to the Citizens League in its evaluation of SSO, since the idea of young people using electronic forums for public input had not been well-received in all school environments for fear teens would complain too much about issues they don't understand or that they would spread "hate" messages about particular teachers or schools.

ON SSO, STUDENTS LEARN THE VALUE OF THEIR PERSONAL CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AND THEY EXPERIENCE THE PROCESS OF SOLVING PUBLIC PROBLEMS.

The Citizens League has found that Ning, which is built for socializing, works well for some aspects of the process, such as gathering and reporting information. But since Ning lacks a project-management component, much of the process-learning takes place off of Ning on email, telephone, and in personal meetings. Small teams of student leaders work with adults who have significant experience in

process design and management, the ability to work well with teens in the driver's seat, can "listen" for themes and insights and which might be helpful to identifying solution, and who are comfortable with social networking software. People with this mix of talents are scarce, however. So the Citizens League considered how to put the process more in teens' hands in order to decrease the potential for adults to impose their own ideas and to increase the opportunity for new, genuine information to emerge from larger numbers of teenagers.

In 2009, the Citizens League will beta test its solution—*CitiZing!*. *CitiZing!* will be the first-ever civic networking platform, drawing on the principles of social networking and project management platforms to bring together stakeholders in public problems to work collectively to find solutions. *CitiZing!* puts teens (indeed all citizens!) in the position to manage civic discourse processes by removing the mystery of "good" process design. Users customize a process in which they'll work with other users to frame a public problem, co-create solutions, and identify ways to influence public policy and practice. Throughout the process,

*CitiZing!* tools empower users with information that will allow them to learn and accomplish tasks that will bolster their potential impact. Tools will help users involve key stakeholders and experts, use existing research, freely exchange information, and encourage transparency, for example. *CitiZing!* employs familiar models—surveys, forums, wikis, to-do lists, schedulers, and graphs—but each with its own “civic twist,” such as a wiki that has templates and screencast walkthroughs for drafting legislation. Also, a drag-and-drop “stakeholder map” of school bureaucracy structure.

*CitiZing!* will give teens the tools (literally) to address public problems on the basis of their competency and willingness to participate, not on age, location and previous understanding of “good process”. The software is designed to change the dynamics of “who” has influence in a democracy, allowing teens to build and run processes that produce information, sometimes with adult coaching, but without adults having control. The information will be useful to anyone designing policy solutions that require teens to behave in different ways.

**Are students learning about democratic engagement and civics from Citizens League’s hybrid of process and technology?**

The students involved say that investigating public problems using SSO helped them learn about policymakers’ influence on public problems, and that their input matters. They also found that they can influence others’ (e.g. teachers’) behaviors in a positive way simply by letting them know they’re paying attention and taking it upon themselves to find ways to improve their schooling. Students found common ground with other students. Understanding others’ experiences helped them to better define their environment, and made their own troubles seem less harrowing. Understanding their own power, students developed skills that they

went on to try out in other settings, such as public speaking, setting goals and going about achieving them, and leadership.

Gathering evidence about quality teaching using StudentsSpeakOut in Milwaukee, Bianca Williams said, “I have all of the advisors [teachers] on their feet wondering when I am going to come and interview them. It’s pretty fun to know that the advisors at my school are really paying attention to what they do and what they say, because they know I will be bringing it to their attention pretty soon. Thanks to SSO, I now feel confident in what I am doing.” Ashlee Bishop also of Milwaukee, WI says, “I think it is important that the students offer their opinions and insights because we are the main ones the educational policies are going to affect...The rules and guidelines the policymakers set forth are going to determine what we learn, how we learn, and where we learn.”

Shane Saunders of Brooklyn Park, MN, said, “I learned that [being an active] citizen is, for one, a lot of fun. It makes you feel really good about yourself and makes you feel responsible and appreciated. [My peers now] say I’m insightful. I’m more organized for myself.” Ashley Iverson of Spring Lake Park, MN reported, “I learned a lot about myself. Hearing other peoples’ stories, I realized mine wasn’t so bad. This year at my graduation I got up and spoke in from of all my teachers and 150 more—something I thought I would never do. Students Speak Out has helped me open up. I am happy I did, ‘cause it was one of the best things.”\*

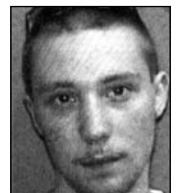
*Check out Students Speak Out, on Ning, for yourself:*  
 Minnesota – [www.StudentsSpeakOut.org](http://www.StudentsSpeakOut.org)  
 Milwaukee – [www.Milwaukee.StudentsSpeakOut.org](http://www.Milwaukee.StudentsSpeakOut.org)



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