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## Students have varying experiences of 'school'

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A collection of student commentary from StudentsSpeakOut.org

The students participating in Students Speak Out have had varying experiences of school. As a result of these varying experiences students have felt a range of connections to their school communities. Some students feel like they are (or were) prisoners at their schools, while other students have a sense of truly belonging to their school community. Most students who attend Area Learning Centers (ALC) and chartered schools give them high marks and praise the community atmosphere teachers and administrators foster there. Many of these same students feel that their previous schools did a poor job encouraging students and were not supportive of students' needs. In this brief, readers will find that students did better in school both academically and behaviorally when they considered themselves to be a valued member of their schools.

*Kelsey (Senior, Jennings Community Learning Center)* "[One] thing that is different at Jennings is the voice students have. Each week we have all-school meetings to discuss the climate of the school, and students are never cut off, even if they are complaining. It is understood at Jennings that how a student spends the majority of their day should be in their hands, because when that happens, students can thrive and begin to enjoy learning."

*Kari, (Riverbend ALC)* "ALC schools have a message that no other schools can deliver to their students. ALC schools make you aware that you are welcome; that you can have trust in them, and that you'll fit in among the other students. They don't judge you even if you came from the streets. They give you the hope and encouragement to graduate and move on to better things in life. If you've never gone to or visited an ALC you're missing out. At traditional schools, the teachers didn't care whether you were there or not, all they cared about was piling more and more work on you. They were inconsiderate and didn't care about what each individual student was going through like the ALC does."

*Brett (Freshman, Avalon Charter School)* "At Avalon you get a small share of students who were kicked out of their old schools. They get to Avalon and the way the community works and the respect levels how the school functions they turn around completely. I think the way the systems at traditional public schools are now we don't have the same way of making kids feel like they have a responsibility to behave."

*Ashley (Spring Lake Park Learning Alternative)* "One other thing I love about alternative schools is the classes and the teachers. They treat you like humans and more like you are adults instead of kids (unless you act like one). I have to say that I am so happy with the teachers I have now and that they care and would do whatever they could to help me pass. And how some try to find things you can relate to. That is truly awesome. For that and how they treat me with respect, I respect them even more."

*Eric (River Bend Area Learning Center)* "I am 16 years old and I currently attend the River Bend Alternative Learning Center, which I have been attending since 3rd quarter of 2007. I left my local public high school with no desire to graduate. When I first stepped into the ALC I was amazed. What I saw was one big family. Within days I felt that I truly was part of this family. It was this family that gave me the desire to attend school and graduate, something I never could have experienced without the ALC. I was recently elected as state officer of MAAP STARS, which stands for Minnesota Association of Alternative

Programs and Success, Teamwork, Achievement, Recognition, and Self-Esteem. What we as a whole strive to do, as well as what I would like to do here, is to encourage students attending alternative programs to go above and beyond with many things such as your schooling, job employment, and personal growth.”

*Pang (Senior, Patrick Henry HS)* “I attended Hmong Academy then transferred to Patrick Henry High. I believed in creating these charter schools; it helps unite students in culture. Though I'm a US citizen and many students critic me for attending Hmong Academy; I enjoyed my time there. The workload was as challenging as it is here at Patrick Henry. I don't want to be bias but I believe the charter school does a much, MUCH MUCH better job at uniting students and strive them into success.”

*Brett (Freshman, Avalon Charter School)* “I think that there are (I have experienced them in school,) times when teachers disrespect students or abuse their power. I think that respect should work both ways and that there are some students who will always be somewhat of a handful, but most kids will behave if there is respect coming their way from the start. At Avalon we have a responsibility to the community, our peers, and ourselves. We are taught to be respectful and that here are the consequences of your actions and how it affects the community. What do we need to do to correct it and prevent it from happening in the future, and we work on it. I don't really agree with a lot of the punishments the schools hand out, and sometimes I don't even think one is needed. Suspension for one of the misbehaved kids, who hates school or does not care, is almost a reward for example.

At my previous district school I felt I was more of a criminal than a student....We need responsibilities and obligations at school for our behavior and the community. Kids have to learn to be good adults somewhere, and it needs to be done differently than the way my previous district school was doing it...

I think it is really unfair how the schools treat the kids sometimes. It is like we are criminals and some of the jails treat inmates better!..We also could not use the bathroom in many classes without our planner, and there were NO exceptions. ... I hated that school and it was unbelievable what some kids had to go through at different times and the average kid faced everyday. We were not students we were inmates at the prison the school had become that year.”

*Annie (Freshman, Southwest HS)* “...Automatically, students should be given the benefit of the doubt...teachers shouldn't walk in on the first day and lay down a set of really strict rules and punishments. They should sort of assume mutual...I want to say ‘respect’, but that's not it, because respect develops.

If students are treated more like peers and less like little children, they'll be more likely to behave. I've had some really condescending teachers who pull the ‘I'm the teacher so you have to listen,’ card. It reminds me of the movie Matilda, when Matilda's dad and Ms. Trunchbull would say ‘I'm big and you're little, I'm smart and you're dumb, I'm right and you're wrong.’ That is not a good basis of relationship and does not create an environment of respect. Yet some teachers say this, trying to force students to have more respect and behave better.

A lot of teachers don't know how to have that off the bat ‘respect’, and some can never find it. I had this teacher who complained tirelessly about certain students who didn't behave. Once, she expressed to me personally, how hard it was to have certain students two years in a row (we had a rotation where we had the same teachers for 2 years)...I felt so uncomfortable hearing this! I think sometimes, when teachers see a student misbehaving, they label the student ‘bad’. They don't try to respect or find the good in the person, they just see them misbehave and write them off as ‘bad’. I know that sometimes there are people you don't like. That's human. But as a teacher, you can't be biased or judgmental and you have to try to find the good in everyone and find something that you enjoy about them. It's hypocritical, really, for certain teachers to have the expectation of students being tolerant and accepting when they can't be themselves....and this is so important as a teacher and human being!”

*Dena (Freshman, Southwest HS)* “I've never gone to summer school, but I know that the unfair treatment they get does not lie just in the lack of bathroom passes and breaks. And I know for a fact that, even in

May/June, the heat in my school is almost unbearable! And that's just in late spring! I can't even imagine how horrible it must be to sit through 3.5 weeks worth of suffocating heat in July. My middle school had no air conditioning (except for in the science room, and that one is only there because some teacher who used that room a long time ago had asthma). It's just wrong to force kids into enduring that for so long, along with the other unfair treatment! Instead of paying kids as an incentive to learn, buy the schools some air conditioners!!!!"

*Annie (Freshman, Southwest HS)* "...I think...It's disrespectful. I think sometimes teachers treat students like they're kindergarteners...or animals. I think sometimes adults think we need to be under strict law and punishment...but isn't it better to be strict about bigger things, not just one little tardy? If they can't trust students at all and respect them, how do they expect us to respect them?"

*Brett (Freshman, Avalon Charter School)* "Yeah I agree I think people have abused the power of the bathroom pass and the teachers took it to a whole other level that was unneeded and there should be a way to work on respect and trust and all those things in school so the community is strong and not too prison like. Avalon has a wonderful community the public schools could learn a good lesson about how to control their students if they listened to these methods more often."

*Annie (Freshman, Southwest HS)* "I think what it comes down to is respect. What I've noticed with teachers I've had is this: The teachers that students really feel respected and have respect for are the classes they behave in. In these classes, the teachers constantly disciplining, they're just running class....It's not about enforcing a bunch of laws and being all tough...a teacher should build a relationship with students so they care enough to listen. It's like with friends...you respect your friends enough to not interrupt them when they're talking. It should be the same with teachers. When students feel like a peer, not looked down on like a little child being 'babysat', they'll be more inclined to respect the teacher.

Also, it's about consistency and stability. If a kid is messing around, and a teacher threatens to send them to the office, please send them out. Otherwise students get no idea of boundaries, because there aren't any...they're constantly broken. Which isn't fair to the students. How can you expect them to be perfect angels when they don't know the limits? If they don't think they'll be punished, they'll act out...because why not?"

*Kelsey (Senior, Jennings)* "Jennings is project based, and also has an emphasis on field trips. The environment of the school teaches students to be well-rounded citizens, not just good test takers. The school day is much less mundane, and staff understands when students need to just take a break and play a game of spades. The staff at Jennings is extremely passionate about students; even the ones that aren't star quarterbacks or that don't have a 4.0 GPA. Students are not expected to fit a mold, instead, there is room to create your own mold and staff will go along with it. If a kid is behind on credits, or is taking 2 weeks to do a project that would normally take 1, it is not assumed that student is stupid; it is assumed that they are different: which is a good thing.

Before this turns into a novel, the last thing that is different at Jennings is the voice students have. Each week we have all-school meetings to discuss the climate of the school, and students are never cut off, even if they are complaining. It is understood at Jennings that how a student spends the majority of their day should be in their hands, because when that happens, students can thrive and begin to enjoy learning."

## **ABOUT STUDENTS SPEAK OUT:**

StudentsSpeakOut.org is an initiative of the Citizens League Minnesota 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Project (MAP 150). MAP 150's purpose is to find ways of cultivating citizens' ability to participate in designing public solutions by developing new spaces and roles that respect citizens' experiences and ideas as relevant to the policy discussion. People affected by the problem should be included in defining it. StudentsSpeakOut.org is a project whose face is a social networking Web site. We are testing a variety of strategies for involving young people as active citizens by meeting them where they are (on the Web, using technology, and in both school-based and outside-of-school learning environments). The Web site was at first Minneapolis-focused, and has now expanded to all of Minnesota and Milwaukee, with potential for further expansion nationally.

There are forum discussions where students and adults raise questions and discuss ideas for solutions. We've "turned the tables" and asked students to act as commentators on the education-related ideas of high-profile adults in Minnesota. The Web site was also the host of the "I Am Minnesota's Future" Video Contest, a pilot-level contest providing a forum for students to articulate what adults and youth must do to ensure a better future in Minnesota.

There is a lot of behind-the-scenes work, too, that occurs to cultivate active citizenship and bring the site to life. For example: Student leaders from Minneapolis and from Minnesota's alternative-education programs have project coordinators who assist them in investigating topics of their choice on video and in written story, and who connect the students to decision-makers working in their scope of interest.

In Milwaukee, students learn how to use the site to address education matters they care about via workshops, and adults participate in separate workshops to learn how to support the students on the site. The workshop designs and in-person recruiting strategies built on the successes of Minnesota's site, and the strategies are succeeding (as evidenced by rapid growth of site participation—almost 160 new participants since its launch in mid-April 2008.)

There are a number of strategies for facilitating more dialogue amongst students regarding respect, and other issues affecting students, using the site's discussion forums and cultivating student leaders to run the discussion. Most important to the students' willingness to participate is their trusting that there is an audience willing to consider their ideas. If that's you, and you would like to know more about working with Students Speak Out to involve students in your work, contact us: [studentspeakout@map150.org](mailto:studentspeakout@map150.org)