

What do students want at school?

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A collection of student commentary from StudentsSpeakOut.org

The students participating on Students Speak Out are insightful, thoughtful, and clear about what they want in a school environment. These students have expressed a need and desire to be heard and have a voice in their own education. Over the course of many different discussions the following themes kept reoccurring in regard to what students want out of their schools.

- Students want an environment that is conducive to learning. They need to be respected by their peers and teachers. Students need to feel safe physically and able to take risks intellectually in classrooms. They want opportunities to be challenged, ways to apply what they learn to the real world, and discussions about current events.
- Students want to learn the basics to be successful in the real world and be prepared for college. They want there to be high expectations and at the same time an understanding that what is best for one student is not necessarily best for another student.
- Students want to develop meaningful relationships with their teachers and peers. Quality teachers engage their students in learning, while maintaining discipline in their classrooms.
- Students want a physical school that has space, light, and accessibility. The school is their work place and they want it to enhance not detract from their learning.
- Students want their parents and other community members to be active and supportive of their education.
- Students want to be involved when making choices that affect their schools.

In this brief, student quotes are divided into the six categories mentioned above.

1. Students want an environment that is conducive to learning. They need to be respected by their peers and teachers. Students need to feel safe physically and able to take risks intellectually in classrooms. They want opportunities to be challenged, ways to apply what they learn to the real world, and discussions about current events.

Holly (Freshman, Avalon Charter School) "Respect is really important, and it goes in both directions. I can respect someone for who they are or what they do or just because I should, and they may or may not respect me back. It is really important for me to know that my teachers respect me, and that makes it easier to respect them back. This can also fuel trust, which I believe is just as important."

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 as you pointed out [in the previous post a participant had made the distinction between courtesy and respect] respect develops..."

Brett (Freshman, Avalon Charter School) "I personally hate disrespectful behavior anywhere, and I think this would qualify under that umbrella of negative energy. I really don't understand why there has to be so much disrespect everywhere . . . maybe I sound really adolescent and simple minded here, but does it

have to be that complicated? Can we simply work on respecting your peers (and your elders too =) Could a solution be teachers and staff not tolerating this type of behavior and making it have consequences?"

Annie (Freshman, Southwest HS) "Adults definitely turn a blind eye (to bullying)...I don't think they see it as threatening. On the first day all of my teachers said something like 'All the upperclassmen just love freshman!' or 'They'll embrace you!' ...'Don't worry, no one REALLY throws batteries [at students during a back to school pep rally]'" And for the most part, nobody's seriously hurt. Freshmen kind of just tolerate because they know that they won't be the picked-on freshman next year...they'll be the picker-oner (for lack of a better term). Adults couldn't seem to care less...they just sort of deny its existence and move on to teaching."

Holly (Freshman, Avalon Charter School) "I believe that politicians, education and community leaders need to emphasize that today's generation is tomorrow's future, and that if we don't increase funding and inspire critical thinking in today's students, what hope is there going to be for the future? Challenging our students should be a priority in public, private, and alternative schools around the country..."

Brett (Freshman, Avalon Charter School) "The right challenge for the right students . . . the bored factor- we need the right challenge not busy work that will not expand our knowledge or really help us move forward. Especially since we have already grasped the concepts they give us the busy work on usually (at least from my personal experience) really aren't going much deeper anyway."

Emily (Freshman, Southwest HS) "I think that it's a good idea to encourage students not necessarily to take AP and IB classes, but to encourage them to do their best. Kids shouldn't have to take all AP's and IB's to have to get into a good college. Some kids just don't learn as fast as others, and some are trying their hardest but can't seem to understand things. ...You can be in non-advanced math and still be smart. I think teachers should be encouraging kids to do their best, which isn't necessarily the kid taking IB or AP courses."

2. Students want to learn the basics to be successful in the real world and be prepared for college. They want there to be high expectations and at the same time an understanding that what is best for one student is not necessarily best for another student.

Brett (Freshman, Avalon Charter School) "[We need] the right challenge for the right student. AP and IB programs are not the right challenge for everyone. Many kids are just not ready for that big of a step yet or in that direction. If we focus on getting people prepared for AP and IB programs by making sure they are ready and monitoring them so people are not in over their heads, would make a lot of students happier and more successful in school because they were at a good level for them..."

There is really no reason that we should need to lower the standards just make things work for the individual student. Let kids work at a pace that is fit for them without lowering the standards of what they need to address and master within their school years. We have plenty of smart bright people out there, the problem is that we are all so different and also learn differently, so having one system or one type of school, and pace for everyone won't work. That is one way that will help more students achieve."

Annie (Freshman, Southwest HS) "Many people stress about what should be graduating requirements for high school students. High school isn't intended to be student's last form of education, so we don't need to know everything, but we do need to know some definite, basic things:

We need to know basic math, like algebra, trigonometry, and geometry. We need to know basic English grammar, and to have been exposed to classic and famous literature. We need to know basic social studies, like history and geography so that we can relate and know something about the world around us. I also think that students should have some experience with an art or music and learning a second language because they really give students a chance to be creative and communicate their ideas in other ways.

We don't need to know every single thing about all of those subjects, because that's what college is for... since we don't know what careers we will have or what we will need to know, it's necessary to have basic ideas down. We don't need to be experts.

I don't know how you would write this up as a requirement, but I also think that students should have to participate in some form of critical thinking. Whether it's writing a thesis for a project or joining the debate team, being able to think critically will be crucial later in life. I cannot stress this enough, since many teachers are lacking this in their classroom teaching... but we really need to be able to take information and make educated, thoughtful judgments and decisions. We need to be able to think critically because we will use it in our everyday lives when we face tough decisions or problems. It may not be part of a specific subject, but it's needed in every aspect of our lives and teachers are still responsible for teaching and challenging us to think."

Mai-Eng (Senior) "The skills that many high school students in Minnesota need to graduate would have to be their experience level, interest in their academics, and the ability to really show the value of education through their assignments...."

I just think that when students graduate, it's the moment they realize that another door has been opened for them; this is when all the hard work has paid off. Also I do find the quality of being an engaged student to be highly important. For me, coming from a Minneapolis school, I find education to be so important that the qualities I expect from myself are to be motivated, encouraging, confident, and most of all, respectful of anything and anyone. I find these qualities to be important to me as an individual and to those that are around me at any time.

I want to be the best of the students to graduate this year and I know many other students too. Therefore, my idea of qualities a student must have to graduate in Minnesota is that, if they want to make a difference and pursue education, they are the ones who must be willing to try and ask for help. In this world, we need to start looking at education as a key to success and put our heart to it."

Brett (Freshman, Avalon Charter School) "For me the question is about whether or not students are really ready to be out of high school. Has the student performed at the level of which we request of them, and have they really obtained what is required? Floating through high school is only going to hurt students in the long run, so we should be able to tell if they have been challenged and got more than just passing through school. Holding students back is not where we should start either. Instead, engage them in discussions about importance of school and make sure kids have the knowledge of why they are in school, caring about not only their responsibility to themselves but others too about being well educated. This way we can work to prevent the problem not clean up the mess later or not at all.

I think kids really miss out on a lot in high school. There is definitely something to be said for a good overall general education. The enjoyment of a good classical piece of music or other art expression has been lost in the young minds of America and it is a sad thing. Being conversant in literature and history for example so that we can be appreciative of things other than the pop culture of our time and be able to grow as people and a society—not step backwards into less keen adults letting other countries walk all over us. Let's make the upcoming generations of our parents more perceptive of the world, not just in an academic sense. They should have a social justice comprehension and other important skills the wise and astonishingly intellectual people of the world now and before us have. Robotic academic knowledge is not the only knowledge out there. It isn't all about me; it is about what I can do for other people too. We have lost that motto in colleges across the nation. Of course being able to comprehend computer skills and other futuristic knowledge is important, but what about what information that has worked already to produce smart people and the other things we need to teach? We have smart people and good schools not only in Minnesota, but the world. Let's look to those wise minds and communicate with one another so that we can perfect the education system in Minneapolis. My parents both had a good overall general education, and so did the rest of their generation. It worked! Of course the world is different now but what we can do is improve not fix our basic motivations through how we cultivate students. We shouldn't fix what isn't broken. What has broken in our education is the outcome and system/process, not the motivation to have our kids well educated and ahead of not just the other 49 states, but also the world hopefully. Make Minnesota known world wide for outstanding knowledge and ability in sharpening young

minds into enlightened adults.

One thing that would assist graduates of the Minneapolis high schools, which would not be found elsewhere, is if we could make high schools more valuable to the average adult. The education found in common high schools will not land you a very successful or high paying job alone usually, but we can make our high school diplomas worth more in the world. Give students knowledge that will give them the option still of pursuing higher education, but raise the bar for our colleges and universities as well. Let students go farther and deeper into subjects in high school so that youth can excel beyond what has been accomplished in high school by generations before them. This will also mean that students who do not choose to pursue post secondary education will have that good general overall education that will still be able to land them a good job because they had a gratifying educational experience at the required level that will make Minneapolis high school diplomas worth more to every youth it graduates. Not only in allowing them to acquire a good career, but also in helping to get our society more educated as a whole.

One skill in particular is for students to be able to become life long learners. Knowing how to obtain information beyond our schooling years, also the appetite and compulsion to teach ourselves outside of school will make kids go further into their own interests and help others to do so. When students are in school the attitude of "What can I do for others not only myself?" is very momentous. How we educate not only ourselves but also each other. Working together and developing our minds into what can only be possible together. Working to save the environment and also focusing on other very important subjects so we can be closer to a more open, peaceful, and complete society in America. Hopefully helping to rebuild America's place in the world to a more positive point, and help all the countries work together in unity and less in separated ways and conflict. Together we stand, together we learn, together we make the world a better place."

Shanaye (recent graduate, North Community HS) "I think basic day-to-day skills should be demonstrated for a student to graduate. For instance basic math, reading comprehension, and writing skills are needed to be able to find and keep a job, as well as to continue into college if the student so chooses. Students should also be able to show that they have moderate testing skills since most of the jobs require testing in one way or another to see if the candidate is qualified. If a student doesn't test moderately well it can affect their career options later. Also students should be able to test well if they plan on going to college since they will have to take tests and pass them in order to graduate, and since they will be paying for these classes it is only fair that they have the skills to do so.

Furthermore I think that students should have to take a second language of their choice to allow them to be able to keep up in the world outside of school since everything is expanding into another culture in one way or another. Also possessing multiple language skills makes the student more sensitive to the world around them, and gives them a chance to bridge gaps that could otherwise remain separate between their culture and the next.

Students should also demonstrate leadership skills, and health awareness. The leadership skills will come into play in daily life. From the choices we make in friendships, relationships, and personal things. This is not saying that students have to prove they can be independent of everyone, or that they can dictate to those around them, but rather showing that they have enough respect for themselves, and their community, to take the necessary steps to benefit that community, and themselves, positively and not negatively."

Claire (Perpich Center for Arts Education) "I suppose my first answer would be that everyone should be able to write an at least passably developed essay. It's disconcerting how many people still have trouble with this in the last years of high school.

This means you should know how to research, take the research you've collected, draw your own conclusions, and then support those conclusions. Many of us understand how to structure an essay, but the prose of an essay is a bit more challenging. Most importantly, for a truly developed essay, you have to have learned to think for yourself, to question even the experts and to draw your own conclusions from what you've learned. I've had a number of teachers who assign one major essay for the semester and concentrate all their efforts there, but I think there's a lot more to be learned from several smaller essays

throughout the year.

The biggest skill overall, not specific to any subject or class, is learning to think for yourself or learning independence. It's too easy to recite information back to a teacher and then forget it over the summer. It's even easier still to become obsessed with learning as many facts as you can fit in your head only to realize next year that you spent all that time learning facts which will never help you outside that one class. As I said already, this applies to essay writing; it applies to math in the sense of learning why the equation exists instead of just memorizing it. It applies not only to every subject but everywhere. Independence is an enormously useful skill to just get through high school with the least amount of stress, let alone graduate.

Other skills would include leaning to truly concentrate, learning to be flexible, and learning to truly apply yourself. In short, I think the skills one should need to graduate high school should be essentially the same ones that will still be useful outside of high school and even outside of college. We often lose sight of that in the days of standardized testing and testing in general. Yes, I can write an essay in thirty-five minutes for the SATs and ACTs, but when is that going to help me outside of school? (Other than now, I suppose)..."

Gayle (Senior, Patrick Henry HS) "In order for students to graduate from high school, a student should have to demonstrate the skills that they will need to last in the real world. There are not too many specific examples that can be listed, however, the main things that a students needs to take from high school are the social skills and ability to be trained in an employment position. The thing is, social skills are not really taught in the classroom. These are skills that students gain from getting involved in school activities, which enables to get to know people and work with them on more personal levels..."

There are certain skills that a student does have to be efficient at in order to continue their education also. One very important thing is their ability to read and comprehend very complicated texts because in college a lot of the work is reading. Another skill is the ability to write efficiently because college students spend a lot of time writing essays and other papers of different topics and ideas."

3. Students want to develop meaningful relationships with their teachers and peers. Quality teachers engage their students in learning, while maintaining discipline in their classrooms.

Wes (Lake Harriet Community School) "A great teacher has two main qualities: they know how to teach, and they are fun. These two qualities go hand in hand because when students like a teacher, they listen to them, but when no one likes a teacher, it makes it difficult for the teacher to teach. A teacher must know how to successfully deliver the content that they are supposed to teach. In order to help someone else learn about it, they first must have learned about it. It is no good to have a teacher just reading out of a textbook. They need to know their material. A teacher also needs to have great organizational skills. This covers everything from keeping their gradebooks neat so that students know when they have missing work and having a clean classroom environment to keep students focused. If teachers continually lose students' work or never hand it back, it makes it hard to learn.

A fun teacher is a teacher that kids are inclined to make happy, and inclined to learn from. Teachers must have a sense of humor and be able to put some time aside just to have fun, or at least teach through games or other fun activities. They need to be outgoing and supportive so that students are confident and encouraged to participate in the class and try their hardest. They need to be able to develop a strong teacher-student relationship. However, a good teacher knows where to draw the line. They need to be able to discipline their class. If it were ALL fun and games, no learning would happen. They need to find the perfect place in between students being bored and students having a party.

If teachers have both of these qualities, students will like them as well as learn from them, and then they truly are fantastic teachers. "

Arda (Senior, Roosevelt HS) "What I think makes a great teacher is a cool and understanding person. Not cool as in Brad Pitt for some people, but cool as in an understanding and flexible person. A person who can work out things with your situation and provide alternatives if needed.

At school I'm so tired of those strict teachers, I mean it's good that they're strict on school policy but have they forgotten that they're human beings too? ...So my advice to you for being a good teacher is just be who you are and remember that teachers and students alike are still human beings and that students have feelings and needs just as well as you do. Just don't forget the question of, 'What if you were in our shoes?' How would you feel?"

Annie (Freshman, Southwest HS) "Teachers make the largest difference in our learning, since they are the ones with the most direct control. They choose how we learn, plan lessons and teach us the material.

Teachers that I consider great share some characteristics. Great teachers are compassionate and kind. They don't just teach at the students...they actually know and care about their students.

A great teacher is also respectful. Teachers have to show respect to students in order to get it. That's what I find among my teachers...the teachers to whom students are really attentive and cooperative are the teachers that have respect for the students. If the students feel respected by their teacher, they respect the teacher. I had a teacher who constantly told us we were her worst class, and why did she always have to "babysit" us? Students never felt respected or cared about in that class, so they didn't really feel like she deserved their respect.

A great teacher is compelling. When they teach, you want to learn. They teach in ways that make you remember the material, and make it meaningful. That may sound like it's complicated or hard, but really it's not too much to ask in a teacher. A great teacher teaches so that students can learn. Teachers should engage students in critical thinking...not memorizing.

Teachers with a sense of humor and energy make class fun. However without the respect, passion, and ability to capture students' imagination and will to learn, they are really lacking what's important to being a teacher."

Mai-Eng (Senior) "Teachers. Sometimes students see them as a key to success while often times some can say that teachers are just people they see everyday who lecture them about their academics. However, I know that the people who are interested and do have a passion for teaching, they are the ones who will definitely make a difference in this world.

To answer the question of, "What makes a great teacher?" First of all, teachers are human beings like everyone else, but, there is something that differentiates them from others. For example, someone who is passionate about teaching and loves to see the growth of their students will work hard with the student to see them strive for success. Although there are a lot of teachers that just like to teach because that's what they do. It's the matter of time and commitment for themselves well as for the students.

I feel that characteristics of a good teacher would be: committed, honest, and has the energy to motivate students to be the best they can be. As a fact, one of the greatest science teachers I have is just not like every other teacher. Unlike most, he could be down to earth. I mean that I didn't just go to class everyday and listen to him lecture about chemical reactions and what we need to obtain energy. He is very different. The way that he presents himself to us, it's a sign of his own comfort that makes us approach his class feeling safe and warmhearted. As an example, at the beginning of class he will ask us how our day was and make fun of us because we complain a lot, but he's actually there to listen to us. His listening makes me and most others feel that we could open up to this teacher and talk to him like a respected friend.

Therefore, I believe that the generation whose experience with and commitment to improving our future education system for the younger students and teachers will have to have confidence and bright ideas. When adults are able to be patient and kind with their time in or out of their school community we as students will start to see that there is a key to success. We will have people who can be trusted and who will trust us back."

Brett (Freshman, Avalon Charter School) "I think a great teacher is one who works hard for every one of their students... For me the things that make a great teacher are based around how they run their classroom. I think any teacher can be great, but some are always going to be fabulous. I have been

fortunate enough to have a few fabulous teachers.

... was my favorite fabulous teacher. There are some basic things that make her so wonderful. She never gives up. She works hard for every student and cares about their personal success in her classroom and beyond. (She) knows each student at a personal level as well, and she always knows the right challenge for you. Every year her class also writes and performs their own opera (of which I was in two.) This helps kids learn responsibility and to take ownership of their own education and work. Critical thinking is also an important part within the opera and around her classroom curriculum.

The most respectful class of 4-6 graders (she changed teaching grades from 4/5 to 5/6,) is always her class in and out of school. She taught students how and why to be respectful, and you could always tell which kids had been in (her) class once they moved on. She taught in an open school style and has never let go of it, even when situations got rough with funding and resources. She always has a fabulous system working in her classroom; there is a balance of rigorous and easygoing work.

Along with being able to make everyday fun, interesting, and different in some way I loved going to school while I was in her class. Every student had a voice there, and was responsible for insuring that he or she was heard. (She) values the voice of every student. Her classroom is a community based on thoughtfulness and respect allowing every student to stay motivated through each other and themselves creating a wonderful learning environment. I know every student can come out of (her) class and say they learned something useful and have gotten one step closer to becoming a respectable educated adult, something that every parent seeks for their child..."

Shanaye (recent graduate, North Community HS) "The teacher who had the greatest impact on me was knowledgeable and passionate about his subject and his students. He knew his subject and it showed. He had such a passion for math that he managed to find a way to make us see its application in ever facet of our lives. So to me a great teacher is someone who loves their subject, and wants others to love it too. Don't get me wrong, it shouldn't consume their lives, but a student should be able to enter a classroom, look at the teacher, and almost get swept away by the teacher's enthusiasm for their subject.

Another thing that makes a great teacher is when they strive to see their students succeed. It's a typical thing to say but at the same time if it's so "typical," why is it that more and more teachers show less and less interest in their students? So any teacher who shows a genuine interest (not the I'm-doing-it-because-it's-what-is-expected-of-me or maybe-if-I-act-interested-I'll-get-an-award attitude) in their students makes the students feel that they are worthy of showing their knowledge; that they are worthy of being seen. But mostly that their teacher is worthy of their best."

Dena (Freshman, Southwest HS) "If teachers did less learning out of text books and worksheets, and more learning from experiences, students would get so much more out of school... I think that any way you make an effort to learn about something that is not out of a textbook or course curriculum is so much more meaningful (and you are way more likely to remember it). If students have the motivation to try and learn something in a "hands on way" I think it is way better than being forced to complete a worksheet assigned at school."

Pang (Junior, Patrick Henry HS) "I personally think and DO SO notice students that struggle in class due to a no-relationship or communication with teachers. In order to increase a relationship, either the STUDENT or TEACHER must make the first step of confronting the situation- which is rather hard.... Hence, it rarely happens. I INDEED strongly [believe] that if the teachers know more about a student and some communication are made, both will benefits its values."

4. Students want a physical school that has space, light, and accessibility. The school is their work place and they want it to enhance not detract from their learning.

Brett (Freshman, Avalon Charter School) "I think that school is a place for students to prepare for our future, so what our school building sets as an example is how we will think other buildings will look like and our future offices and homes. We should have our own personal space were we don't need to worry about tripping over each other, or becoming frustrated with how little room there is to learn.

The way the school not only looks, but how it treats the environment and the details within the space will make a difference in the way kids learn. I have done a little bit of research into solar energy ...but if public schools were to look into the use of solar energy it could not only be a good for the budget in the long run, but be a good way of teaching kids about the importance of being good to the earth, and also there are some good science lessons involved with solar panels. This would be a way for kids to see good lessons in their own lives instead of just talking about it in school."

Shanaye (recent graduate, North Community HS) "I think a good school design has a plenty of windows. I don't like schools that look like prisons, with high fences and metal detectors, and where three of your six classes don't have any windows or sunlight; they just have "fake" light. All it does for me is make me dislike going to school because I feel like I'm being detached from the world, and I thought the whole reason behind going to school was to better the world."

Dena (Freshman, Southwest HS) "I think that having our own personal space would really help. For instance, in my science class, we sit in tables of four. It is extremely distracting having someone directly next to you and two people straight across from you within arms' length. It is especially hard to concentrate when a troublemaker is sitting across from you and throwing erasers at you (personal experience) and taking your things just to see if you notice (another personal experience). I'm just trying to say that I think students really need their own space so that they can concentrate more easily, have room to organize their books on the desk without them falling off, and be able to get into the 'learning zone' without so many distractions."

Brian (Osseo Area Learning Center) "My parents made me go to the ALC. And if they didn't I think... well I know I would have dropped out of school. When I first walked into the school it didn't look like a real school. And when I walked around I could see everybody laughing having a good time. Just a lot of cool people just trying to get by. I walked into the bathrooms and was amazed there were doors on every stall. No gang signs everywhere and the sinks worked. I was really grateful to be in a place like Osseo ALC. When I went to this school it made me think about what kinda of stuff I did in my past. My parents did make the right choice on sending me to the Osseo ALC. Because without the ALC I don't think I would be graduating this year."

5. Students want their parents and other community members to be active and supportive of their education.

Wes (Lake Harriet Community School) "I think that the most important thing parents can do is talk to their children's teachers. They should know what their children are learning about and how they are doing. Overall, other adults in the community need to recognize that our teachers have one of the most important jobs in the community, because without them, kids would not have an education to run the future."

Holly (Freshman, Avalon Charter School) "... What would be the impact on students and our schools if a parent or other adult were present in the room? I personally think it's a good idea, because it reminds students to be good, while not necessarily punishing them. It gives a choice for the student, that they may recognize more strongly. Act up, get in trouble for sure. Do what you're supposed to, nothing bad will happen. I get sick of threats that are made that are not followed through. It's like a parent who proclaims that their child will be grounded for a week or something, but then just forgets and the child gets off fine. Also, these kinds of punishments can be very useful and I think are vital to the child's growth in that they have choices, and must make a wise one. If they don't, they get grounded or some privilege is taken away. Although this might seem cruel to some people, I absolutely believe that when you do something wrong, having something not so great happening to you will actually help in the long run."

Shanaye (recent graduate, North Community HS) "...As for the way schools and communities can help us, all they have to do is give the encouragement when we 'the students' tell them our dreams and aspirations. All they have to do is say, 'You have dreamed the dream, let us help you make the reality.' However, if you want to be specific, schools can give more scholarship opportunities, internship

opportunities, and volunteer opportunities. They could also get more mentor programs to give students more one on one attention and cater to the specific needs of each.

Furthermore communities can help by supporting their children—not just each parent’s individual child, but the children of every parent in the whole community. It’s too often that communities are divided amongst themselves, thus setting the children against each other by the examples of their parents. But if the community truly comes together and helps each other then the students benefit by knowing that they have the love and support of everyone around them. And that makes us feel like the weight of the world isn’t on just us anymore, but shared by all who care.”

Gayle (Senior, Patrick Henry HS) “...The way my dreams can be supported by my schools and communities is if both showed teenagers that anything can be accomplished no matter what type of environment. The schools definitely need to nurture the interests of the students rather than constantly shutting them down because eventually the students will begin to give up hope and there are dreams killed. I am not saying that it is the job of the community and the educational system to supply everything the student needs to fulfill their dream because most of that is the parent’s responsibility, but the community and the schools have to realize that they are a type of support that the student yearns for. I know that when I was in high school, my dreams were supported. Even if it was just comments from teachers saying, ‘good job,’ or, ‘you’re well on your way’ and others like that.”

Shanaye (recent graduate, North Community HS) “Your community is where your heritage lies. Where you grow up and who you grow up with has a huge influence in the outlook you have on life, how you speak, how you view the people around, and how you view yourself. I see the influence of my community at work in my life because I always had someone telling that I could reach my goals if I worked hard enough.

When you have other people telling you that you can do whatever put your mind to, it makes you feel like you don’t have to carry everything at once; you know that there is someone willing to help, and thus you want to do your best because you feel those who help and encourage you deserve nothing less.”

6. Students want to be involved when making choices that affect their schools.

Brett (Freshman, Avalon Charter School) “It is about the students . . . shouldn't we have them involved? When you take a class or go somewhere for a learning experience or just an experience, afterwards they give you an evaluation form. They ask questions about what could have gone better for you and how could you have gotten more out of these classes. Why can't education work like this? We may be just kids, but we should have a say in what works best in delivering our education. This site is an example of that. We want to improve education so we ask the parties involved. You underestimate the students in Minneapolis because we can understand a lot and have something valuable to say. The best schools talk to their students and involve kids in more than just sitting in class, because the school is there for them. It is also a great learning experience to be involved more in your school and how your education works. Of course teachers can be there to say no, or draw the line, but at Avalon for instance we know our boundaries and what would be abusing the voice we are given. We are not saying to have the kids run everything, but give us an equal say.”

Annie (Freshman, Southwest HS) “...I can see how adults think they always need to protect us and they know what's best, and sometimes, yes, they do...but at the same time, they don't give us enough credit. So they don't involve us in discussions about education. What I heard from a lot of students when I talked to them about standardized testing, many said that for how much testing affects them and how important it is in their lives, they didn't really feel informed about it. Adults need to trust us more with these matters and tell us what's going on. Yes, we need perspective, yes we need to hear more of the story...so TELL US and we can give you OUR perspectives...one side of the story that adults are very much lacking in

their decision making. It goes both ways.”

Dena (Freshman, Southwest HS) “I don't mean to state the obvious, but the STUDENTS are the reason there even ARE schools in the first place! Their whole, entire purpose is to teach the next generation what they need to know in the world, because they are the future. Meaning we students are the future. I think that teachers and other figures of authority at schools should make an effort to get more input from students. For example, at my middle school, one of the only times the school asks for general opinions on things is when they give the graduating eighth graders a survey to complete about how they felt their experience at Middle School was. I think there should definitely be more student-teacher discussions about . . . WHATEVER! Anything that could affect the students' education!”

Brett (Freshman, Avalon Charter School) “A combination of all different types of students so they are capable of coming to a mutual agreement on something. That way there is a less likely possibility of having problems with how students handle or interpret the policy. I don't believe it is right to exclude a type of student during decisions (not that you were saying we should). It will decrease the problems in the future if more of us can be involved somehow and share all sides of the story.”

ABOUT STUDENTS SPEAK OUT:

StudentsSpeakOut.org is an initiative of the Citizens League Minnesota 150th 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 143 new participants since its launch in mid-April 2008.)

There are a number of strategies for facilitating more dialogue about what students want in school, 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