

# Youth Weigh-In

on the California Blueprint for Great Schools



Alliance for Education Solutions

2012

The *Youth Weigh-In on the California Blueprint* report is a product of the **Alliance for Education Solution's** (AES) Youth Weigh-In Initiative. The Youth Weigh-In student convening and this report were accomplished in partnership with the California State University (CSU), Chico Cross Cultural Leadership Center and CSU Chico Department of Communication Arts and Sciences.

Thank you to the *Youth Weigh-In* planning committee: Bernie Davitto, Kelsey Dean, CC Carter, Lisa Foster, Stephanie Hamel, Malcolm McLemore, and Krystle Tonga.

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The AES is a non-profit organization. Our mission is to help turn high poverty schools into high performing schools, and to support the growth and development of vulnerable youth.

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## A Message from AES

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The Alliance for Education Solutions (AES) has been privileged to partner and work with the Arata Brothers Trust, the California State University, Chico Cross Cultural Leadership Center (CCLC) and Department of Communication Arts and Sciences, the California Department of Education (CDE), and over one hundred California youth in making possible this significant student contribution to California's education reform dialogue.

The Youth Weigh-In (YWI) report is but one example of the substantive contributions that young people can make to help solve our education crisis. The report allows students to share their views on questions that are central to the effective organization of teaching and learning and provides their perspectives for each of the areas of concern identified in the original *Blueprint for Great Schools* report.(11)

However, the 'bigger picture' implications of the students' work is equally important. Once again, student voices confirmed that Linda Darling Hammond (co-chair of the Transition Advisory Team that developed the *Blueprint*) had it right in 1997 when she identified both competency building and community building as indispensable for systemic and sustainable school improvement.

Student respondents tell us in no uncertain terms that the "human side" of education reform must be as much a focus of our change efforts as the technical side – and the research on successful turnaround schools backs them up! Students simply work harder, behave better, learn more and grow more in positive educational environments characterized by caring, respectful relationships, high expectations, and adequate supports for getting there. Both students and quality teaching thrive in those environments.

The YWI Initiative (described on page 4) is also a call to action that we ourselves will heed. We have taken very seriously the invitation issued by State Superintendent of Public Instruction Torlakson to add our own (students') thinking and to continue with the hard but rewarding work to realize our goals for all California students. This report, for example, is based on the responses of 120 Northern California high school and college students. We would be pleased to share our data collection process and instruments with anyone wishing to collect additional information from student populations in other parts of the state. Phase II of the YWI is already underway with an expanded range of partners. We invite you to visit the AES website at <http://www.AESimpact.org> to learn about follow-up initiatives, connect with like-minded others, and find links to action resources.

However, the data showing what students need to succeed in school are clear and consistent. We have less of a need to gather more data than we have the need to act on the data students have been providing us for the past twenty years. To determine the next steps we need look no further than the words of *Turning High Poverty Schools into High Performing Schools* authors Parrett and Budge: "As a profession, we are poised to significantly improve all of our schools; we know enough and possess the capacity to do so. The question of whether we do so is not one of knowledge and skill, but of will."(10)

A consistent finding of successful schools research is that these schools are data driven “learning organizations” with strong cultures of continuous improvement. They actively seek out data from all relevant sources, and feel no need to protect themselves from student input. Our student respondents again demonstrated that educators focused on improving have little to fear from students. Although students had no trouble identifying the kinds of teachers they learned the most and the least from, they were unfailingly appreciative of the many educators who cared enough to help them learn, whatever their circumstances. Moreover, an overwhelming 94 percent of our student participants affirmed their willingness to help their schools become better places to learn.

Let’s make sure that this time student voices are heard in ways that count!

Bernie Davitto, DSW

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# Background and Overview

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## The Blueprint for Great Schools

In early 2011, State Superintendent of Public Instruction Tom Torlakson convened a Transition Advisory Team charged with providing him advice on the development of a new mission and planning framework for the California Department of Education, one that ensures a world-class education to all students, and prepares them to live, work and thrive in a highly connected world. The 59-member team – described as a diverse group of public education stakeholders – included parents, teachers, classified staff, administrators, superintendents, school board members, business and union leaders, and higher education and nonprofit representatives. However, students were not listed among the Transition Advisory Team’s participants.

School leadership programs and trained student leaders exist in most communities. In addition, all students – who are primary stakeholders in the education system – have opinions and ideas, based on first-hand experience, about what is needed to help them learn. Yet this valuable resource is often overlooked, or specifically excluded, in efforts to improve schools and educational achievement.

In his August 2011 message introducing the Transition Advisory Team report, *A Blueprint for Great Schools*, Superintendent Torlakson invited Californians to “review our efforts, add your own thinking, and join us in the continuing discussion and the hard but rewarding work to realize our goals.” He stated that the *Blueprint* was not written “to sit on a shelf,” but rather that it is imperative that it becomes a plan of action.(1)

## The Youth Weigh-In Initiative

The long term goal for the AES Youth Weigh-In (YWI) project is educational success for all students. We support the Superintendent’s goal of preparing California’s students to live, work and thrive in a highly connected world.

Our guiding assumption is that progress toward this goal has been hampered by the systematic exclusion of two sets of data from many policy deliberations: youth voice and research pointing to the impressive gains when schools invest in the “human side” of education. These data, which often converge, promise to help all students succeed in school, and especially those who continue to be disproportionately disadvantaged by the current educational system. As a result, the YWI project takes action to ensure that data missing from the *Blueprint* report and other sources is included in education policy discussions.

The YWI Initiative supported a student convening as one mechanism for the voices of students to be heard on critical issues of education reform. We are sharing our findings from this event with educational decision makers through this report and will be monitoring resulting actions. This convening can also serve as a model for a student input process that can be utilized throughout the state.

In addition, the YWI initiative educates candidates for state office and is developing an online communication and resource network for students and adults that supports ongoing action and collaborations with other individuals and groups.

## The YWI Convening

A core planning team comprised of both adult professionals and university students from the Alliance for Education Solutions (AES) and the California State University (CSU), Chico Cross Cultural Leadership Center (CCLC) designed and conducted a one-day convening. Dr. Stephanie Hamel of the Department of Communication Arts and Sciences, CSU, Chico trained her undergraduate Communications Studies class as facilitators and recorders for this project. Dr. Hamel also developed, and her class field-tested, youth-friendly data-gathering instruments that addressed the core areas covered in the *Blueprint* report.

On February 29th, 2012, CCLC adult and student staff convened the 9am–3pm working session with 120 students from two universities and 12 Northern California high schools and alternative education programs. Participants included students from high and low performing schools, and involved both traditional student leaders and students who are not typically involved in such activities.

The Principal Advisor to the Superintendent of Public Instruction, Craig Cheslog, addressed the participants. He described the purpose of the *Blueprint for Great Schools* initiative, highlighted the Transition Advisory Team’s findings regarding California schools, and outlined the major recommendations contained in the *Blueprint* report.

CSU, Chico CCLC adult and student staff conducted teambuilding exercises and Communication Studies students – trained as focus group facilitators and recorders – built working teams and ran dialogue tables and working sessions to gather data. Each working team consisted of students from different schools and two facilitator/recorders. Following the conference, the facilitator/recorders compiled and summarized the data from both their focus and working groups. (See Appendix A for the list of facilitator/recorders and participating high schools.)

In addition to encouraging trust and interaction, the student-centered format of the day resulted in an unplanned benefit. The student facilitator/recorders noted that the high school student participants took full advantage of the opportunity to interact with them as college students and asked a “ton of questions about college life in general, both socially and the workload that is required.”(1)

In addition to the youth groups, Dan Sackheim, Education Programs Consultant with the California Department of Education, conducted a focus group for the more than one dozen adults in attendance: those teachers and counselors who had accompanied the high school student participants and invited educational experts. Adult participants had the opportunity to share their experiences and discuss challenges and successes in working with students, and to identify strategies to increase student voice at their schools.



The convening provided a unique opportunity to gain multiple perspectives on education. The focus groups, primarily composed of high school students, provided insight into the lives of youth both inside and out of the classroom as they discussed the positive and negative effects of their communities, how their teachers are beneficial to their success, which resources they lack and those they want, and the public school system as a whole. All of the students who participated shared thoughtful perceptions about their various high school experiences.

## The YWI Report

The YWI Report presents the data from the high school students who participated in the February 29<sup>th</sup> convening as compiled and summarized by the CSU, Chico Communication Studies students. The source data for each focus group, including all student responses, is available in the CSU, Chico Department of Communication Arts and Sciences report: *2012 Youth Weigh-in on the Blueprint for Great Schools: High school students' perceptions of the California's Department of Education's framework for creating quality schools.*(1) The data from the adult focus group is not included in either report; however, it is available on the AES website.

The student input is organized within the eight categories that correspond to the high priority areas identified in the *Blueprint* report: 1) educator quality, preparation and evaluation, 2) curriculum and assessment, 3) higher education and secondary alignment, 4) facilities construction and reform, 5) education supports, 6) school finance, 7) accountability and school involvement, and 8) early childhood education. Included are examples of written responses from the high school students (highlighted in red italics) in each category.

The report also compares student responses in specific areas – teacher quality and effective learning environments – with recent research findings. We conclude with implications for action.





## Students Share Their Views

### Student Thoughts on Their Teachers: Educator Quality, Preparation and Evaluation

#### **Students describe the qualities that make the best teachers.**

The student facilitators report that the high school students described their best teachers as being a complete package. This means besides being interested in – indeed passionate about – the material they are teaching, they want them to care about the student's success. Students believe that the best teachers are ones who are enthusiastic about their subject, understanding, and interactive. Many also said that the best teachers communicate well. They raised the concept of “motivational” as a key quality.

Another important quality for teachers is that they actually like kids. While this is usually assumed to be a given for adults who choose to be teacher, students point out that it has not always been their experience to be true. On a personal level, the students said they wanted their teachers to be a support and mentor through learning and life.

In addition, being innovative and utilizing technology as an instructional tool are other important qualities – these are seen as important to students' success as future employees.

*The best qualities include a good sense of humor, experience, and a connection with students.*

*Making them open – easy to talk to. Using different ways of teaching such as visual, verbal, and physical. When they come every day with a good attitude.*

*They get to know their students, they care about what grade they have, they're open to working with that student one-on-one, they talk with the students, not at them.*

*They are understanding of what we go through as teens. They have a passion for teaching. Willing to put in extra time for the students.*

*Respectful, interacting with students, goes over homework to understand what you got wrong and what you did wrong,*

*They also need innovation; we students are interested in new things involving technology.*

## **Students share who has inspired them or connected with them, and what these individuals do to make them want to learn.**

Based on the reports by the student facilitators, there are differences among the high school student focus groups in their responses as to who inspired them. In one group, most students mentioned their teachers as being inspirational or connecting. Others included counselors, guidance teachers, advisers and other club/extracurricular teachers. The key elements that inspire students to succeed are: encouragement, support, and motivation. Some students in this group also identified parents as a source of inspiration.

In the other two groups, most students either felt that it was primarily their friends that helped inspire them or they pointed to both family and friends. The few examples of teachers who connected with them and inspired them were the teachers who got to know the students individually and related to them on a personal level.

*My yearbook teacher. I have known her for a few years. I can talk with her about anything. She is honest and has taken the time to get to know the real me.*

*A lot of my teachers inspired me, they know when they make mistakes and take the blame instead of pushing it off to some one else.*

*Some teachers that admire you as a person, and tell you the good things about you, that motivates you and believe in you.*

*My parents inspired me to keep on learning and go to school because my parents never went to school and never gained any education. My ROP teacher inspired me to keep on learning because she always worked really hard and never gave up.*

*My mom has inspired me to be my best in everything I do. She made learning fun for me at home by helping me.*

*My friends have inspired me because they are all good students who learn well and make me think that if they succeed, then I must be able to also. The people that love and surround me also.*

## **Students describe the qualities of those from whom they learn the least.**

The student facilitators report that high school student participants expressed a lot of frustration about the poor teachers they have had during their time in high school. They were extremely vocal and had strong opinions about what qualities their least favorite teachers had. Several students reported that they had more experiences with poor teachers than good teachers.

Specific qualities that students identified to be associated with those teachers from whom they learned the least include being lazy, unorganized, and unprepared to teach the lessons that students need to learn. They also do not make sure that students understand

those lessons. The high school students often complained about unnecessary busy work and excessive reading without a purpose, or not providing additional discussion.

Other qualities associated with poor teachers are a lack of interest in, and passion for, the subject they teach and an inability – or unwillingness – to control the classroom. Students also identified traits related to a lack of interest in, and disrespect toward, students.

*I learn least from my math teacher because he expects us to learn everything without teaching. He wants us to do his job for him.*

*They seem to not prepare before teaching/ they use the book rather than engaging the students.*

*They tend to move on with the lesson when they can't fully help the student understand. They do the same routine every day, which gets boring.*

*Don't care about students' future. Don't teach to the California requirements for the class. Goes off subject frequently.*

*They sit behind their desks to teach instead of being up and involved in the classroom. They don't care about student, they don't cover any information that they test you on and they teach only to the top 10% of the class.*

*They don't get up from their desk. They can't control the class. They don't stay on top of their own work.*

*Teachers who I learn the least from are always disrespectful, rude or hates kids. Teachers who don't take the time to teach you properly and just throws work at you.*

*They never ask about me, they don't talk about my personal grade, they don't talk to me, they tell me what to do and not how to do it.*

### **Students share advice they would give their teachers to help them better reach and motivate students.**

The student facilitators report that most high school students had some very specific advice that they thought their teachers could use. Two of the most common responses were for teachers to “like kids,” and to enjoy teaching in general. Both are recurring themes.

The students also advised that the best way for a teacher to motivate their students is to show respect. They made it clear that they will open up to a teacher more if the teacher is willing to hear them out and support them. Also, having teachers who are able to connect with students about real life situations will help teachers reach and motivate students.

Another overall advice theme was the accessibility of their teachers outside of class; teachers who are accessible are seen as concerned about students' education and



opinions. Lastly, some suggest that one motivational method would be for the teachers to set clear expectations for students to aspire to reach.

*PASSION: it's infectious! Consistency, respect for students, school and educator. A love for what they do. A true understanding of material. The ability to make lessons accessible.*

*Show the student your motivation for that subject/profession. Understand the material. Even if you don't like the school/teachers/administration, remain positive to allow the student to develop own opinions. Good attitude in general.*

*Be excited about being at your job and encourage people to ask questions. It is much better when a student doesn't have to feel embarrassed about not understanding. I'd tell them to not teach the same way all the time, add a little twist now and then (i.e. don't do book work all the time). Maybe do work together to know that the students understand.*

*To be open, honest, relaxed, organized, level headed, and to treat the students like they're people.*

*The want or ambition to better the students. Give the students something to strive for.*

*Become invested in the student, keep an open-door policy. Listen to advice and try to reach the students. Love kids and be prepared for class.*

*I would give them the advice as simple as remember when you were a student and how hard everything was. When one of us does not understand, take the time and work with us. Show motivation.*

### **What students think teachers need to be the best they can be in their jobs.**

The student facilitators report that there were a variety of responses to this question. Overall, however, the high school students again repeated that teachers need to communicate and connect with their students, and they need to like teaching and want to work with kids.

Students identified the need for teachers to have integrity and be enthusiastic about the subjects they teach, and show how the material will be relevant and valuable in the student's life. They expressed a desire for teachers to be understanding to their needs and present their material in a fun manner to help them learn. They explained that their teachers' interest and passion about what they are teaching is what stimulates their interest and motivates them to learn. However, too often they see repetition from their teachers who appear bored with teaching. Students also discussed that teachers need to be respectful towards them (students). Like their teachers, students are individuals with their own personal issues and they would like for their teachers to consider this when teaching them. They suggest that teachers build rapport with their students.



The facilitators also report that students suggested that teachers need to have a better support system from their school administration; this support includes additional funding.

*I would tell them to always support them and be there for them. Also that when they see someone giving up to talk to them and convince them that they can do it. They need to treat everybody equal.*

*Passion for what they do. A true love for teaching and students. Open-mindedness.*

*Communicating, social and personable, strong interests in subject, a passion for subject, students, and teaching.*

*The teachers are active with the students. They help the students with any assignment that they're struggling with. They let you know what is going on with your grades and what you can do about it.*

*I do think about my future quite often. There are some teachers that talk to you about your future.*

*I would say teachers should connect with the students more, because there are some great kids out there but they don't take the time to get to know the students.*

*They need to have support from the administration including being adequately funded.*

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## What Students Learn and How They Learn It: Curriculum and Assessment

The highest performing schools in the world prepare students to apply rigorous academic content – such as math, English language, history, and science – to real life situations that involve technology and the ability to apply knowledge in flexible ways using their reasoning and problem solving skills. Students also learn how to collaborate and communicate in multiple ways. And yet, despite this applied and collaborative approach to learning in high performing schools, student assessments and individual test scores are the primary indicators of a school's performance.

**Students consider ways – besides test scores – to assess their ability to work through problems, think critically, and work creatively and collaboratively.**

The student facilitators report that the bubble test exams that schools use are not popular because students feel that such tests are not a true reflection of real skills. Students' felt that the current tests were limiting to some because it didn't play to their strengths. The focus group students had a range of alternative ideas to judging students solely on test scores. Most agreed that group projects or other group activities could be an alternative.

They thought that student presentations could show creativity and public speaking skills. While some suggested responses to essay questions/ prompts could also be an alternative, most students indicated that overall grade point average would show scholastic aptitude ability aside from test scores.

Most of the students expressed the desire for outsiders to see their abilities through hands-on activities in the classroom. They suggest that schools should give seminars or real life situations where the student is asked to perform an activity. In addition, the students in one focus group felt that the professionals in the district that care about their thinking and working abilities need to spend more time observing in the classroom to monitor their progress and assess their skill level.

*Working creatively could be a good way for outsiders to see my ability of work because school really cuts off kids' imaginations with all of the rules that they have to follow with projects.*

*They need to see the hard work that the students do on a day to day basis.*

*Looking at the overall grades in the class or sitting in on a class discussion.*

*Yes, it's important to understand that not everyone is a good test taker. Different types of intelligence should be assessed through more creative tests. It all goes back to the principle as to why IQ tests don't work.*

*I think that if outsiders just watch and ask questions then that's how they can see my ability.*

*Have class activities or projects. Give the students real life situations to work through realistic problems and observe how they react.*

*They should put you in actual physical test because some people are bad test takers but when they are given something to do they do better than tests.*

*In some schools, assessments or tests are used as guides for teachers to understand where individual students are and what they need.*

### ***Students consider whether schools should be assessed for the kind of learning environment they provide.***

The student facilitators report that all student focus group participants were in agreement that schools should be assessed for the kind of learning environment they provide – safe, positive climate, respectful – because their surroundings are crucial to their [the student's] success. They all expressed strong opinions on this issue. Safety especially was mentioned continuously throughout the discussion; students stated that this needs to be assessed so that they can feel safe at school. They also pointed out that in the wrong environment (unsafe, toxic, disrespectful, etc.) it would be nearly impossible to learn.

*Yes because if they are not safe, positive or respectful, then most of the students there won't be doing good because of the environment they are in.*

*Yes, a good learning environment is key to a good education. Someone can't learn if they are scared, but there shouldn't be punishment for lack of safety, only work to make it better.*

*Yes, because it teaches the kids what is going on and how to treat people.*

*Yes. The school affects the student's experience for four years. Which in turn affects the student as a whole.*

*Yes, it gives motivation to maintain high standards and ensures funds are relocated properly and not wasted or spent on endeavors not helping the school/student.*

*Yes, because if the schools were assessed often for a positive learning climate then the school would try to make it better for the kids which is how it already should be.*

*This is a good idea because safety and respect to the teachers are crucial for learning to take place in a classroom.*

*Yes, because obviously a school should be a place where students can reach their full potential, and this requires a positive environment.*

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## Preparing for College and Jobs: Higher Education and Secondary Alignment

### **Students think about their future after high school; but do they talk about it in school?**

According to the student facilitators, almost all of the students reported that they think about their future after high school. However, students reported different experiences in relation to talking about their future at school. In one focus group, most described having the opportunity to talk with teachers and counselors about their future options and aspirations, including colleges and career plans. Other students described more limited opportunities; they said that the subject was generally not discussed unless they made specific efforts to reach out for help in this area, such as asking for information on applying for colleges.

*Yes, all the time. I am very focused on my future and my AVID class talks about college all the time.*

*I think about jobs, housing, colleges, and how I will survive. I talk about it with friends and some teachers talk to us about it.*

*Yes, I go to a college prep, we take every day a step at a time. And the teachers and staff prepare us for the challenges of high school.*

*Yes, all the time. It's slightly irritating how much I hear about college but I'm glad to know I'm prepared.*

*I do, but not as much. I don't want to stress too much about my future that I don't live my life out right now.*

*Yes, I think about it but I don't speak about it at school because the teachers lack enthusiasm for addressing students into pursuing their dreams.*

*I think about my future after high school. We talk about it in school, but not as much as we should.*

*I do think about my future after high school and I also talk to friends and classmates about it.*

*No I don't, partly my fault but also I believe the school is at fault.*

### **Students identify the information they need to make good decisions for their future after high school.**

When asked about what information they need to make good decisions for their future after high school, the student facilitators report that the high school students identified the following common themes: college preparation courses, career options, and financial aid. Students stressed the importance of financial aid, stating that without it they would not be attending college. In addition, they indicated the general need for more information to be more readily available to them in order to help them get into college and/or make informed decisions about their future.

*Info about career choices, schools, and how to live on our own.*

*How many credits you would need and what you need to do to get into the area you want.*

*The classes I need to take in order to get into college and also the test that I should take.*

*More info on what is out there. I need to know all the facts of college and how to get the best grants & scholarships, where to find them.*

*I need information on the available opportunities in terms of colleges, financial aid, and jobs.*

*I need to know all the different types of working fields out there in the workforce.*

*We need someone to talk to that knows what they're talking about. Someone that's been through the process to where you want to get. I need the information on how to go to college, but I guess I'll manage once I get into college. Not the best idea, but I'll try.*

## **Students talk about getting the information they need from their schools to make future decisions about jobs or careers.**

According to the student facilitators, most of the high school students in focus groups felt that their schools had given them information to help them make decisions about their future. They identified various classes and other resources available to help them with college or career options such as AVID, ROP, ETS, LEAP, and job fairs. However, the students pointed out that, even though the information was available, it wasn't advertised well to the students. Some students described having to be extremely proactive in searching for the information they needed about job skills and college opportunities. As a result, many students feel that information needs to be advertised and disseminated better to all students, and while the available information is helpful, it is not sufficient.

*My school does, but many students don't know where to look.*

*Not really, if you want information you need to talk to the counselor or a good caring teacher.*

*My school does provide this, they have an AVID and also being able to talk to counselors.*

*A few teachers (if asked personally) along with counselors will provide the info.*

*Yes, but I feel it's mostly common knowledge.*

*I believe not because all school does is teach you the basic things like English, math, history, they should focus more on real life jobs.*

*They do, but I think that I don't take as much as an advantage over them.*

*Yes there was a career center but unless you knew it was there you didn't go and get the help.*

*Yes, my school has ROP classes for medical, cooking, and child care. There are a lot of job or career classes.*

*My school doesn't provide a lot when it comes to future jobs and careers.*

*All of our classes are geared toward college education. Definitely. We go to career fair every year and have visits from colleges all the time.*

## **Students talk about getting the help and support they need in applying for college or employment.**

The student facilitators report that most of the high school participants indicated that they are getting some information on applying for college, but many said that the amount of help is limited and it would be beneficial to get more information. The quality of support at some schools also needs improvement. Students pointed out that most of the help they receive comes from teachers and counselors and programs at school. Only a few

students voiced that they are getting the help that they need in applying for college at home from their parents.

*I do if I ask for help, but I believe that our school should talk to us about people from a larger variety of different careers.*

*Yes, the programs Educational Talent Search and AVID are very helpful. They provide us for upcoming tests and college tours and meetings and discussion about college.*

*Somewhat from the programs at school, but it doesn't clarify it well and isn't always available.*

*Yes but that's because I wanted it and searched it wasn't put in my face to made readily available.*

*The school social worker. He showed me how to apply, and proved to me that I could.*

*Yes, my family, teachers, coaches, and friends are providing me with the support and information about college and employment.*

*I sort of get the help I need, but it could be much better. The counselors and ETS provide it to me. However, the counselors only give me basic info, but become confused when it comes to detail.*

*Have to go out of my way to do so. Depends on the school.*

*Yes, our junior and senior year is focused on that. Also, we have a college counselor.*

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## Where Learning Happens: Facilities Construction and Reform

### **Students' first impressions of their school: good or bad and why?**

When students were asked about the first impressions they had of their high schools, the student facilitators report that there were a range of responses given that students in their groups attend different schools. Many formed their first impression of the school just by its appearance. For example, many explained that it was much larger than the middle school they had attended and that the large campus made them nervous. The students noted that that word of mouth, the surrounding community, and campus appearance all contribute to a student's first impression of their high school.

*I first saw my school as a 6th grader when my sister was considering it. I moved from Southern California so coming to this environment was a little of a*



*culture shock. I thought the school was small and free, privileged, a place of high learning, crazy, driven students, nice faculty and teachers.*

*Bad: There are several “ghetto” communities surrounding I live in at those kids with a negative influence have come into the school and my school has a bad rep.*

*It was good and bad. Good because it looked like a good school and I had many friends who were already in it. Bad because I could tell my classes were going to be filled with bad students.*

*Bad-old, falling apart, a ghetto like appearance.*

*My first impression was that I was excited, but I was going to be lost going to my classes. It was a good impression.*

*My impression was mixed. To me, my school looked like any other school but my friends said it looked bad. It's changed and improved but it didn't matter to me because I knew I was getting a good education.*

*My first impression was that the school was big, the students are a little scary and the campus is a little dirty.*

*At first I thought it was pretty because I heard that they pay more attention to get new things for the school. Rather than giving the money they get to the teachers... It was the first outside school I had ever seen. But it looked clean and friendly...The facilities were not good and sports had very little funding. It looked “ghetto because the buildings looked like trailers.*

*It was good because the campus was small but inviting.*

*Good because it was big and looked nice.*

*It was good, but very different from my middle school experience. It seemed very large because my middle school wasn't that large, it didn't seem good or bad. Just a campus.*

### **Students identify spending priorities for upgrading their school facility.**

Based on the students' responses, the appearance and functioning of their campus is important to most in order to provide an environment that is conducive to learning. According to the student facilitators, the focus group participants identified that spending should be focused on outdoor and indoor athletic spaces such as fields and playing surfaces, and gymnasiums. A second priority for spending is fixing and upgrading the classrooms and other buildings, specifically the bathrooms. This includes fixing the air conditioning/ heating systems, and improving the overall appearance of the school through adding greenery.

In addition to their upgrading their school facility, students would like to see more money spent on sports and classes such as college prep courses, arts programs, textbooks, library computers, and support services.

*Offering more classes, upgrading sports and arts facilities, then gyms and bathrooms.*

*1. Ventilation system, 2. Sports field*

*Make classes more breathable, Clean up bathrooms.*

*I would like to see an upgrade to improve our science labs. I would also like to see more sports facilities like a swimming pool, track field, and football field.*

*Classrooms*

*Football field, soccer field, buildings. Probably be better to tear down the whole thing and start over.*

*I would like to see my school fix all the classrooms with broken air conditioners. It's annoying when it's too cold or hot in classrooms. The second would have to be to just keep better care of the fields when not in use.*

*I would like the money to be spent on better books and sports.*

*Athletics, college prep courses/career center, after-school programming.*

*I don't think facilities or how a school looks matter as much as the education. Aesthetics shouldn't be a focus. Instead, learning materials should be bought.*

### **Students identify some low-cost ways their school could make a better first impression.**

The majority of students agree that taking better care of the overall outside appearance would make a much better first impression of their school. The student facilitators report that the students identified a variety of low cost options that their schools could implement to accomplish this. These include adding more trees and plants to their campuses and maintaining them, painting throughout, and picking up more trash and garbage. They suggest that school clubs could be utilized to help with these projects and school events could be held to raise money for specific ones (such as promoting school cleanliness). The students expressed that they want to be a part of beautifying their campuses, as well as seeing efforts and involvement from their teachers and school staff.

*Repaint things to make it look clean and neat.*

*They can start by keeping it cleaner because through the years people have been less respectful.*

*Have art.*

*Have more nature. We don't need expensive fountains, but more plant life would help the view.*

*Community gardens, clean up campus initiatives through which students could get community service hours done.*

*Fundraisers, events that fund our school.*

*The sports, clubs and stuff.*

*People can volunteer and clean areas around the school and make it a cleaner campus. Therefore, the campus would seem much cleaner and more welcoming.*

*Have the higher class greeting the incomers. Non-expensive decorations maybe.*

*First impression doesn't have to be a campus visit. Getting our name out there so people can recognize it as a good school before they visit it would probably best serve us.*

### **Students identify ways their school could improve the learning spaces.**

The question that students were intended to tackle was to identify some low-cost ways their school could improve the learning spaces. However, in reviewing the responses provided by the students, the responses do not reflect “low-cost” ideas but rather more general suggestions for improving the learning environment.

The student facilitators report that most students also suggested that updated computers and software; new textbooks and other materials; new desks, tables and chairs – with adequate space for them – and new (or fixed) heating and air conditioning would improve their learning spaces and help them learn better. In addition, they identified better teachers and teaching methods, and libraries with more books and stronger internet connections. The majority of students in one focus group stated that smaller class sizes would positively impact their learning.

The majority of students indicated that overall school cleanliness would help their learning environment. They also suggested a volunteerism effort to improve school morale.

*By upgrading the computers the students have access to, not just the teachers' computers.*

*Bigger space and new tables and chairs.*

*Fix the heating and air.*

*Having less students in the class. More time for one on one.*

*Replace textbooks and other materials.*

*Lab materials. Better technology.*

*Through volunteer work; students could volunteer to tutor other struggling students and help them out.*

### **Students talk about working with community members to improve their school.**

When students were asked whether or not they would be willing to join members of their community to work on improving their schools, student facilitators reported that they overwhelmingly responded that they would. Some mentioned they already are making efforts at their own schools or have joined members of their communities in school improvement projects. In addition, students concluded that they would be willing to join clubs and organizations that help improve their schools, especially if club members are dedicated and serious about the issue. Students felt that serious efforts to improve their school would inspire them and their peers to take further action to make their high school experience a more positive one.

*Yes, I would love that.*

*Yes, I want the next generation (the future) to be more prepared for college.*

*Yes. I would be willing to join members of my community to work on improving my school.*

*Yes. We have clubs on campus devoted to community service and they'd be willing to volunteer.*

*Yes, I have the time to improve the school, it's where I go so why not better my environment.*

*Yes, if I thought it would make a difference.*

*Yes – less politics, more action.*

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### **Help at School: Education Supports**

#### **Students share their views on support services – healthcare, social services, after-school programs, tutoring – and student performance.**

The student facilitators report that the majority of the high school participants agreed that the availability of support services makes a difference and plays a big role in student success. Health care, social services, tutoring and before- and after-school programs provide students with motivation, support and energy to do well in school – without them school cannot be an effective tool in a child's total learning experience.

The student participants felt that such services, especially tutoring, contribute to students' academic achievement and their ability to focus and perform in school. They also identified after-school activities as important in keeping students safe and engaged in positive activities instead of being bored and engaging in unwanted behavior. In one of the focus groups, most of the students reported that support services have helped them and their friends.<sup>1</sup>

*Yes in many ways. The schools that provide one-on-one interaction to improve students generally end up successful. I know many students who benefit from on-campus services and they are able to achieve things they normally wouldn't be able to.*

*These services help the students succeed by giving them health and peace of mind to focus on school.*

*In my opinion, yes. Having a tutor one-on-one makes me learn better because the one who teaches me focuses on me and knows what I need help on.*

*Yes, if a child feels supported then they are more likely to succeed and also tutoring can help them academically as well as with confidence. Think it definitely helps others succeed because it gives people the extra help that they need that they didn't get in class. Also, it helps support students who may be struggling outside of school.*

*They do play a role because when kids aren't given the right tools for an education they won't succeed. It's like a construction worker going to his job to make houses without a hammer. How will he build a house?*

*There is not a lot to do there after school and not really a place to hang out, everyone gets bored.*

*Sometimes it does play a role but most of the time, even when the students are given the help they don't take advantage of it. There are some students who simply don't care.*

*No, people failing are not looking for help.*

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## Show Me the Money: School Finance

### **Students share what they would like to see more money spent on at their school.**

The student facilitators report that the high school student responses focused on sports, textbooks, and elective opportunities. Many thought priority spending should go to their

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<sup>1</sup> In one of the focus groups on Education Supports, the facilitators noted that they felt that many students did not fully understand the question they discussed.

gym. The facilitators pointed out that it is very important for students to get exercise and release endorphins in order to be happy or content in school. Students said they would like to see more money going to their sports teams because they believed it would boost morale in school and the surrounding community. They felt that better facilities, uniforms and athletic equipment would give them a better school experience.

Students also brought up new textbooks as a priority funding item. They explained that their textbooks are reused and falling apart in class; they are also outdated. They would like to see money go toward bringing back electives that have been discontinued at their school. For example, many expressed sadness at losing their art programs due to lack of funding. They believe that bringing back elective programs (e.g., music, languages, woodshop) would increase enthusiasm for school among students and help them prepare for future careers.

*New text books – they get old and fall apart. Sports. School ventilation system.*

*I'd like to see money being spent on things that can help teach students much faster. Such an example is to buy electrical devices for students to use in class. This generation is the tech-savvy generation, so they will be glad to use electronics.*

*I would like to also see money to be spent on sports facilities. Sports help motivate some students to get good grades in school to stay on the team.*

*More elective classes to give us more options and see what other subjects are out there.*

*I would like to see more funding in sports, food and after school programs because it helps the students stay active and lunch makes the students more alert.*

*I would like to see money spent in more programs that orient students in some careers/majors. More money should be spent on textbooks.*

*I would like to see what our school spends our money on because sometimes it seems that they use it more on other stuff other than what is actually needed. The resources that we need there.*

### **Students weigh-in on the importance of the community knowing how money is being used in their school.**

The student facilitators reported that the majority of high school students believed that the community should know where money is being spent because it is their tax money being used. A smaller number felt that their school did not use their money wisely in the first place (so it did not matter), or that spending decisions were their school's own business.

The students believed that it is important for the community to be involved because they are also directly affected by the schools decisions. Students reasoned that if their



community knew where the money was going, they would care more about the school and the students. They also felt that if the community was informed about school funding, then they would be able to influence (through lobbying for example) the decisions to make sure that the money goes to those areas that are needed at the school. Parents are knowledgeable about school needs because their student is attending the school and giving them direct feedback. Funding information for each school is also important because parents can use this information to make decisions about schools for their children.

*Yes because the school needs to spend money wisely and not on things that really don't need to be improved or just don't need, and the parents need to know so they can have a voice and a say on it.*

*Yes our community needs to know where their tax money is going. They also need to know what is going on with today's schools so they know what their kids are learning or not learning.*

*Yes, so the community would help more.*

*Yes, because the community deserves to know, because it's their school therefore they need to know. It greatly affects the students.*

*I think it's not important for us to know, but at times it is kind of good for us to know.*

*No. If you trusted the people making the decisions, this information shouldn't be divulged. It's impossible to make everyone happy – everyone values different things in education.*

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## **My Community and My School: Accountability and School Involvement**

### **Students describe the community surrounding their school.**

The student facilitators asked the focus group students to describe the communities where they spend their time when they are not in school. They report that most students identified both “healthy” and “hurting” aspects in each of their communities.

Students described the healthy aspects of their communities as primarily including parks, libraries, after-school programs, volunteer opportunities, sports programs and other extracurricular activities and organizations in which kids can participate. They said that having these resources, along with people who are friendly toward each other, create a safe and healthy environment that makes them feel comfortable.

The major hurting aspects of students’ communities are easy access to drugs and drug abuse (including alcohol), gangs and related activities, and street violence. Many noted that drugs, gangs, and violence are the primary sources of negative impact on their

community. Students who live in these communities described the lack of safe locations where they could spend their free time.

**Healthy**

*Safe neighborhood  
Quiet Neighborhood  
Not busy with cars or traffic  
Library  
Churches  
Community center  
Community pool  
Parks, open areas, skate parks*

*After-school programs/activities  
Clubs and organizations  
YMCA  
Grocery store  
Sports  
Soup Kitchen  
Friends  
Volunteering*

**Hurting**

*Lack of parks  
Lack of sports  
Gang Violence  
Homeless  
Crime  
Drugs  
Violence  
Little community involvement*

*No parental support  
Drugs and alcohol at home  
No school involvement  
There isn't much to do  
People are spread out from each other  
Low income neighborhood  
Some "scary" parts of town*

\*\*\*\*\*

**Students identify the positive community resources for kids and suggest how schools could work more closely with them.**

The student facilitators report that the focus group students responded with some options. These include having the school work with community centers, clubs, libraries, tutoring, and after-school programs. To help maintain close ties between the community resources and the schools, students suggest providing them with reduced or special prices or fees for classes and activities. Also, students could be encouraged to volunteer in the community for experience.

A large number of students in the focus groups reported that their communities did not actually have good resources for kids. They noted that they would like to have additional community resources to help them achieve success in school and with their future.

*Community centers, schools can promote or show the things that are going to happen at the community centers.*

*There are many libraries and our school offers many outside classes. American River College and other junior colleges around, there are many resources helped.*

*Volunteer programs, like the zoo or other places.*

*Gyms, Rec centers. Schools could do more to make kids want to participate in their community and get them involved. Park is close by – School could hold events over there.*

*Next to elementary school – interact with them.*

*Theaters – have more productions from the theaters and cast more people in them, gyms, public libraries, after school tutoring, parks, have more programs besides sports.*

*By encouraging activities like this schools bring out the best in the community.*

*There are a lot of church services, volunteers in hospitals, work experience for high school students. I know that if you want you can do it, but I learned it because some friends told me about it.*

*There are few resources, mainly we rely on the public library system, but that isn't much.*

### **Information students want officials to collect or have about their community to better understand their school and the students in it.**

The student facilitators report that the focus group participants provided a variety of responses when asked what information they want officials to have about their community to better understand their school. Some identified school location and key characteristics of the community (such as socio-economic status, ethnicity of community population, and community resources). Others focused more on the demographics of the school itself and the variety of the different classes and programs at the school. Students identified the need for more community and school connection. Also, they want officials to know that they need more useful and productive activities to do, along with more resources.

In one focus group, students primarily wanted officials to know how easily and frequently drugs are provided and used, and about the negative activities like gangs and violence that take place outside (and within) their school. In contrast, a few students indicated that their community had a poor – but undeserved – reputation.

*I think that our school needs to get involved with the community.*

*The International Baccalaureate program draws kids from outside the community.*

*The type of people there.*

*Look to see the different ethnicities in order to know if they need to put in language helping courses.*

*They should go “inside” the community and see what’s going on first hand.*

Any information that would help them think positive about the students and the community.

There is not a lot to do there after school and not really a place to hang out, everyone gets bored.

Drugs are easily provided for the students at my school and community, you don't have to go far to find someone willing to sell.

Our community reputation is bad but not true. Our community works together to make it better and its very diverse. We are all focused and want our community to work together as a whole.

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## Remember Kindergarten: Early Childhood Education

A new law in California requires that, by the fall of 2014, children must turn age five by September in order to start kindergarten. Younger children can be enrolled in a transitional kindergarten. The purpose of this change is to give children who would have started at age four an extra year to develop their language and social skills so that they can be more successful in school.

### **Is this a good idea? Students weigh-in.**

The student facilitators report that the high school student responses to this question were divided among “yes,” “no,” and “it depends.” Those who agree with the new law stated it was a good idea because starting at an older age would help children develop more, learning would become easier, and children would be more prepared and have a better chance in school. Those who disagreed had two perspectives. The first was that every child should start as early as possible as more learning would only benefit the child. The second was that as each person is different, he or she should start school when they are ready for it; that decision should be up to the parent or, alternatively, based on testing or made by school supervisors.

# Looking Forward

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## A Convergence of Research and Resources

The responses of our student participants closely mirror those of previous student voices, particularly as they relate to *teacher effectiveness* and the *importance of positive learning environments*.(10)(5)(6) Students say they learn the most from teachers who care about them, those who believe in them and never give up on them. They learn from teachers who know about the subject they are teaching well enough to show its relevance to students' lives, and who share their passion and have a sense of humor. Students want healthy, safe and supportive learning environments.

Significantly, the student generated data in this report also closely parallels the findings of the growing body of research on the core strategies of successful turnaround schools.(2)(3)(7)(8)(9) Leadership in these successful schools seeks to develop and support teachers with essentially the same characteristics as those most desired by students. In these schools, principals take the lead in building “positive and trusting relationships with students, their families, and the broader neighborhood and community.”(9)

Two other emerging developments hold promise for more systemic youth-adult partnerships in education reform. The first is a perceptible shift among educators toward focusing on professional and systemic, as well as student, learning. The other is a growing movement toward educators “learning from student descriptions and analyses of their learning.”(4) This movement is also characterized by a “culture of continuous improvement” – for educators and systems as well as students. In successful turnaround schools, for example, researchers Parrett and Budge found that principals in often served as “lead learners among a community of learners” all working to build a positive school culture in which both students and teachers thrive.(9) In these learning centered environments, student voice is respected and welcomed.

The above trend coincides with a growing recognition among educators and researchers that student voice is a critically important piece necessary for solving the education crisis. Educator/researcher Alison Cook-Sather argues that “*attending to students’ perspectives on teaching, learning, and schooling, as well as other assessments of teaching practices must be an ongoing and never-ending process.*” (5) In addition, the benefits of authentic youth voice are now being documented. In a recently released study, researchers Toshalis and Nakkula concluded that fostering student voice – “*empowering youth to express their opinions and influence their educational experiences so that they feel they have a stake in the outcomes*” – is **one of the most powerful tools schools have to increase learning!**(12)

If the above is true, and our student participants strongly suggested that it is, shouldn't we in California act quickly on this information? Doesn't the fate of tens of thousands of students in California's underperforming schools and the quality of our nation's future depend on it?

## Action Implications: So Now What?

The potential payoff for continuing to develop the potential of youth-adult partnerships in education reform is enormous – BUT ONLY IF WE ACT ON WHAT WE KNOW! Superintendent Torlackson has repeatedly stressed the critical importance of following reports with positive action. Our expanding YWI partnership is preparing to do just that.

We suggest that high schools are the ideal place to expand youth voice in education reform. Historically, high schools have been the most difficult schools to turn around, and that unfortunate reality continues to this day. What fortunate timing that just as expensive curriculum based models have shown themselves to be marginally successful at best, and unsuccessful in turning around high poverty schools, an old/new human resource is presenting itself. This resource is inexpensive to bring on board, readily available in every school, a willing partner, and their expertise is research validated. The resource, of course, is students themselves.

Although system focused youth voice initiatives seem more established and developed on the East coast, we can quickly catch up if we have the will to do so. Students are eagerly awaiting their rightful place at California's education reform table.

Information on AES follow-up activities to build upon this report is available upon request, or by visiting our website at [www.AESimpact.org](http://www.AESimpact.org).





## Appendix: Student Facilitators and Participating Schools

### CSU, Chico Cross Cultural Leadership Center

Charles "CC" Carter, Director  
Malcolm McLemore

#### Student Staff

Krystle Tonga

Bianka Perez  
Cindy Melendrez

### CSU, Chico Advanced Interviewing Class

Stephanie Hamel, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor  
Department of Communication Arts and Sciences

#### Student Facilitator/Recorders

Christopher Beltran  
Brian Buckham  
Brittanie Conaway  
Kristen Corich  
Nathan Duttera  
Lindsey Eli  
Cody Foster  
John Kammerer  
Angela Kiju  
Natasha Lydon  
Stephanie McHugh  
Christopher Melendrez  
Alexandra Mongiello

Michael Nush  
Katelyn O'Hair  
Daniel Peabody  
Taylor Putnam  
Yoel Ramirez  
Lindsey Rein  
Angela Santilli  
Edward Schatzman  
Javier Silva  
Makenzie Snyder  
Kasey Wall  
Gordon Wilson  
Brittany Wright

### Participating Schools

CSU, Chico  
University of California, Davis

Chico High School, Chico Unified School District (CUSD)  
Gridley High School, Gridley USD  
Hamilton High School, Hamilton USD  
Hiram Johnson High School, Sacramento City Unified School District (SCUSD)  
Luther Burbank High School, SCUSD  
John F. Kennedy High School, SCUSD  
Live Oak High School, Morgan Hill USD

Mira Loma High School, Mira Loma USD  
Orland High School, Orland USD  
Paradise High School, Paradise USD  
Pleasant Valley High School, CUSD  
Pacific Career and Technology High School, North Highlands-Twin Rivers USD  
Sacramento Charter High School, SCUSD  
West Campus High School, SCUSD  
Wheatland Community Day School, Wheatland Union High SD  
Yuba City High School, Yuba City USD

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