



Youth Weigh-In on the California Blueprint for Great Schools

Brief

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In early 2011, State Superintendent of Public Instruction Tom Torlakson convened a Transition Advisory Team, described as a diverse group of public education stakeholders, and charged them with providing him advice on the development of a new mission and planning framework for the California Department of Education. In presenting the Advisory Team's *California Blueprint for Great Schools*,¹ the Superintendent invited Californians to review their efforts, add their own thinking, and join them in the continuing discussion and the hard but rewarding work to realize the state's educational goals in preparing California's students to live, work and thrive in a highly connected world.

Students – primary stakeholders in the education process – were not included on the Advisory Team. So, in late February 2012, over 100 Northern California high school and university students came together through the AES Youth Weigh-In (YWI) Initiative to respond to the Superintendent's invitation and join the discussion.

California State University (CSU), Chico adult and student staff from the Cross Cultural Leadership Center convened the one-day working session and conducted teambuilding exercises. To gather data for the *Blueprint* process, CSU, Chico Communication Studies students facilitated and recorded focus and work groups with high school students. This working session provided students the opportunity to discuss and share their views on questions that are central to the effective organization of teaching and learning.

The *Youth Weigh-In on the California Blueprint for Great Schools* report describes the YWI convening and presents student data which adds value to the *Blueprint* discussion and implementation. Specifically, it provides the perspectives of the participating students for each of the eight areas of concern identified in the original *Blueprint* report, including students' thoughts on their teachers (educator quality, preparation, and evaluation); what students learn and how they learn it (curriculum and assessment); preparing for college and jobs (higher education and secondary alignment); and help at school (education supports). The YWI report is available on the AES website at <http://www.aesimpact.org/>.

The responses of the student participants closely mirror those of previous student voices, particularly as they relate to *teacher effectiveness* and the *importance of positive learning environments*.² 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.

The student generated data in YWI report also closely parallels the findings of the growing body of research on the core strategies of successful turnaround schools.³ 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."⁴

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."⁵ 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.⁶ 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.*"⁷ 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!***⁸

¹ State Superintendent of Education and California State Department of Education. *A Blueprint for Great Schools*, Transition Advisory Team Report (2011).

² M. Poplin and J. Weeres, *Voices from the Inside*, Institute for Education in Transformation at the Claremont Graduate School (1992); A. Cook-Sather, *Learning from the Student's Perspective: A Sourcebook for Effective Teaching*, Paradigm Publishers (2009); and K. Cushman, *Fires in the Bathroom: Advice for Teachers from High School Students*, New Press (2003).

³ K. Chenoweth, *How It's Being Done*, Harvard Education Press (2009); K. Chenoweth, *It's Being Done: Academic Success in Unexpected Schools*, Harvard Education Press (2007); G. Gordon, *Building Engaged Schools*, Gallup Press (2006); L. Pappano, *Inside School Turnarounds*, Harvard Education Press (2010); and W. Parrett and K. Budge, *Turning High Poverty Schools into High Performing Schools*, ASCD (2012).

⁴ W. Parrett and K. Budge, *Turning High Poverty Schools into High Performing Schools*, ASCD (2012).

⁵ A. Cook-Sather, "Authorizing Students' Perspectives: Toward Trust, Dialogue and Change in Education," *Educational Researcher* 31, No. 4 (May 2002).

⁶ W. Parrett and K. Budge, *Turning High Poverty Schools into High Performing Schools*, ASCD (2012).

⁷ A. Cook-Sather *Learning from the Student's Perspective: A Sourcebook for Effective Teaching*, Paradigm Publishers (2009).

⁸ E. Toshalis and M. J. Nakkula, *Motivation, Engagement and Student Voice*, Students at the Center, Jobs for the Future (2012).

The Alliance for Education Solutions (AES) is a non-profit organization. Our mission is helping turn high poverty schools into high performing schools while supporting the growth and development of vulnerable youth. Please visit our website at www.AESimpact.org for additional information and resources.