

**STUDENT INVOLVEMENT  
IN SMALL SCHOOL CONVERSION**

**INDIANAPOLIS, INDIANA**

A SAMPLE OF EARLY PLANNING DOCUMENTS

August – September 2004

# **Student Involvement in Small School Conversion in Indianapolis, IN: First-Year Activity Summary**

## **Indianapolis Public Schools Harmony/VISTA Service Learning Demonstration Project**

September 23, 2004

The Indianapolis Public Schools District, in partnership with the Harmony/VISTA Service Learning Project and other community partners, has engaged its students and parents in a number of ways as it explores converting its five large, urban high schools into small schools under the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation model. These schools are currently in the Exploration Phase of small school creation. Full implementation of small schools is expected in August 2005. IPS high schools are currently in Small Learning Communities. Here are some examples of the powerful experiences that have engaged youth and parents over the last year.

### **Fall 2003:**

- Youth Forums (2 per school): 30 students participated at each school. These students met to discuss their “ideal school” and what it would take for each student at their school to be successful. Students learned about Small Learning Communities and had questions answered by the SLC Coordinator or knowledgeable teacher. This was the first time that many students had been engaged in this way. These groups were diverse in age, race, academic skill, and overall success in school.
- NESSI Gates Grant Kick-off: Youth Forum participants (about 25 students from across the District) led table-top discussions with city officials and business and school leaders at the dinner. Many guests reported this as the highlight of the evening.
- IPS Youth Congress: Youth Forum participants (30 from five schools) met at the Adam’s Mark Hotel for one full day. Students discussed what they can do as a group and as individuals to help all students succeed. Students reported that strong relationships with adults and peers, feelings of trust and community, and engaging, hands-on learning strategies were the most important characteristics of a successful school.

### **Spring 2004:**

- Brown-bag Lunch Series (2-3 per school): Early in the second semester, VISTA Volunteers resumed formal meetings with Youth Congress participants. Equipped with the skills and knowledge from the VISTA-led Youth Forums and the IPS Youth Congress, students began planning what they would like to do to help their school transition to Small Learning Communities and Small Schools.

- Youth Summit: This IPS sponsored, VISTA-led event brought 60 students from eight IPS high schools and one Bloomington, IN high school together for a weekend of skill building and learning. Students participated in break-out sessions about leadership, effective communication with adults, the differences and similarities of large and small schools, and community-building
- IPS Parent Congress: The Parent Congress was an opportunity for parents, students, educators, and community partners to come together for 1 ½ days to explore parent involvement in the small school conversion process. Nearly 150 people participated in this powerful event.
- Exploration Team: Throughout the school year, students participated in Small School Exploration Team meetings.

### **Summer 2004**

- IPS Small School Leadership Academy: Students, parents and teachers attended this week-long Academy. The Harmony/VISTA Project facilitated the student track. Students focused on developing their own leadership skills, and discussing how they would like to be authentically involved in the small school reform process. Students generated a list of ideas addressing ways that they, as well as other students, can be involved in small school reform, including the creation of a student-led TV show explaining small school in “kid friendly” language.
- Student-led Research Project: The Harmony/VISTA Project received funding from CIRCLE to engage high school students as researchers of student engagement in the small school conversion process. They will measure the engagement level of students at the beginning of the 2004-2005 school year and will organize activities throughout the school year that will invite students to talk about, learn about, and ask questions about small schools. Students will also create a short documentary and booklet at the end of the school year sharing what they did and what they learned about how to engage students in school reform.

### **Fall 2004**

- Youth Congress groups continue to meet at each school, determining what they would like to do at their school to contribute to the school reform efforts, as well as overall student engagement in school.
- The student-led research projects will kick off with a training session on October 3<sup>rd</sup>.

**“We Can Make a Difference”**  
**Ideas for Student-led Contributions in Small School Conversion**

**Created by Indianapolis public high school students at the**  
**Small School Leadership Academy**  
August 2-6, 2004

**A. COMMUNICATION AND INFORMATION-SHARING**

**Our vision** is to promote a better understanding of communication among those involved in the small schools transition. Our purpose is to create a smooth and effective transition into small schools so that everyone involved has a better understanding and no one is left behind.

**Our ideas** on how to do this are:

- Start a public relations club
- Eye-catching ads
- Social events
- Visit middle schools
- Open forums (comfortable environment)

**The support** we need from adults is:

- Help from the SLC coordinator
- Help creating a budget
- Help finding space
- Help recruiting volunteers/participation
- Help with transportation
- Someone to sponsor us
- Supplies and materials

**B. GIVING OTHERS A VOICE**

**Our vision** is that every voice should be heard. We the students feel that giving every student a voice is important. As students, we feel like many of us are left out of things for several reasons such as grades and appearances and behavior. We believe that teachers are more likely to communicate with the higher achieving students. This can be changed by teachers treating all students the same by showing interest in student’s opinions. We as students believe that every opinion matters. We believe every single student can be a leader and that everybody’s ideas and opinions matter to the small school movement.

**Our ideas** are:

- To lead conversations with our peers whose voices are not heard
- To organize student assemblies that will help students learn about small schools
- To create a way for every student to ask their questions and know that they are important
- To recognize teachers that connect with each student equally

**The support** we need from adults is:

- Teachers and adults to listen to what we have to say
- A sponsor to help organize assemblies with us

## **C. REACHING OUT TO THE COMMUNITY**

**Our vision** is to reach out to the community and educate them about small school conversion

**Our ideas** are

- Create a Television show (on ETC) and other invited channels
  - Answer questions about small schools
    - Have a suggestion box at each school
    - Talk to Teachers, Administrators, parents, students one-on-one
    - Invite selected TAPS to read their questions
    - Invite TAP to answer questions on the show
  - Showcase local talent

**The support** we will need from adults is:

- Have an adult sponsor
- Connect with television stations
- Have the support of IPS and VISTA Volunteers

## **D. COLLABORATION**

**Our vision** is that we need to collaborate as students, teachers, and community members because students learn in all environments. Collaboration increases knowledge, understanding, and sharing of ideas for more school efficiency.

**Our ideas:**

- Adult and student liaisons, together bring input to academy leaders on the school body needs
- Student/teacher advisory committee for each small school—a decision-making body
- On PBA days, students could present ideas and observe the work done at the meetings
- Students on exploration teams at each school—students responsible for making up missed work.

**The support** we need from adults is:

- Time in administrators schedules
- Students ask in advance to come to meetings

*For students to be more involved in their learning experience, they need common staff support as well as support from within the student body and the open community.*

## SMALL SCHOOL LEADERSHIP ACADEMY — SMALL SCHOOL ATTRIBUTES

Rewritten by Indianapolis high school student participants

August 4, 2004

**Leadership:** Leaders provide the vision to create a school based on equality. It is necessary for leaders to help maximize student learning and help teachers work together so that all students can be successful and be good citizens in their school and community. Leaders listen to all voices and respond. In small schools leadership comes from all groups – teachers, parents, students and community members. Leaders also help create a system to make sure that the school is successful and that all students are learning.

**Equity:** Everyone must work together to stop discrimination based on a person's background. The goal of an equal school is to mix and accept the differences of all students to create a more successful and comfortable learning environment. This requires giving access to all students regardless of their background and choice.

**Respect and Responsibility:** Everyone must come together to create a safe, comfortable, equal and supportive learning environment. Everyone must teach, model and expect responsible behavior from each other, therefore they have a trustworthy and respectful relationship with each other.

**Common Focus:** The teachers, administrators, parents, and students are focused on the few most important goals. The school has begun to use a teaching approach that has been proven to work, that is based on the teachers', administrators', parents', and students' beliefs.

**High Expectations:** Teachers, administrators, parents, and students hold each other responsible for helping themselves achieve standards; students are engaged in a high-achieving and challenging course of study; and student leave school prepared for success in work, further education and to become a good citizen.

**Personalized Learning:** Teachers, administrators, parents, and students develop relationships together based upon their similar goals and interests. Teachers use their knowledge of students and families and the standards to help students learn in their own individual way.

**Performance Based:** A student's progress is based on their performance related to the standards and personal goals. Students have access to useful curriculum, learning opportunities, and assistance they need to achieve to a high level of learning.

**Time to Collaborate:** Staff has scheduled time as part of the school day to engage in assessment of student work, collective planning and reflection for student and school success.

**Technology as a Tool:** Teachers, parents, and students use technology to design fun and creative learning opportunities that are linked to standards and students' personal goals.

**Parent and Community Engagement:** Parents and community are partners and benefit small schools by providing places for student learning and for the development of social responsibility.