

## WKCD Interview with Jesse Anyalebechi

*Note: WKCD had a chance to interview at length one of the student participants in the “If Kids Ran the Schools”—Jesse Anyalebechi, an extraordinarily thoughtful senior at Kerr High School in Alief, TX. Here is an edited transcript of our interview.*

### Our “one thing”

Our starting point was how at Kerr, like many high schools, students are not knowledgeable enough to make the right decisions when it comes to college. We find ourselves in colleges that aren’t necessarily right for us because we didn’t know enough about college to choose the right one, the one that fits us best.

At Kerr, there are the stock colleges that just about everyone applies to—mostly the University of Houston and the University of Texas. Kids apply blindly. If you ask them *why* they are applying there, the stock answer is, “because everyone does.”

We have fewer students at my high school—around 800—than other high schools in Houston, but our guidance counselors still have too much to do. When it comes to college, I think a lot of the responsibility has to fall on students—they need to learn how to advocate for themselves. The problem is that they don’t know what they don’t know, they don’t know that they absolutely *need to know* certain things. Without this knowledge, they don’t even know what they are responsible for.

So our [“one thing”] team thought: Why not take the advisory that all students have at the start of the school day and make it a time when students could ask questions and actually work on getting ready for college? We surveyed teachers to get their input and agreement, then we created a timeline and established certain goals for the advisory that were contingent on the month. We turned advisors into resources for students who had questions about college readiness, about volunteering and completing the required volunteer hours, about the college application process. The questions and focus differed by grade level, but the idea was that advisors would work with every student, on what they personally needed to know.

It was optional for advisors, whether they participated, but they all did, more or less.

### Students as shareholders in their schools

The best paradigm for reform in school, I think, is one that involves the students as shareholders. I don’t understand how you can make a decision that affects 800 students—people—as at Kerr, without asking them about it. You can’t solve a



problem unless you understand what the problem is. And in a school, the best way to understand a problem is to talk to the people who live the problem everyday and are affected directly: the students.

The system that we have—I should say in our society as a whole—is like a pyramid. Decisions are made at the top of the pyramid, then travel down to affect people all along the way, then reach the bottom of the pyramid where they most affect the most people. The people at the top of the pyramid are supposed to be responsible for the welfare of everyone below them, that's been the organizing theory throughout history, it's how our society is modeled—not just our schools. But this kind of top-down decision making, in my opinion, often leads to poor decisions and poor solutions.

The way I see it, the best thing would be to find an alternative to the model we have right now. We need to re-think how we structure responsibility and power in our culture, not just our school systems. But I'm a realist—not a lot of people would be interested in that.

What we could do, though, is distribute power more equally. In schools, we should see students as shareholders in their success, not just end-products. I hate speaking in economic terms like these, and the fact that we apply these terms today, that we think of students as “products,” shows the problem with the system. But my point is that we need to start thinking of students as shareholders in their education as well as products. We need a new paradigm.

### **Knowing one's place**

Let me share a story. Today we had a different bus driver, maybe he was new, and he skipped the last stop. I thought to myself, “those kids aren't going to get to school and that's not a good thing.” But I decided to wait a little bit before mentioning this to the bus driver, unsure of how he would take it. I looked around to see if anyone else had noticed or cared that the driver had skipped the last stop, but no one did. So I went up to him and asked [politely] if he'd missed the last stop. He realized he had and went back to pick up the kids. Still, it would have been safer to just stay put and keep silent; the driver might have reacted negatively.

But that goes to my point. On the bus, the bus driver is technically the commander-in-chief, so what he says goes. A student who says to the driver, “Hey, I think you missed a stop,” is stepping out of place—and may suffer for it. We're raised to feel out of place when we question someone who's in a different position than we are.

I think this is why students don't take a more aggressive role in the decisions that affect them. They are raised to think that is not their responsibility, that to speak out will make them stand out in ways that are uncomfortable. This acceptance of their position, the desire to blend in, means they don't question decisions that are made for them and that they disagree with. They'll complain to each other, sure, but they

don't feel a responsibility to challenge how the decision was made. They've been raised to feel socially inhibited about speaking up directly; instead they go along or act out, drop out, disappear.

I think our whole society is structured in this way, to accept decisions made by those above us without questioning, to allow other people to define the problem, our problem, when they don't understand it and it is we that have to live with the consequences.

The way our schools run certainly reinforces this. First, there's the idea that in the classroom, the teacher knows best. But wait, when it comes to the entire school, the principal knows best. But as far as all the schools in a district, it's the superintendent that know best. And so on, up to the top of the pyramid, when it's the nation's education system at stake. At each step up, the decision makers are farther from the problem, but it's assumed that they know the most. And students, they are nowhere to be found. Does this mean that they know the *least* about how schools should run? That's the issue!

I've figured out, though, it's a good thing that there's opposition to how I feel. In a sense, it makes people recognize that they are in a system—they don't recognize this until they see how a system can put down the opposition. When some people start speaking out and other people see how they are made to feel uncomfortable or silenced, they figure it's better to keep quiet and go along.

I find that when I explain these ideas to other students, when I tell them what I am thinking or feeling, they tend to agree. But that doesn't mean they internalize the message and sign up for speaking out. That won't happen unless they feel encouraged.

Creating change, something new, is long and hard work for people of any age. Most students, I think, lose interest. The structure isn't there, the encouragement isn't there. They give up and say, "Let me just get my grade and go home."