by Kathleen Cushman and the students of
What Kids Can Do, Inc.

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EXCERPTS FROM OUR NEW BOOK

SENT TO THE PRINCIPAL

Students Talk About Making High Schools Better

by Kathleen Cushman and the students of What Kids Can Do

We often think of adults as investing their time, effort, ideas, and even money in making schools better. But if we took students equally seriously as investors, we all might realize far greater rewards: increased interest and motivation, better communication, a more welcoming working environment, and improved learning outcomes. What can the principal do to reframe the culture of high school in such terms and begin to see such results? How can school leaders make students allies in improving their schools?

In the new book excerpted here, ***Sent to the Principal: Students Talk About Making High Schools Better***, students offer some compelling answers. Their messages come from Kathleen Cushman's work sessions with over 60 urban youth across the country, plus conversations What Kids Can Do has conducted with high school students nationwide.

This student collaboration with What Kids Can Do was sponsored by MetLife Foundation, part of both organizations' work to make public the voices of youth about their lives and learning. It came about after ***Fires in the Bathroom: Advice for Teachers from High School Students***, another WKCD collaboration sponsored by MetLife Foundation, drew the attention of educators to the thoughts teenagers have about teaching and learning.

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FROM THE INTRODUCTION

On an otherwise normal school day in the winter of 2004, the principal of a well-regarded big city high school walked out of his office during lunch period to find hundreds of students sitting on the floors of the halls in an act of protest.

About twenty percent of the school's three thousand students, upset that he had closed off the hallway areas where they hung out and socialized during their free periods, had organized in defiance.

The scene was a principal's nightmare. Mr. Randolph (let us call him) knew the power of his office; he could summon security guards, identify all the students participating, and mete out consequences for their disruption. But he could not erase the dramatic image before him. This moment had just taken root in the school's institutional memory, to grow larger and more vivid every time students retold it.

An experienced principal, Mr. Randolph spent much of his professional life trying to keep order in his school. He had plenty of good reasons for his earlier decision about the hallways, and he knew that he could deal with this day's crisis. But as he faced the mass of kids in the halls that day, he realized that students had their own culture in his high school, and he was a stranger to it.

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Very few of the students who worked on this book have ever sat down in the hallways to express their alienation from the way their high school works. More often, kids take a more indirect form of resistance. They come in late or ditch their classes. They act up in class or simply sit through them passively, passing notes. One or two might write critical editorials in the school paper; lots more scrawl graffiti on the walls. Some start fights or set fires in the bathroom wastebaskets.

But all these actions have one thing in common with Mr. Randolph's sit-in. They are messages, sent to the principal by high school students. And if you know how to read them—which this book aims to help you do—those messages contain the crucial ingredients of school success.

In the current climate of school improvement, no one feels more pressure than a high school principal. If you head up a high school—whether large or small, urban or suburban or rural—you bear responsibility not just for the organization's daily functioning but for the performance of its students in high school and beyond. You hire and supervise teachers. You set expectations and consequences for behavior. You manage the budget and oversee the physical facility. You advocate for policies and reach out to the community. In the eyes of students, teachers, parents, taxpayers, even state officials, you stand for the school. You own its successes and its failures.

That is one way of thinking about high school leadership, and from it result many admirable deeds. You might, for example, follow the far-reaching recommendations of the National Association of Secondary School Principals, in its 2004 publication *Breaking Ranks II: Strategies for Leading High School Reform.* By making innovative changes in your high school's design—such as breaking schools into smaller units,

creating personal learning plans, or grouping students in more flexible or equitable ways—you may already be taking important steps toward transforming your high school into a real learning community.

The students who helped write this book, however, do not think of school in terms of its design. They come to school because they have to. They come to see their friends. They know they had better come if they want to do well in life. And if at school they find adults who acknowledge them as interesting people and help them try new things, they also come to work side by side with you, and to learn the habits they will live by.

*

The sit-in at Mr. Randolph’s high school felt different to many students than it did to him, according to Eleonora, a petite eleventh-grader with long dark hair. Kids knew what consequences they might suffer for their protest, in a competitive academic high school where the principal’s word could make or break their futures. In their view, the principal held the lion’s share of the power.

> I was really afraid that we would get marked down for cutting classes, and my mother would be called. Students are really scared of the principal and the assistant principals. I feel like I’m powerless—there’s the giant administration, and there’s us. (Eleonora)

She remembers the reason Mr. Randolph shut down their right to hang out in the hallways; kids had been leaving trash in the areas, and teachers complained. She acknowledges that he had a point. But even though Eleonora serves in the student government, she says that she and her schoolmates do not have the kind of relationship with the principal that would allow them to work out a solution together.

> We don’t feel like the administration would ever cooperate with us or find a common ground about a problem. Most of the time students won’t approach the administration, and that’s sad, it’s really horrible. It’s like living in a house where you can’t approach your parents. (Eleonora)

Just like millions of other students in high schools around the country, Eleonora experiences her school as something done *to* her, not something she herself might help to shape. Adit, whose dark Indian hair erupts in dyed red hues around his face, explains.

> A student walking into the high school sees the building and the administration, the principal and sometimes the faculty, as a separate entity that he is opposed to, not on the same track. But school shouldn’t be like a brainwash camp, just a solid institution that the students butt their heads against. It’s gotta be a dynamic entity that we have a vested interest in making better, and more enjoyable, and more profitable for us. (Adit)

As far as Mr. Randolph was concerned, kids who left trash in the hallways were signaling their lack of respect for the institution, and so closing off the hallways had a

certain logic. But the students took another meaning from his action. To Alex, the student body president, it showed that the principal did not consider the institution *theirs*.

> They tried to section off certain areas where we can hang out and can't hang out, and we felt like our liberties were taken away, because this is our school. We should be able to go anywhere we want. (Alex)

If Mr. Randolph had thought of school in the way Adit described—as "a dynamic entity" that students "have a vested interest in making better, and more enjoyable, and more profitable for us"—he would have made the problem theirs to solve. Instead, it seemed to students like one more instance of the principal telling them what to do, one more indignity that held them powerless.

> The students' initial response to what the principal wants to do is "No," and the principal's initial response to what students want done is "No." It's an automatic reaction. The principal wants to put more restraints on the students, and the students want more freedom from the principal. Unfortunately the principal is on top and you're on the bottom. (Eleonora)

When the principal always wins that power struggle, teenagers take it as a very personal judgment about them. They may have reached physical maturity, they may drive cars, hold down jobs, help their families, and negotiate a complex and changing world—but they can't have a say in how their school works.

> If the administration insists on making and enforcing policies that show that they're aloof and they're in charge, and what they say goes, it devalues the student, and it kind of inflates the principal. (Adit)

Teenagers rarely stay passive in a situation like this. They are driven by a pressing developmental need to establish an identity, and they will seek out anyone that helps them find it. If their high school administration does not hear their voices, respect their perspectives, and use their energies, they will ally themselves with another group that does. And a profound gap may then open between the principal's high school and that of the kids—two cultures (or more) overlaid on each other, in an uneasy tension that invites continual resistance and repression.

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But that does not have to happen, according to the students who helped write this book. Adit's comment, for example, suggests an approach that involves neither resistance nor repression. Instead, it regards students (just like adults) as active investors in their school. An investor puts something of value into an enterprise, and also expects to have a say in how it conducts its business. If all goes well, investors also realize a return on whatever they expend, further increasing its value and benefit to them.

We often think of adults as investing their time, effort, ideas, even money in making schools better. But if we took *students* equally seriously as investors, we all might realize far greater rewards: increased interest and motivation, better

communication, a more welcoming working environment, and improved learning outcomes.

What can the principal do to reframe the culture of high school in such terms and begin to see such results? What might allow students to trust the invitation to join adults as investment partners in making schools better? The teenagers who worked on this book say that the answer does not lie in sweeping or dramatic changes. Instead, they speak of little things that make a big difference.

When Kevin stays late to use the school's computer, for instance, his principal sometimes offers him a ride home. Enka's principal noticed a summer program she might enjoy and pointed her toward it. Katie's put a few comfortable couches in student gathering spots. Danesia's got students to survey their peers on ways to make school better.

Each of these small things made students feel that they mattered. They probably wouldn't show up on anyone's list of leadership strategies, although they do align with best practices detailed in *Breaking Ranks* and elsewhere. They derive less from a checklist or strategy than from an attitude—and that attitude is contagious.

RaShawn, a lanky senior with corn-rowed hair, attends an urban high school long labeled "failing" by its district. He says that when school leaders show students that they respect their opinions in the little things, they send a message of confidence and high expectations that pays off in bigger things, too.

> When they give us more responsibility than they usually would—other people might call it challenging us—they show that they trust us to accomplish it. Giving us more say in our education means that they think we're capable. They trust us to make the right decisions about our learning, about our daily experiences at school. That would be a huge benefit to all the entire student body, rather than a liability for the administration. (RaShawn)

Little things can also make a big difference in a negative way, of course. Jose wishes the cafeteria would let him take the items he wants for lunch and leave the others behind, not issue lunch as a package deal. In Ernesto's school, the principal made an executive decision to throw away any hats students wore inside the building. In both cases, the boys felt alienated by the way adults had decided to impose order on the school. When Ernesto kept his hat pulled over his ears as he went to class one bitter winter morning, he says he knew it was against school policy.

> But who are you to throw away something that I bought? I don't have parents, but if I did, I would tell them to come in and talk to her, because I have to go to work today and I need my hat. I understand that I was wearing it, but that doesn't mean that she can throw it away in the garbage. She could hold it till the end of the day, then give it back.

Ernesto's principal probably saw strict rule enforcement as necessary to learning, and she had a point. But a small act of empathy, instead of a small act of control, would have allowed Ernesto his dignity and respected his individual circumstances. It might have even made him an ally in maintaining fairness and order in the school.

Each small interaction between an adult and a high school student has enormous influence in shaping that adolescent's developing sense of self. And, like all of us, teenagers learn from making those relationships.

> You can't look down on someone as if they have a lesser intelligence. You've got to give them the opportunity to prove themselves, and give them the benefit of the doubt that they can improve themselves. At the same time, you have to really make them feel like you really care—not like you're just trying to control the situation. There's got to be some kind of emotion in it, that it's more than just a job. That means constant communication about expectations and about how people are doing—but encouragement at the same time. A principal needs to know what the student goes through, and what causes certain things like being late and absences. (RaShawn)

We saw this message play out powerfully in the first book we wrote with students, *Fires in the Bathroom: Advice for Teachers from High School Students*. In what they said about their classroom experience, its young co-authors gave vivid testimony about what helped motivate them, engage them, win their respect, and overcome the obstacles to their learning. And because students spend so many hours in classrooms with teachers, their experiences came alive with the often painful details of up-close observation.

But kids typically don't know as much about the principal as they do about their classroom teachers. If they see the principal at all, it is in passing moments (a greeting in the hallway or at a basketball game) or in more formal settings without much interaction (announcements over the intercom, or talks before a school assembly). The exceptions generally are when students participate in the student government—or get into some kind of trouble. So we sought out students with those experiences to contribute to this book.

From student advisory councils and leadership classes, we recruited students who knew something of the pressures and problems that a principal faces in leading a successful school. We also took kids who had sat in the line outside the principal's office waiting to catch hell for some disciplinary infraction. But as these two kinds of students spoke, we found that they were saying virtually the same things.

They talked about lunch and dress codes and student parking. They spoke of hall passes, detention, vending machines, surveillance cameras. They described the principal who came to the dance and did the "funky chicken" and the one who walked to the subway with kids to make sure they got there safely. They talked about the principals who kept their doors open, knew their names, cared what went on in their lives. They told what made them drop out, and what made them want to come to school.

> If students knew when they woke up in the morning that they were going to a school where their opinions affected how the school ran, how their teachers acted towards them, and that what they had to say really mattered in what changes were made in the school—they would really come. It wouldn't just be an education that processes them, but one that they could affect and shape to benefit the student body. (RaShawn)

These students had many workable suggestions for things their principals could do to make schools fit the picture RaShawn paints. But sometimes, those ideas came up against the hard realities, from budgets to legal constraints, that school leaders inevitably juggle. To balance out their inexperience, we shared what students said here with three seasoned public school principals. Olivia Ifill-Lynch from New York City; Lynn Haines-Dodd from Oakland, California; and Teri Schrader from Devens, Massachusetts contributed stories from their practice that offer realistic routes to bring the hopes of students into an adult perspective. Teri Schrader took it one step further, working with us on chapter-end exercises to help principals put themselves in students’ shoes, and reflect on their own choices.

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It doesn’t take a sit-in for kids to say what Mr. Randolph heard that day: “If you don’t respect us, we won’t collaborate with you.” That message gets sent to the principal every day, in almost unnoticeable acts of resistance or disruption, apathy or alienation.

But when students sense that you do respect them—no matter how small the ways in which you show it—something starts to change in a high school. Everyone notices, from the newest ninth-grader to the highest state school officer. The difference, Adit says, is “to make people *care*.”

> The kid is a thread and the school is like a fabric, and you want to weave that kid into the fabric. You want to make it so that he has a vested interest in the patterns that the fabric of the school makes. You don’t want him to be like the piece of lint on the side. You need to weave the student into the dynamic of the school and make him interested in, make him respect, the workings of the school, rather than see it as just another opportunity to show his defiance. (Adit)

In a million little ways, your students are watching to see whether you regard them as citizens or as subjects. In a million little ways, they will invest in school, if they see you as a partner.

HOMEWORK FOR PRINCIPALS

Each chapter of Sent to the Principal *concludes with "Homework for Principals," an exercise for use either by an individual administrator or by collegial groups. This one comes from Chapter 3, "A Place and Time for Us."*

Competing for space

More and more students are driving to school and you have a serious shortage of parking space for them. Only about half the students with cars have a place to park. Class officers from the junior and senior class ask you for a meeting in your office.

> *Senior*: You've got to do something. Lots of kids are late because they have to park so far from school.
> *Junior*: And if we park at a meter they're towing our cars. Plus a couple of kids got their cars broken into.
> *You*: We only provide parking for teachers and visitors, you know. Whatever's left is all we have for you guys. That's just the way it is.
> *Senior*: Well, can't you make it that only seniors can park there?

As principal, what do you hope for in this situation? Check any that apply.

> __ All students who need it have access to adequate parking.
> __ The limited parking you have is distributed among students fairly.
> __ Students and adults act as partners in resolving this situation.
> __ The situation gets resolved quickly, before it escalates.
> __ Other ____.

What do you imagine happening if you responded in the following ways? Using your goals from the list above, write down your thoughts of how the situation might play out.

You say: "I'm sorry, but there's not much I can do about this. No matter what I do, there's going to be trouble with parking."

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You say: "We need to make parking a privilege you earn. I'm going to give parking spaces to seniors who have a B average or better."

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You say: *“Why don’t you pull together some kids and work out a proposal that you can bring to me?”*

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You say: “Let’s get together a meeting of everyone who drives and see what we can figure out.”

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Do you have another way you would rather respond? Write it here, explaining why you think it would work better.

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WHAT’S THE PROBLEM?

If you ask them, students can help think through some of the many obstacles to learning that exist in most high schools. They can do this in various settings (advisory groups, leadership classes, student government, school site councils) and on a range of topics like these:

- Student profanity
- Class disruptions
- Unproductive adult-student relationships
- Lack of study time in a supportive context
- Insufficient links with adult mentors from the community
- Inadequate access to health care or counseling
- English language learning problems
- Family or job responsibilities after school
- Money problems
- Lack of good food to eat during the school day
- School bathrooms in poor condition
- Size of the school (too large, too small)
- Too great a student load for teachers
- Over-crowded classes