Youth and Adults Transforming Schools Together

Evaluation Year II

Prepared For the Vermont Principals' Association

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Introduction

For two years, The Vermont Principals' Association (VPA) has been supporting the work of the "Youth and Adults Transforming Schools Together" (YATST), an initiative lead by Dr. Helen Beattie to improve teaching and learning in Vermont high schools by personally involving students in decisions that affect their schooling experience. According to a recent RFP to the Nellie Mae Education Foundation the goal of the Youth and Adults Transforming Schools Together is:

> To increase **student engagement in learning** and **voice in decision making** by creating a partnership between students and faculty to increase rigor, relevance and relationships in Vermont schools. Relevance and student-teacher relationships are essential for personalization. Rigor, including a fundamental belief in the capacity of EVERY learner and not just traditionally successful students, is also key to engagement. This affirmation of learning capacity is particularly important to students who have received a very different implicit (or explicit) message about their potential in the current systems, often perpetuated by tracking. In short, this strategy was chosen because until student voice is placed at the center of learning, we know we will continue to see increasing numbers of student disengage from the learning process, feeling devalued and lacking hope.[1]

YATST and its Theory of Change

The theory of change behind the YATST initiative is relatively straight forward. Quality training and on-going coaching and support are core components of the YATST model. Once their school teams formed, teachers and students--with students taking the lead--would use data collection techniques to ascertain which area or areas were of the most concern to the school community. Then they would construct action plans to effect some changes along those lines. Such actions would build academic, cognitive and inter/intrapersonal skills, link students and teachers closer together and make a practical case for why what goes on in school is of importance for all participants, especially those students who are the least connected to school. Reflection would occur throughout the process—before, during and after the action planning, and lessons learned would be applied to future actions taken. The depth and quality of the support received by YATST teams distinguishes it from most other efforts.

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[1] Funding proposal to the Nellie Mae Education Foundation, n.d.

A unique dimension of this initiative is that it intentionally was designed to uncover ways in which a broader cross section of students, alongside adults, could play a more vocal and active role in decisions that matter in their own schools. This evaluation reports on the progress of the project along several emergent themes of the initiative across the participating schools:

a) The importance of Student Voice

b) Data-Driven Decision Making

c) The new 3Rs-Rigor, Relevance and Relationships

d) Time as a Factor

e) Principal Leadership

f) YATST, VPA and the future of Student Voice in Vermont

METHODS

Data Sources

The report utilizes data from a variety of sources. Principal fieldwork was conducted in May of 2010 that included interviews with twelve teachers and six principal along with focus groups with YATST students at six high schools, as well as an interview with Vermont Principals' Association (VPA) administrators and a brief follow-up interview with Helen Beattie. Additional data came from several DVD recordings that were made during a November (2009) training with Adam Fletcher, a nationally recognized expert in youth voice, and a May (2010) Conference during which students presented the results of their action research project. A second recording from the May Conference also included selected interviews with individual students. Written data sources included 'free writes'[2] by teachers and students from the November Conference, teacher reflection papers from a graduate level course, documents from individual schools including samples of student-generated surveys, copies of the YATST newsletters, postings on the VPA website, and other internal communications.

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[2] "Free Writing" is essentially a form of stream of consciousness writing where individuals are instructed to write (usually without self-editing) for a continuous period of time.

Measures and Analysis

The interview and focus group protocols were designed to help collect data on different aspects of the YATST initiative, how it was situated within school cultures and the impacts, if any, it has had upon participants, the school community as a whole, and in the case of the VPA, the State. Similar questions were asked of students, teachers and principals to help construct a portrait of what the YATST initiative looked like from inside the seven participating Vermont high schools. Written data provided self-reported insights into what individuals learned, accomplished and their beliefs and ideas about where the YATST was heading in the future.

The analysis of interview and artifact data occurred after the fieldwork was completed. It followed a process described by Strauss (1990)[2] as the "constant comparison method." This iterative process occurred through a series of stages of moving the raw data to final conclusions using a strategy of data reduction. Working from the interview protocol, codes were developed that broke down the transcripts into large categories. Coded data were collated, read, and re-read to identify thematic categories (Miles & Huberman, 1994)[3], and the data were further reduced into smaller categories Additionally, a similar approach was used to analyze the contents of the DVD presentation data and individual reflective writings looking for recurring themes, and patterns regarding student, teacher and principal perceptions of how participation in YATST had an impact on members of their school community. In the interest of at least partial anonymity, all schools are referred to by pseudonyms and no individual's names are used.[4]

Emergent Themes

Rather than disaggregate the data and report one school at a time, I have chosen to organize the data around these key themes that both mesh with the overall mission of the project and its theory of change, and that emerged from the data itself. Included at the end of each section are questions for reflection that are intended to spark continued dialogue about YATST's vision for how the program might develop in order to best accomplish its overarching aims.

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[3] Miles, M., & Huberman, A.M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

[4] Schools were named Hill Top, Hoover, Jackson, Kennedy, Monroe, Pine Woods and River Grove.

Evaluation Caveats: Cultural and Systemic Change in Schools

It is important to underscore that this initiative is, in no small part, an attempt to introduce cultural and systemic change inside Vermont high schools. In the syllabus that Dr. Beattie used with YATST teachers enrolled in her graduate course this past year, Alison Cook-Sather (2002) is quoted addressing these concerns. Cook-Sather writes that "*The twin challenges authoring student perspectives are: a) changing the structure in our minds that have rendered us disinclined to elicit students' voices and b) changing the structures in educational relationships and institutions that have supported and been supported by that disinclination*" (2002, p.4). Even the meaning of the initiative's acronym Teachers and Student *Transforming* Schools Together (italics mine) speaks to the ambitious and far-reaching purpose undergirding the enterprise. However, the YATST initiative seeks to enlist teachers to join with youth in bring youth voice more substantially into the conversations of (and hopefully action towards) school improvement and increased academic achievement.

The culture and system of public education--targeted for transformation--is one that historically has been resistant to change and when it did attempt change seems to prefer quick fix solutions that pay off in simple quantifiable indicators of success. A teacher from Kennedy articulated the struggle to bring about change when he/she said, "*I don't think that everybody had gotten the vision of the cycle or what the work was really about. I mean I know this [YATST] is like a student advocacy voice which I have always felt is a hugely important piece of any school climate and culture. But just getting the idea of how do we make this systematic and really address actual needs in the community rather than saying 'well let's get a student lounge*.'"

The kind of work that foments systemic and cultural change is a long-term enterprise and the work of this evaluation is presented as formative rather than summative findings; by which change is measured and assessed through the incremental progress and seeds of change that have been planted in schools over YATST's first several years. In conducting a formative evaluation, the actual time spent in schools, and the resources available limited the degree to which the data collected captured the gradations and essence of the change process.

Further, if a benchmark of success is the transformation of schools, two years may not be sufficient time to see schools accept these kind of changes, especially ones that requires a re-distribution of decision making power when there has been little or no experience--for teachers as well as students--with alternatives to the way 'we have always done things;' or as the principal at Jackson put it:

I think it's really important that there be adults willing to partner with the students to examine what the school's about. I don't think students can do this by themselves mainly because the structures are really kind of tightly wound around each other and the way we do things in high school is really established.

While there have been some fairly significant accomplishments in just two years, it is wise to view the content of this evaluation, both the changes observed and obstacles encountered, in light of what it means to take on cultural, structural, and institutional boundaries and to invite students into the process of legitimate and not token decision making where they have had limited opportunities up to this point.

YATST Accomplishments-2009-10 School Year

The ambitious cultural and systemic goals for change produced a number of accomplishments achieved by YATST teams in a relatively short period of time. They include but are not limited to the following categories and actions:

<u>Teaming Capacity</u>

- Among the very first accomplishments was the development of an authentic working team of students and teachers who built trust and support for one another and who learned how to work towards common goals. Some teams also had to withstand significant turnover in their original compositions.

<u>Research</u>

- All seven schools constructed and administered a survey to students and faculty. All teams analyzed their results. Some but not all of the accomplishments listed below resulted from YATST teams' analysis of their data which in turn led to action plans.

- Presentations of survey data were made at local schools boards (2), to school faculty (3) and to the student body (1).

<u>Time and Place related Changes</u>

- One school created a time at the beginning of the school day in which not only could their YATST team meet but also allowed for the creation of numerous additional school clubs.

- One school created a "Breakfast Club,' a before-school Open Forum where students could eat and talk freely about any issue that concerned them about their school with teachers and peers.

- One school created a Principal's Advisory Committee composed of four students, and teachers to assist in policy decision making.

- Several schools created an open forum during the school day to discuss issues.

- Four schools conducted student-to-student forums in Teacher Advisories (TAs)[5] to collect data on school culture and student learning.

Policy/Governance Changes

- One school changed the calculation of letter grades, essentially lowering the necessary threshold.

- Two schools expanded the rules for Student Government membership to permit any student interested to be able to join.

- One school helped to design a new 'punishment' to hold students accountable for their tardiness. Created an In-School detention that contributed to a lowering of the daily number of students tardy by 65%.

- One school earned students the privilege of 'outdoor lunch'.

Actions Taken

- All but two schools created student feedback forms for voluntary participating faculty and in some schools those teachers received fresh data on their classes usually within a single day.

- Students across all schools assessed their own role as learners and set goals accordingly, reinforcing the role of education as a partnership.

- One school increased the number of eligible families enrolled in free and reduced lunch and raised over $5000 to help this program.

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[5] TAs are similar to what once was called 'homeroom.'

- One school raised $1000 to buy school new gardening tools and to help build a garden shed to house tools in support of a wider nutrition campaign.

- One school promoted a "Muscle your Way to School" day (i.e. self-propulsion) to build community esprit de corps and promote healthy alternatives.

- Several schools used time in public meetings to acknowledge and appreciate the accomplishments of students whose work (e.g. dance recitals, started blood drive) might be less known than those typically celebrated such as athletes.

- The 'Rights to Action' course next year in one school will be co-taught by the teacher and a student. Students will assist in designing the course curriculum.

Actions in Process

- Most schools are working to get student representation on local school board.

- All schools are working to fine tune survey instrument to collect more classroom/core course specific data to help individual teachers further.

- Two schools are developing a curriculum for TA.

- Students across all schools helped orient and support new members who joined part-way through the school year.

- One school is working with school board to increase the school day by 30 minutes, primarily the lunch period. Linked increased time to the promotion of healthier eating habits and increased learning.

- Students in all schools learned the stages of survey research including instrument design, data base construction, data analysis and presentation of findings.

Theme A) Conceptions of Student Voice

In the first year evaluation report (2009), John Downes included a literature review and summary of the theoretical foundations supporting Student Voice as an emerging and important dimension of contemporary school reform. It seems both appropriate and useful to revisit of his work which I cite in some detail. At one point in his review of the emerging literature on student voice, Downes cites the work of Dennis Thiessen (2007)[6] who outlined three major strands of how student voice is manifest in terms of school improvement over the past several decades through:

1) Students' thoughts and feelings and the relationship with their teachers.

2) The dynamics of the classrooms and schools and how they contribute to social and academic success.

3) How involving students as consultants and decision makers shapes classroom management and curriculum design (Downes, 2009, p.9).

Downes goes on to say that in terms of how student voice can contribute to educational improvements, the YATST initiative is best seen in the third strand. He underscored that YATST was designed in part to be a mechanism to bring all students, and especially those who were most distant and alienated from their education into a belief that change could was possible and that school could be improved for all involved. Additionally, the same students could be affiliated with a group who wanted to make important changes so their schools were a personalized and meaningful experience for all its stakeholders. I think where Downes' work was most prescient was his sketch of how the planners of YATST imagined the various ways that student voice would take shape and make an impact in the participating schools. It is worth re-visiting his list in light of the second year's accomplishments listed above.

- Regular student input into the classroom experience, such as mid-semester written feedback, followed by dialogue and goal setting by both students and teachers regarding desired changes.

- Student involvement on standing committees: curriculum development, school climate, hiring committees, school board, etc.

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[6] Thiessen, D. Researching student experience in elementary and secondary school: An evolving field of study. In D. Thiessen & A. Cook-Sather (eds.), International handbook of student experience in elementary and secondary school. Dordrecht, The Netherlands, 2007, pp.1-76.

- Student generated courses, with students as teachers and facilitators, mentored by classroom teachers and administrators.

- Multiple opportunities to be civically engaged through courses such as "Rights in Action" or service learning programs.

- Regular seminars and/or school forums to discuss school, local or world issues of concern

- Students joining adults in analyzing school academic and climate data and developing plans to address findings.

- Quarterly dialogue nights to involve parents in meaningful discussion about student issues.

- Students regularly providing information and direction to the school board, and school boards deferring decisions until adequate student input is obtained.

In the second year of the initiative, with the exception of student-generated courses and quarterly dialogue nights to involve parents, in one school or another there was reported evidence of all of these other examples of voice occurred at varying degrees.

Situating Student Voice in Schools

All of the students, teachers and principals interviewed expressed genuine interest in recruiting and hearing the voices students, particularly those who might be disengaged and otherwise not be well served in their schools. They also felt it was part of their charge as a YATST team to do something about including them. In this sense, they shared the aims of the initiative designers. This was easier said than done as comments from students across schools pointed out. A River Grove student said:

 "*I enjoy helping out my fellow peers and the ones who are having most trouble at school. A lot of kids in our school have been in and out. The biggest challenge is getting people to realize that we're actually doing this, that we're following through and not having them fill out surveys just because we want them to*."

A student from Hill Top also recognized that it was important for the identity of YATST to become better known in order for their work to have a perceived impact.

"*A lot of students are still hazy on it. They don't know what the group is. We need to let the students know what we're doing. Some will always deny the importance of it but the majority of students and teachers will see it if we can explain the importance and if we really want others to see it as well*."

In four of the focus groups students expressed their concerns that they had not done a good enough job bringing into YATST the very students who felt most alienated and outside of the system. A teacher from Monroe, described the work of her YATST team and their attempt to act on their feelings. "*When they met in the fall they asked what group is not represented here and they immediately said our English Language Learner (ELL)[7] students so how can we include them? Their push was to get a lot of ELL students on Student Council, have someone from Voice as a liaison between the two groups to keep them informed, listen to their voices and bring it back, which I thought was wonderful*." Other schools also wrestled with how to bring into the overall concept of Student Voice more marginalized students. A Kennedy student characterized it as:

"*Our biggest hurdle will be getting disengaged students to be engaged again and to give them hope at the high school level that things can change; because they've been through so many years where they've been drilled on dates and history and timelines and I think to give them a sense that they can actually have an effect on their schooling is going to be the biggest goal for us.*"

Teams have recognized and named the importance of including the more disengaged members of their student body in their work and membership. Despite their concerns for the under-represented students, there was no real evidence that the composition of these YATST teams were made up of anything but students who were engaged in school. The students interviewed appeared to be well connected socially, reported that they were not struggling academically, and wanted to be involved in the affairs of their school. It is possible that some members who dropped out and who might have represented a less enthusiastic perspective but those interviewed did not discuss this possibility.

Situating student voice might imply that there is a sustainable and permanent place in the school's structure for this work to exist. While this was true for Hoover and both Hill Top and Kennedy were moving in that direction, the concept of situating anything that is new inside the structure of schools is no easy task.

Faculty Buying into Student Voice

The value of increasing Student Voice was something that at least the participating YATST teachers began to integrate into their own thinking. A teacher from River Grove commented that "*we are now aware of Student Voice and think of it when we're at meetings and the kids aren't included. We speak up for students and mention their concerns if they are not present. We inform students in our classes about changes and explain why so they understand. We also listen to their*

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[7] In the interest of anonymity, the identity of this sub-group has been altered.

questions and value their concerns." A teacher from Monroe shared that wish but cautioned that in her school, they still had a long way to go to build the kind of support from adults for student voice mattering. She described a kind of impasse that developed over time between the YATST team and adults in authority. She did offer a simple suggestion for how that impasse might be bridged saying that:

When I first started I was nervous, I'll admit it, that do you give students too much voice? And as I worked with these kids, how do you measure what is too much? You can't really. So I would say that in order to get people to realize just what they are going to get out of this, they really need to at least go to a meeting and just sit and listen. Don't be the talked, be the listener because they will get more out of that than anything else.

Having teacher allies is a necessary ingredient for integrating YATST into the overall school community. All of the principals interviewed agreed that this was critical. However, just having teachers, or even principals, affiliated with YATST did not mean that the entire school or even a critical mass of faculty were on board. As noted above, this initiative is trying to spark cultural and systemic change and people do not often go along willingly with such changes. The Pine Woods principal offered his critique of the kind of shifts that occurred by bringing YATST inside his school.

I think it's been received by some teachers that participated in the partnering with students in a very open and supportive way, other teachers are skeptical of it. By its very nature it is not well defined in its approach because it's research-based more than other endeavors and so it has taken the student council out of their traditional role in working with non-student council members. It has placed students working directly with teachers on issues of instruction; that's never happened here. It's placed us asking through surveys what student opinion is and, as well as teachers, how we can improve the school, and that's fairly new. With that, I don't know if there's one answer that would do justice to all the different responses. Some students don't even know it's going on. So, it hits the whole array.

Another teacher from Kennedy was not as confident as the Pine Woods principal that YATST was necessarily positioned to spark deeper change into matters of curriculum and instruction. He reflected on the challenges for YATST to become more integrated across schools, as well as the time it takes to do it.

There is a problem with schools today that they are so insular, that they only know what they know, and so to even approach youth and say, how can we look at what we are doing, they have no ability to compare and contrast. They assume this is what it is and it doesn't get any better Especially in high school, I think we hire content people and pedagogy comes second. So with that shift there are cultural and system shifts that need to take place. I really foresee that this work needs to be credit-bearing, it needs to be central and integral to the mission and vision of

the school, I think that this work is so meaningful and so rich and it's just unfortunately that the way we have to come at it is that it has to be marginalized. There are only few exceptions whereby schools are making this part of the curriculum.

A teacher from River Grove described how she had to work hard to understand her own limitations as a teacher, but wondered about her colleagues who might not have the same inclination towards self awareness and hence had less incentive to consider buying into an initiative like YATST.

What if you're sitting there every day and you're teaching and its fine, everything is fine, and then you do…so the carrot would be that kids are more engaged. Maybe you can't see that right away right? For you to teach a class and everyone comes in every day and everyone does everything you say for the most part except for some kids who kind of check out here and there and they don't really do their home work that much, and sometimes they seem apathetic but for the most part you feel good because your lessons are really, really hard and kids are challenged, or it seems like they are challenged. They are nervous about your class. They get stuff in on time. Why would you do it right? I don't know. I feel like the reason I was drawn to this work is because I sucked at teaching my first year at teaching; and I was so awesome at creating a relationship with kids and then I would go to teach and I would like bomb. I just didn't get teaching and learning. So I would be like, everything's great, everything's great and I would like pass out this stupid worksheet on Andrew Jackson and everybody would be like what? Why do we have to do this now? And I was like, in my head I don't know, I don't know.

Several principals commented that even teachers who might want to become more involved there have limited to the amount of time available to spare on activities outside of their classrooms, and because their schools are small, most teachers' time is already committed elsewhere. There was also change work occurring among faculty beside YATST. Some schools have been involved in their own district-mandated curriculum work that was already very consuming. Of course, there will always be some teachers who feel (with their union's backing) that they should not give their time away for free. The principal at Hill Top reflected that "*that is part of the reason why I am looking to see if there is a way to integrate it into the daily curriculum work because I do think there would be a greater level of commitment to do that.*" He was not impugning his teachers' commitment and care for their students, and in all schools there certainly are teachers who do things without added compensation. But as this principal and others recognized, "*the ones who volunteer and put in extra time for this or that things are few and so you can only go to them so many times to ask for something more. They're [already] busy.*"

A teacher from Jackson imagined how else teachers might buy into utilizing student voice in their work. She speculated that:

Okay fine, you don't want to mandate that teachers do the student feedback form, but you could say that everyone has a responsibility of creating a reflective tool for the year that you are going to use. We know that three really great ways to get feedback on your teaching is looking at student work. So whether it is test scores that happen outside your class. It should be a combination of evidence of learning in your class. Another is peer observation, someone you trust to get feedback from them. And then three, is Student Voice, student feedback. This is something, as a principal I think is a good idea to do, is to say I want to see your plan for this. How are you going to use these three different ways to improve your teaching or to answer questions about your teaching? Then this is where the student feedback tool, if you wanted to use it, or you have to design something, but something that is in the plan. That would be a way to mandate slowly. Maybe you do an exit card every Friday—hey that's fine

Getting teacher buy-in to any new reform approach is an age-old challenge in schools. The approach YATST has taken is to build small and from the ground up and to see whether it can take root and grow organically rather than be a top-down mandate.

Trust and Student Voice

It is important to keep in mind that YATST was a new experience for students as well as for teachers. It is rare to have students involved in making decisions of real consequence and being asked for their input. As minors in society and perhaps even inside their families, high school students enjoy only a restricted range of decision making opportunities. It seems natural that some might view such a shift with a degree of caution. Hoover students remarked in their focus group that while they felt like "*the teachers in the school respect student voice but we can't say the same about the adults outside the building.*" Their teacher explained that this is because Hoover is a small school community. She added, "*I think I need to do more research on it but it's an issue of trust. I think the students feel very marginalized in life and they don't necessarily trust adults.*"

Further, there were some small examples of the degrees to which certain voices seemed to still be silent or excluded. A content analysis of the focus groups conducted and of the videos shot during the November workshop with Adam Fletcher revealed that even within these groups, the few students of color frequently sat silently or rarely spoke up in comparison with their Anglo peers. Additionally, there is some degree of irony that none of the facilitators (Mr. Fletcher included) appeared to notice this enough to challenge it during this November workshop. While student responses to this evaluator and Mr. Fletcher may, in part, be explained by occurring in small, intimate rural schools and with students' reluctant to open up to strangers, the fact that students within the own teams did not especially notice when their minority members were more

silent than others suggests that there are levels of inclusion (and a need for more training) associated with promoting student voice that have yet to be plumbed. These findings are admittedly slight and it is one area where longer field work might have uncovered more examples of inclusion and diversity.

This is noted not to discount the sincerity with which students wanted to change this situation but rather to illustrate the systemic nature with which silencing occurs and how it invisibility among participants in school persists. One student from Hill Top summarized it thusly:

"*What YATST is trying to do is get people with different perspectives and who you don't usually see in student government and after-school programs. It's been difficult to get those people who aren't usually involved to step up and say something. As individual members we're trying to recruit from different cliques. I think it might be easier after the survey when they can see that their answers are taken seriously; they might actually have a reason to do this.*"

Students seemed to recognize that their impact from being involved with YATST needed to be first felt by other in order to be believed. As long as it and they remained out of the consciousness of their fellow students, their good work may not be reaching the very persons they hope to include.

Reflection Questions:

How can YATST teams better recruit students who may be left out, marginalized or otherwise disengaged from school? Why is it so hard to recruit them despite a consensus on the importance of hearing from all voices, especially the most marginalized?

What kinds of training might be helpful to assist teams in examining the systemic nature of inclusion/exclusion?

What would the dynamic of the team look like if they were to really get what they wanted and be partially composed of students whose experience in school was far from their own in terms of feeling valued, heard and respected?

Theme B) Data Driven-Decisions

The theory of change behind how YATST would work was relatively straight forward. Once teams formed, teachers and students--with students taking the lead--would use data collection techniques to assess which area or areas in their school were of the most concern to the school community. They would then construct action plans to effect some changes along those lines. By these actions students would build academic, vocational and social and political skills, link students and teachers closer together, and make a practical case for why what goes on in school is of importance for all participants, especially those students who are the least connected to school. In theory, YATST provide an experiential case for the value of rigor, relevance and relationships. A closer examination of how the theory of change worked out in Year II revealed a number of interesting observations.

The use of survey research methods produced mixed but largely positive results. All seven YATST teams chose to administer a survey. Some surveys targeted students others targeted faculty or both. Some teams were able to present their findings to a number of stakeholder groups, faculty, students, and even to their school boards. Others did not finish their analysis in time to present at all. While all teams used their survey research to look at the culture of the school and the quality of curriculum and instruction, they only drew minimally upon the survey data for their action plans during this school year.

The school surveys had a number of commonalities. They asked questions about the teaching and learning environment. They asked questions about the relationships between students and teachers, about whether students felt sufficiently challenged by the course content(s), and whether and in what ways did students feel school prepared them for their future—as college students, citizens, independent persons and ones open to diverse groups of people. The YATST teams who also surveyed teachers also asked similar questions of their faculty. Their teacher survey asked about the collegial atmosphere in their school, the degree to which students are involved in decision making inside their classrooms and in the school as a whole, and their own sense of identity as teachers. Response rates from both students and teachers ranged from 33% to 100%. No team reported efforts to increase the response rates by re-approaching the non-respondents. Nor did they attempt to account for what the missing data might have said about their overall community. At Jackson, YATST students made a promotional video to appeal to students to take completing the student/teacher feedback forms seriously. At Kennedy, the YATST team included a question in their student feedback form, 'How serious did you take filling out this survey?' and threw out the surveys where the person answered that they were not serious at all. Students across all the schools expressed empathy for their peers faced with another demand for data. Several of the teams made it a point to personally go into each classroom and explain to their fellow students what they were asking and why they felt it was important. One student from Kennedy summed up what many others felt, "*We want to make sure students actually understand that we're working with [the findings]. We're looking at the results*

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and trying to make changes because a lot of students take surveys and don't take them seriously because they don't see the results."

Unfortunately, while the teams wished otherwise, students in all but two schools did not see the results from their YATST surveys either. It was more a case of the teams being unprepared for the time consuming dimensions of data entry and analysis rather than any attempt to withhold the information from their peers. Those two schools intend to share their findings next fall, indication perhaps that this work is as much embedded in the process as it is in the opportunities.

Students also recognized that there was some power in the potential findings from collecting data from their peers and, in the case of one second -year school, they also began to understand how fine tuning their questions would yield different and potentially more useful results. One student recounted:

Last year the survey asked general questions—what do you want changed in the school? What do you have an issue with? This time we're being more specific. We're asking more questions like how can I talk to one of your teachers and say [what we've learned] without being rude or anything about their curriculum, saying to them, how can you learn best? What is not working? What projects work better? And how can you work with your teachers to actually determine what you are learning in class and what can you do with your teacher to have it relate to the outside world. Because, a lot of kids have issues learning because they can't see a connection, like in math. If we apply it to real life then you can actually understand it more.

Where access to computer technology was possible, the YATST teams had students and teachers fill out their surveys on-line and directly into the data base Survey Monkey which would then calculate the frequencies and could display their finding in the form of charts and graphs. Where there were limited resources, paper surveys were administered and then hand-entered into either Survey Monkey or Survey Bob (a free as opposed to subscription service that a teacher at Jackson discovered and shared with other YATST teams). The available technology allowed for certain teams to have a very quick turnaround and, in the case of mid-year evaluations forms, to supply teachers with the raw data as soon as the following day. This helped win the team(s) some appreciation in the eyes of other teachers. Other teams that struggled to hand-enter their data delayed their school community the access to it, in some cases the entire year. They recognized that the lag time and the absence of sharable data restricted the perceived effectiveness of their team in the eyes of their community. It is an area teams are mindful of correcting in the coming year.

One of the schools that struggled to just get its data analyzed and ran out of time to present their findings also had had a different group that was working on school issues before YATST arrived. Once their YATST team eclipsed the pre-existing group, the team found themselves straddling a

set of already defined projects and a new process that came from their YATST training. The principal looked back at these events and reflected.

Probably it was strategically an error on my part and on their part, but rather than just stopping that work, we naively thought we could just bring it into this process that was being created by the YATST group, and it didn't fit because the process we took all the kids through was really kind of an iterative process of starting with the survey and then identifying needs; starting from a very holistic perspective and then maybe zeroing in on maybe specific things to work on over time. I wish now that we had abandoned any notion of any ideas and come in and kind of started from scratch. We didn't do that and I think it took us almost the whole year to get to the point where we realized that we needed to have a better sense of the needs of the school and students. So anyway that's part of change, you learn how to do things. It's never perfect and it's never clean.

Not all stories were of their struggles and problems. Jean Berthiaume, a teacher on sabbatical who spent his year, in part, consulting and providing assistance to YATST teams described how many teachers participated in student feedback forms and "*climate-wise, students are seeing their teachers respond almost immediately to the feedback they are getting. I think students are being shown how to use tools [like research] to really make sense of their world that they never have been given and how empowering those tools really are. I don't think it's unique to Kennedy. I see people at Jackson, Hoover and River Grove doing the very same thing.*"

A close examination of the ways in which students analyzed and presented their survey data revealed some interesting observations. Students ran the frequencies of individual question responses and in some case, such as at River Grove, clustered responses together to form comparative categories they labeled as teacher and student 'strengths' and 'concerns,' as well as a category of 'contradictions' they found across the two groups. Other schools also reported contradictions they saw in their data. Several teams recognized that as they went forward they would need to revise and fine tune the questions on their surveys. These are encouraging signs from nascent researchers.

However, in this the second year of the initiative, it appeared that the teams did not go very far into interrogating their data. One small example was observed when Hill Top students reported on their data. One of their questions asked "how comfortable students felt asking questions in class?" They found that 75% of teachers and 66% of students answered 'very comfortable.' A student remarked that "*this is good because most teachers said that most of the students were comfortable asking questions.*" The team did consider whether the question, as written, allowed for multiple examples of questions that might be posed in a given class. They intended for the question to be content related, however as written there was no way of knowing whether the responses matched the intention. Additionally, the Hill Top survey asked a series of questions about the class content. Was it too easy or too hard? Did students get enough 1:1 time with

teachers? Did they need help in finishing/understanding class work? Again, while they reported the percentiles and frequency distributions of individual answers, their analysis did not delve into examining across questions to see what could be learned from relating various answers to a larger portrait.

Dr. Beattie ran several data analysis retreats where teams looked more in depth at the responses to their survey questions, conducted cross-correlations, and developed some themes based first on voting and then dialogue. Unfortunately, this evaluator can only report second-hand on this data. Still, it seems important to acknowledge that there were attempts to take students into deeper levels of their data and subsequent analyses even if it was not always evident. Finally, there is/was always a cost/benefit formula at work. Does a program spend the extra necessary time on data analysis and run the risk of losing the interest of, especially, teenage, researchers and their constituents? The benefit is a greater understanding of the data and its implications. The cost is the loss of people and interest that may result in a lengthy evaluation process packed into an already busy year, and by teams who have only limited time in which to meet and do their work.

The kinds of more in-depth knowledge of data analysis probably should take place in future trainings so that students can make the most out of the data they collect. One of the challenges will be, with a group whose membership turns over yearly, how to offer both ongoing and more comprehensive knowledge of research methods to returning team members and a less sophisticated introduction to new ones. Hill Top was not the only school whose approach to data analysis was limited, and in fairness to all the teams, survey research is not easy work and takes considerable time and practice to build the requisite skill set. The fact that these students began as early as high school is a highly encouraging sign for their future.

As stated above, the theory of change in YATST involves soliciting data from the school community and then allowing that data to drive the decisions of what actions the YATST teams would take. When looking over the list of reported accomplishments for the second year and comparing them to the types of questions on the various surveys administered, it was difficult to see the connection between a number of the accomplishments and the way in which the teams arrived at what actions to take.

Examples where the actions corresponded with portions of the data could be found were in the creation of the mid-year student feedback form, the efforts to open up enrollment on student councils, to get students appointed to the district school board, and the various opportunities for students to gather and share their ideas and their voice in school matters. Other action plans did not seem well coordinated with the types of survey data the teams collected. In one student focus group, the students were open about it and said "*the projects that we chose were the ones that we*

embraced. All of these we wanted to do for our school." This is not to say that teams' choices were based purely on self-interest. They seemed heartfelt and altruistic, really wanting to help improve their schools. The point is simply that not all of them were well connected to their data and hence the principle of data-driven decision making was in operation in uneven ways across the YATST teams.

Reflection Questions:

If action plans are built around the most frequently occurring issue or the one with the most votes from students, does that automatically mean that it is the most serious issue in the school community or the one that demands attention before others?

How do you assess the importance of an issue beyond the numeric value that survey data brings to it? Beyond surveys, are there other approaches to data collection and analysis that would be of use to teams?

What is the best way to identify the pressing issues and needs at a school? Is it always advisable to build actions around the most occurring response from survey data (re: the most popular)? Are there occasions where the minority opinion is as valid and pressing, if not more so, than the majority?

With the emphasis in schools increasingly focused on the role that data plays in school improvement, as YATST teams become highly skilled and competent in their use of data collection and analysis techniques, will others in the school be more welcoming or more threatened by this group's ability to make and recommend data driven decisions?

How can the training in research methods progress and take team members into deeper levels of understanding and competence while simultaneously orient and train newer and less experienced members each successive year?

Theme C) Rigor, Relevance and Relationships

In this second year, the YATST initiative expanded its mission to include specific references to rigor, relevance and relationships and their connection to promoting the value of student voice as

a vehicle for greater student engagement. Including attention to the 3Rs seemed to be a logical extension of the work that YATST was already doing. In the summary of teams' end-of-year reflective writing, the 3Rs were mentioned repeatedly as something they learned about and something important they were taking away from their work but no further explanation was included. Teams incorporated them into their lexicon as well as to wear T-shirts with the 3Rs as part of the design. In this section, I will review what the 3Rs mean and cite examples of how they were expressed in the YATST experience.

Increased rigor in the content of what is being taught is seen as a means to improve students' intellectual growth, and for most schools and districts this means offering an academic curriculum intended to prepare all students for college. The focus on relationships acknowledges that for a high school education to be effective there must be meaningful connections between students and teachers, and that a higher degree of personalization in teaching and learning is beneficial to all students. Further, relationships are important for the culture of the school to better ensure that every student is known to at least one or more adults in their school so as not to fall through the cracks and get lost. Finally, the rationale behind an emphasis on relevance in high school posits that students will learn more and be better engaged with school when the curriculum is linked with the "real world" of students. This typically means linking school to the broader worlds of work, community and the skills associated with different professions (Goldwasser & Bach, 2007).[8]

When asked about the presence of the 3Rs in their work, participants found it easiest to identify the impact that relationships had on members of their YATST teams. In addition to the rapport with the teachers on their teams, the YATST members made an effort to build relationships with their school community, reaching out to peers and faculty in the form of creating public places and opportunities to hear student voices and concerns. Most teams reported that they reached out to their school board members and even to some elected officials There was the case of one team sharing their survey data in a highly professional 'Prezi'[9] presentation of their survey data to their school board and another who set themselves the task of getting students appointed to their school board and, hopefully in more than a token way. Most schools made a concerted effort to try and communicate if not to actively join with their pre-existing student councils. This was not always easy as teams reported some tensions associated with turf and power but seemingly the problems were not insurmountable. On some teams there were individuals who were also members of their student councils which made for easier relations.

Relevance was slightly harder to observe and document. There was little direct reporting on the added relevance of their work from students and teachers even as they touted accomplishments they made in the broader world beyond the classroom and school building. The efforts made by

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[8] Goldwasser, M & Bach, A. High School and the 3Rs: Students' Perspectives on "Good Work." Occasional Paper Series. Consortium for Policy Research in Education. University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA 2007.
[9] For an overview see: http//prezi.com

those teams to earn membership on their district school board probably provided lessons in how the laws and the political system work. Those who raised money and did research on how to help enroll more of their eligible school community in free and reduced lunch programs learned something about the local and practical face of hunger as well as what they could do to help minimize it.

To talk about one final example of relevance and how it dovetailed with the work of YATST is to tread onto some tender territory. At one school there was a student-led protest, with YATST students playing prominent roles, in defense of their former principal who was removed. The students used what they learned and organized themselves. They obtain parental permission slips to be out of the school building, were mindful not to be on an illegal property and that their signs and appearances were respectful and not inflammatory, and were as polite as possible under some trying conditions. In short, they exercised their voice in a very practical way even if it ultimately did not bring them the gains they sought. But as one student remarked, "*The only way to get something changed or started is to speak out and do it. You have to take that chance, step forward and do something with your ideas. And that's the hardest part; in our school people are afraid of stepping forward and speaking out because we've never been given the change. It's hard to change and teachers are having issues with that too*." In the end, their protest was unsuccessful and the YATST initiative was shut down.

Of the 3Rs, rigor was the least visible identify. It is also the least understood of the three, even by educators, more often defined tautologically; that is, a rigorous curriculum is when students take harder courses. Most studies agree that as a baseline rigor begins with high expectations for all students. A recent report by the Hechinger Institute (2008) outlines a framework for achieving academic rigor that seems to speak to the YATST model.[10]

Like most studies, the Hechinger report placed at their center 'set high expectations and get students to meet them.' They explained variance in student achievement as being 24% associated with economics, ethnicity and language and 49% associated with teaching qualifications and practice (Darling Hammond, 2000).[11] With the emphasis on increasing rigor more focused on improving faculty performance they next recommended that school staff examine their beliefs and assumptions including those related to current research, individual and personal ones, and to extend their examination into inquiry and dialogue with colleagues. Finally they identified that assessing rigor can best be seen by triangulating their data from nationally normed exams such as NAEP as well as data from teacher and student surveys. Here is where the work of YATST

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[10] Understanding and Reporting Rigor. A Hechinger Primer for Journalists. The Hechinger Institute, Teachers College. Columbia University. New York. 2008. Retrieved July 15, 2010 from: www.lrdc.pitt.edu/.../Understanding-and-Reporting-on-Academic-Rigor-Hechinger.pdf

[11] Darling Hammond, L. Teacher Quality and Student Achievement. Educational Policy Analysis Archives, volume 8, no.1 January 2000. Retrieved July 19, 2010 from: http://eppa.asu.edu/epaa/V8n1

teams can and perhaps is contributing to building a case for increased rigor in their schools. The student feedback to teachers about how students learn, what they are/are not learning and understanding can and should aid schools to provide more rigorous course contents.

One principal talked about the 3Rs, YATST, and where he felt it was headed in his school.

I certainly think relationships have been strengthened and now the question is, for example with the mid-semester feedback forms, what's coming from that? How are things changing? What effect is that having on instruction and student performance? That's where that needs to go. I would hope is that we would use the feedback forms as a way to have broader discussions—and this was the way it was always intended—to have broader discussions with faculty around the quality of the experience within the school, not just on the student side of it but on the teachers' side of it as well. So we can say these are the things that we want to embrace about our school and these are the things we want to strengthen. So it was meant as a way to generate discussion, dialogue and action plans and if that meant that we're going to look at rigor, relevance and relationships in those three areas then that's what that meant. And I think that it truly is where it is going.

The work students put into analyzing and preparing charts and summaries of their survey data demonstrated a degree of rigor. Especially noteworthy was the Prezi presentation designed by Kennedy students and shared with their school board. There was also at least one example of a missed opportunity to connect the work of YATST with the issue of academic rigor. As earlier mentioned one school lowered its threshold for letter grade and this may have been due in part to it recently being faced with a form of academic probation. As a school-wide issue (i.e. how to bring more academic rigor into our classrooms) this is the type of problem where student research could be employed to help develop strategies for correcting it. For whatever reason, the administration at the school did not think that its students, particularly YATST could contribute to new ways to solve this problem.

There is one final example of the 3Rs that merits special mention. It was a rap that students originally created in the summer of 2009 by returning student who were charged with creating a logo for the initiative. The song was one aspect of the logo and then used to orient new members and new schools. In its own way it does illustrate that there is integration by students of what these 3Rs mean to them and how they can contribute to their overall sense of school success and especially to their identity as YATST participants.

Don't Get Enraged, Get Engaged

Youth and adults transforming school,
You should try it too, it's really cool.
We care about students and the choices they make,
With stuff like this, you just can't fake.

Here at YATST, we're all about the three R's.
With these as our guide, we reach for the stars.
Rigor, relevance, and relation,
Should be taught in schools across the nation.

Now let's break it down:

Rigor is what inspires us,
What makes us get up in the morning and get on the bus.
Relevance is what ties the past to the now,
Get involved in class and we'll show you how.
Relation is what ties the students and the instructors,
Of their education, they're the conductors.

Look up, Speak out, Transform,
Step away from the norm
Look up, Speak out, Transform,
Makes our hearts feel warm.

Now our song is coming to an end,
To get people engaged is what we intend.
We hope you always participate in infinite learning,
A quest for more knowledge you should always be yearning.

"Don't get enraged, get engaged

Reflection Questions

How can YATST teams play a leadership role in the school community by demonstrating what the 3Rs look like in action projects and how they can contribute to student engagement and school improvement?

How will YATST schools' leadership encourage their faculty to build rigor, relevance and relationships into their pedagogy and instructional practices?

If rigor is the most challenging of the 3Rs to operationalize, what can YATST do to help its teams learn how to bring an increased and well defined sense of rigor to their work?

Theme D--Time as a Factor

When asked whether the current time allotted for YATST teams to met, with the exception of the year-long course, all of the principals and teachers interviewed agreed that the time was less than ideal, but they also acknowledged that there were few alternatives. Even the teacher whose team met as a class for the entire year had some reservations about that structure. She preferred the length of a one-semester version to a full year and where students worked all together on their action plan rather than dividing into sub-groups. For the other six teams, their formal meeting times occurred once a week for 30 minutes of less, and more than half of these scheduled times were before the school day started; not an optimal time for teenagers, regardless of the activity. Said one principal:

I don't think the time of day was right. Everybody was fresh but we're still sleepy, we get people straggling in. We're supposed to start at 7, 7:10 and then it became 7:30 and then all of a sudden they're worried about first block exam or homework. And after school, everybody is over-committed in terms of sports or other obligations, so it's tough.

Even with a few retreats thrown in along the way, it seems all the more remarkable that these teams were able to accomplish all that they did in such a limited time frame. It speaks well of their high functioning as teams.

Principals explained that the problem with offering it sometime during the school day was that it would limit the membership because not all students would be available at the same time. As it currently stands--before or after school--students across all four grades can join and that might not be possible were it situated within the daily school schedule. One alternative suggestion that might be worth exploring came from a principal who offered:

What I can imagine is that there would be a time set aside for student organizations, student forums, so it wouldn't necessarily be. Let's say if we said that hypothetically two times a month, students get together for an hour. One of those meeting could be organizational and it could be the steering group getting together. And the other time it could be grade-level groups to have facilitated discussions, doing some specific planning, that sort of thing. So yeah, I think that there's more ideal. If you had time built in, within that time built in you could do a variety of things with it.

In their focus groups, the students did not voice as strong an opinion on the time element as did their faculty. They seemed willing to work with what they got. Teams also found creative ways to find supplemental time for their work. Examples they said were useful included a 'lock-in' where teams spent the night in the school and used that time to work on their projects. Several teams increased their time by breaking into sub-groups, each charged with pieces of their overall plan. This allowed the subgroups find common time during as well as after school. The geographic proximity of schools made it possible for at least one YATST team shadowing

another team as a way to learn other examples of how they might function. One of River Grove's accomplishments was to win a dedicated time during the school day for their YATST team to meet. However, with the school undergoing some serious changes in focus, the YATST teachers and students seemed doubtful that that time would remain dedicated in the next school year.

Another element of time had to do with the length of time it took some of them to come together and learn how to work as a team. Several schools had student resign from their initial YATST team which meant recruiting and rebuilding during the year, and orienting new members to their purpose and plans without the benefit of the summer (or any?) training experiences for new members.

A third example of time as a variable had to do with the time it took to complete survey work. This ranged from several weeks to all semester. Students commented repeatedly that the fact that they had not shared their results with their peers and/or faculty limited the knowledge of the school community about their group's existence as well as the value their work might be perceived as offering to the school at large. In focus groups, students frequently gave variations on the phrase, "*I wish we had gotten the survey results out sooner*," because it would have helped them build a reputation for YATST inside the school. Another motivation for completing their survey work sooner would be that it would free them up to work on other things. As teams found out, there is a certain drudgery associated with doing the work of research. Another repeated concern had to do with how to target the student body. "*If I did it over, I would find a way a more effective way of distributing the survey rather than giving them to TAs because a lot of people didn't get them*," but as stated earlier, there was no evidence that teams had thought how they would account for non-respondents or how they would try again to increase their response rates after the initial attempt.

Reflection Questions

If time is an essential component for teams, what is the optimal amount of time and where it is best situated during the school day? How can the school leadership carve out and then preserve the necessary time for YATST?

 What kinds of creative 'wiggle room' can individual teams generate to maximize the time their projects need?

How can teams use available resources (e.g. technology) better to be more efficient in the use of their time?

Theme E--Principal Leadership

There was unanimous agreement from student and faculty that having the support of their principal was an important if not crucial element in the ongoing success of this work. Students described their principals as "*awesome*," "*he's one of us*" and *"he keeps it fun*." They were nothing but complimentary. Teachers went further in their praise. One teacher from Hoover said that the importance of his leadership was felt because "*students know they have the principal's ear*." At Jackson, the teachers said of principal leadership, "*It is essential. There is no point doing it without principal support. He was a gift. He acted as a full participant. We couldn't have done it without his support. He made it a priority and said that it helped keep him sane. He supports it as a positive and pro-active tool for deep change."* Jean Berthiaume, again commenting from his experience across a number of schools said that "*Their participation makes or breaks a group because it is still negotiating with the powers that be and I don't think there is any exception to that. I think if the principal is heavily involved they are going to see success even as a first or second-year school*." Finally, teachers at Kennedy reflected on the role their principal played to really advance the work not just within their team but across their school.

I think what's different about this model is that the participation of the principal, you know if it's meaningful and if the principal makes a valid effort to participate and engage in this work I think it is one of those rare opportunities where principals are reminded about why they are a leader and why they are there. You know just being in our first year, I think it has really been powerful to see our principal speak about this. I think the more he speaks about it then inevitably people will see this is the direction our school will be moving towards and that it's ultimately integral to high school transformation.

Principals and/or assistant principals worked closely with all of the YATST schools, frequently, time permitting, as participants who could also model for their teachers how to sit back and allow for student voice to emerge. All six interviewed all agreed that there was still work to be done to bring other staff along but they felt that student voice was going to be a fixture in schools and furthermore, ought to be integral to their idea of professional community. Still four of the principals in these schools were/are leaving as of the next year. How will the new ones involve themselves with the program and what can the groups do to fill the need for leadership in the event that new principal support takes some time to develop? Dr. Beattie commented on the quandary of educational leadership.

If we don't have stability in principals in a school for at least long enough (I think it's 2 years, 3 really), 3 is the magic number of moving from the new kid on the block to oh he's always lived here. If we don't have that window to let a school figure out how to make this a permanent part of their structure with a single educational leader during that time frame, it's problematic. And the frequent turnover of educational leaders is unfortunately a reality, so though that is part of the quandary of this, I think and maybe it's part of the recruitment process to be more discerning

about that although it's pretty hard to predict. ...I would just echo that anybody doing systems change work when faced with this, it can be a monumental set-back and you start over again.

Reflection Questions

What role can or should the principal play in creating more widespread buy-in of their staff to the work of YATST and the role student voice plays in their professional lives?

If leadership is central to the success of this initiative, what are the implications for schools with new principals coming on board? What sorts of orientation and/or training will YATST be able to supply to help these administrators?

In the past two decades the concept of school leadership has been moving from a traditional top-down approach to a more shared one. With student voice gaining traction and coming to play a more collaborative role in school affairs, are there other ways of thinking about leadership within a given school that might contribute to further the growth and development of student voice and its participation in school transformation?

Theme F) VPA, YATST, and the future of Student Voice in Vermont

For the first two years the Vermont Principal's Association (VPA) served as the parent organization with independent granting sources underwriting the majority of the YATST pilot initiative. That relationship between VPA and YATST mutually concluded at the end of the 2009-2010 school year and YATST found a new home with the Vermont Rural Partnership. The VPA intends to continue to support its own version of student voice work. The state of Vermont will have several examples to draw upon and hopefully learn from one another.

For their part, YATST has recruited new schools for the 2010-11 school year and is preparing to provide training and ongoing technical assistance to them as well as imagine how that they can continue to support schools who want to continue after the two years of designated and official support services. It will be of interest to see the ways in which the network of participating YATST schools can communicate with one another and profit from the shared and at the same time individual experiences. A major difference between the two models of student voice seemed to be that Dr. Beattie wanted to continue take the work of YATST deeper into schools while the VPA wanted a program that could scale up to reach a wider number of schools and see how sustainability for student voice would work across the state of Vermont.

The VPA explained their decision to go in a different direction from YATST in several ways. On a practical level, the VPA believed that their decision was linked to their mission to serve all Vermont schools. It had become increasingly difficult to justify a sizable line-item on their overall budget that went to only a handful of schools. On a philosophical level, the VPA explained that, all along, they were interested in a model that could be employed across all their schools, including middle schools. Middle schools often are left out of the dialogue when it comes to grants and innovative programs and the VPA wanted to bring them in to their student voice project. The VPA confided that, in November of 2009, a conversation they had with Adam Fletcher, while he was conducting a workshop for YATST, influenced their thinking on the future direction of student voice in Vermont. According to the VPA, Mr. Fletcher told them that he thought that pre-existing structures such as Student Councils were easier to work with to initiate change rather than the creation of new cultural forms (re: YATST).

On an economic level, the VPA saw Student Councils as a viable group to invest in because they were already self-supporting. They also stressed an interest in extending student voice work into middle schools as well. Their plans include a partnership with the Young Writers Network[12] to address the issue of isolation that occurred between retreats and to build a web-based resource to enhance team and project-based communication and documentation across participating schools and across the state. The VPA website already is soliciting input asking students to share what is one thing they would suggest to improve high school, and offers the statement that "*your voice will help focus the project*."[13] VPA also identified an active middle school principal who, in addition to her building responsibilities, would serve as the coordinator of the VPA's new model for student voice. Given the scope of the work Dr. Beattie and her colleagues provided over the past 2+ years as external, technical and moral support both on-site and over time to students, teachers and principals it seems unlikely that the new coordinator--especially if even more schools become participants--will serve the same functions or in the same way as did Dr. Beattie.

Principals offered additional perspective on this parting of the ways. As one said, "*I would hope then if Helen is going to house this action-based effort with the Rural Partnership and the VPA that it doesn't become something that's perceived as two separate initiatives. I would hope that we would start to benefit from what we've learned and support each other and broaden the discussion, and make the discussion more inclusive rather than more divisive*."

Another principal was more dubious in his critique saying that he was concerned that the VPA was:

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[12] http://youngwritersproject.org
[13] One wonders what kind of students visit the VPA website during their internet time and whether there are other recruiting tools also in operation.

...just going to end up the same place every other student voice project has ended up. He is going to end up with a whole bunch of kids who want to change the cafeteria or the gym program or who want to get more senior privileges, and the middle school kids are going to want more privileges and recess or no recess whatever. I've been a part of those large scale efforts in times in my career and they start out big, they have big goals and big visions and big intent, and they're not sustainable because they don't have sort of that fundamental and foundation work and involvement of administration, teachers and students working together. I actually think I was hopeful that the concept of being careful and well thought out and trying to grow from small to large rather than from large to larger would work. I do like the idea of including middle schools, I think it's great. But I think it's a whole different model.

In fairness, it is important to consider that just because an organization such as student council, in the past, has been portrayed as limited in its vision of what student voice and accompanying actions means that does not default all future student councils into that same place. It seems inaccurate to assume student councils are monoliths and incapable of innovative thinking and action. For example, the VPA, with the help of a three-year Department of Education Learn and Serve grant, envisions brokering a stronger link between the actions of their student council voice project and service learning actions and initiatives.

Another third principal articulated the tensions he saw between YATST and VPA while at the same time seeing value in both groups continuing to support student voice in Vermont schools. He is quoted at length describing his perspective on their parting company.

I have mixed feelings about it. I think the VPA because it's a member-driven organization has a responsibility in its membership. I do know that the leadership of the VPA felt that this Youth and Adults project was very selective and it wasn't as inclusive as it should have been. I think Helen did a good job of articulating why it was important that it be this way but there was definitely some conflict. I could argue that both ways because I can see both sides, that the VPA is an organization that exists because of its membership and when they take on a project there has to be some way to show the membership that they're addressing their needs. I would continue to advocate that [Helen] be involved with this work. She is very focused on this work and very committed to it, and the VPA and even all of us principals are focused on probably 25 different things all at the same time. Sometimes it's been hard for me to feel like I was putting in as much time as I should into this project when I had a lot of other things tugging at me and pulling at me. I think that, I'm disappointed to learn that the relationship is going to be severed because I do think there is still some good reason for the VPA to stay involved in this more focused work on student voice. I don't know how that'll go. I'm hoping to be involved with both projects because as I said before, I see there's a place for it in the schools. There's no limit to the opportunities that we should be giving our kids and student government and student voice don't necessarily have to be exclusive and they don't have to be the same thing.

These principals raised concerns that however the VPA constructs their new model for student voice, they hoped that there would be sufficient resources to build a solid foundation or platform for it to grow and evolve. Additionally, they recognized that YATST has something to offer to any new model from its two years of experience. These principals expressed their hope that the decision to go their separate ways would not shut down communication between the ongoing work of YATST and VPA, and the opportunity to share lessons learned and knowledge gained would remain a possibility. Dr. Beattie felt the same way. She believed that "*If I remain an isolated, just the student voice person, and then there's the transformation group at the DOE, and then there's the VPA, I don't think any of us wins. We're too small of a state to do that. We need to combine and figure out how to plant each other in each other's visions in a way that supports the work as a whole and I am really hopeful about that.*"

Dr. Beattie went on to talk about the changes that YATST has already made as it prepares for its next year. These include a greater focus on training and preparation for all participants, increased resources and an understanding that schools can and should be able to enter into the work of supporting student voice from differing degrees of readiness.

The whole intention of that core committee that created YATST and my excitement about it was that we would stop being on parallel tracks in this state and we could start to weave our work better. And I remain committed to trying to do that, and I think that schools are at different places in their readiness to really commit to student involvement in schools in this way. What they [VPA] offer is great for some schools who are opening the door to this work and want to taste it, they want to see what it feels like, they are willing but not able to commit to what it takes to do more training and deeper work that's reflected in the YATST model. And so I'm thinking, for instance the November conference with the high schools involved in the VPA it would be a great opportunity for them to come and see what this work looks like and then take it back and— theirs is an action research model as I understand it—do what they want to do with that information. ... I would see us absolutely combining training opportunities to the extent possible, and maybe some possible networking, access to the web site that we will be developing and the resources that will be on that web. The full curriculum will be totally accessible to anybody for free, as will the youth advocate tool kit and the training of youth facilitators. So they'll be tons of good tools so that anybody who is advising these students would have access to augment their work with the kids. ...I would hope that some schools maybe who started [one] way may say 'oh now we're ready to join, maybe we do have the time and resources and understanding to go deeper,' and that we can be complimentary and part of a good array of quality options rather than somehow judging one or the other as inadequate or unworthy. So that's my vision, that my hope, that's certainly my intention in doing things like making an open web and open conferences to include their work and see if we can go from there.

The Future of Student Voice

YATST work continued even after the school year finished. Dr. Beattie reported that she secured from the Nellie Mae Foundation "Catalyst for Change" funds which will allow for a two day training of "Youth Voice Advocates" from each team for the purpose of creating tools and skills to lead dialogue with various stakeholders. That training will set the stage for all subsequent retreats/trainings to be co-lead by youth.

A second major step was the creation of a YATST Curriculum Guide for use by YATST team teachers and students to deepen/improve the rigor of their work. This will provide one means to address the quality of the research efforts, help participants better form their own educational philosophies as a foundation for their work, provide tools for leadership development such as meeting management and facilitation, and be a step toward a sustainable and replicable model. Third, YATST developed an Advisory Board with YATST participants (students, teachers, principals) and educational leaders on a national level. Fourth, they are planning a state-wide High School Transformation Conference in November that focusing on efforts of involving student voice and to seed ideas for YATST schools and introduce potential new schools to the opportunity. According to Dr. Beattie, timely recruitment has surfaced as a significant challenge in this initiative because of the time the work requires and what a school needs to do to ready itself for involvement but she believes that the fall conference should help. Finally she is exploring partnering with the DOE to co-host the conference which could be a key link for future sustainability.

The YATST approach has been to build a model organically from the ground up school by school and to maintain a size that permits a degree of personalization to operate and limits an institutional approach to managing these new entities in schools. If VPA scales up its approach and reaches out to considerably more schools than the YATST model has done thus far it presents some interesting challenges. As mentioned above, the VPA intends to use a three-year Learn and Serve grant to help broker connections between the work of student council voice project schools and service learning opportunities. It would be a good idea for the VPA to develop its own theory of change and what outcomes it hopes will result from its support of more student voice work in both middle schools as well as high schools.

However student voice progresses in Vermont high schools (and middle schools), it seems clear that students who have gone through the process see merit and value in what it offered them as students and citizens. It seems fitting to give the final word to the voices of several students whose year-end reflections do a good job of articulating the promise, potential and possibilities for using student voice to transform schools (and selves) and to increase student engagement in schools.

I still want to learn about other issues about our school that came up during the survey. It seemed that there were some that were pretty big and that needed to be addresses. We might not change everything that we want about our school right now, but it is important to be educated about those issues in case other voices in action groups want to pursue them in the future.

I think that this class broadened the spectrum of students participating in their learning, this will live on long after we are done with this class. I now know that education is a collaborative process between students and adults working together to learn as much as possible in a meaningful way, I know that meaningful action can be taken by anyone and that is an important part of democracy and one that is shockingly easy to become involved with. I want to learn more about the way Vermont's education system works and learn how it could work better. I also want to learn how to take national action from a small state's perspective. And I still wonder, how can we get more students involved in decisions that being made every day effecting their school and life?

Reflection Questions

What relationship is possible between YATST and those schools participating in the VPA student council voice project? How might they communicate, share experiences and profit from one another's work?

What will be the relationship between student voice and academic achievement? If schools are increasingly under pressure to increase test scores and to demonstrate students are making academic progress, how can YATST and the overall student voice work contribute to that enterprise? In other words how will YATST plan for its future in changing educational and political climates?