



Students as Allies in Improving Houston Schools

“It is up to us to speak out and help right what’s wrong in our schools. We need to make a difference and leave a legacy. I have learned the importance of my voice and I am ready to have it heard.”

— Student, Chavez High School

“I always start out by telling my students that there’s a difference between being a tourist and being a citizen. If they’re going to be tourists in their school, they’re never going to get what they want out of it. But if they’re citizens...”

— Teacher, Lee High School

A program of the Houston A-Plus Challenge and the Greater Houston

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Writing Project, with What Kids Can Do, Inc. and MetLife Foundation



Introduction

When you ask high school students in Houston and nationwide how they feel about school, you likely will hear a number of common refrains. "It's boring," they might say, followed perhaps by, "I don't see how it relates to the real world." If asked whether their voices count in what happens in school, many will answer, "no." But when asked how to improve their schools or what qualities make a good teacher, however, students light up. "You love school when it makes you feel smart," explained one high school junior, "when you know the teachers care about you and your future...when they act like they think you'll be someone in life."

Students as Allies (SAA), launched in the fall of 2003 by the national nonprofit organization What Kids Can Do, Inc. (WKCD), with funding from MetLife Foundation, draws out student voices like these. Aiming to make students *bona fide* players in improving their schools, *SAA* works with local partners in five cities—Houston, Chicago, Oakland, Philadelphia, and St. Louis—to support students as researchers and change agents in the schools they attend.

Specifically, *Students as Allies*:

- promotes discussion among students, teachers, principals, and community partners about central issues in teaching and learning
- supports student research related to these issues
- brings to a public forum the results of this research and discussion, then forges feasible next steps towards change
- models the student-teacher, youth-adult partnerships the project encourages.

Rather than follow a one-size-fits-all approach, *SAA* has encouraged local partners to tailor the project to their own circumstances. In Houston, *SAA* partner the Houston A-Plus Challenge reached out to the Greater Houston Area Writing Project, hoping to enlist experienced Writing Project teachers in the project's survey research and public presentations. They hoped right. More teachers responded to the project's request-for-proposals than anticipated, and the seven selected schools are as diverse as the city's student population: Bellaire High School, Chavez High School, Furr High School, Lee High School, Madison High School, Reagan High School, and Scarborough High School.

Writing Project teachers spearheaded projected activities at each school, working with research teams composed of students from an entire class or representatives from several classes. In

October more than 800 students at the seven high schools completed surveys; in November they presented their findings at a day-long Youth Summit attended by more than 400 students and educators from 15 of the city's 24 comprehensive high schools. In the months since, student-teacher research teams have created action plans that their schools have pledged to include in the redesign plans they submit to the district.

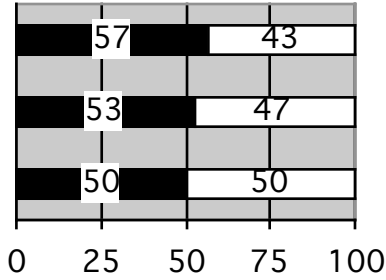
In the pages that follow, we provide four detailed snapshots of *Students as Allies Houston* in action, including results from students' surveys. If the project simply ended here, its accomplishments would still be large. The project has engaged students and teachers in almost one-third of Houston's high schools in a thoughtful look at teaching and learning in their own school. Students have gained skills in survey research and data analysis; their presentations at the Youth Summit blaze new trails for communicating research findings, especially to a youth audience, in inventive ways. And at every step, the project has sparked important conversations among and between students and teachers about what makes classrooms academically engaging, respectful, and safe.

We fervently hope, though, that the data, conversations, and student voices marshaled through *Students as Allies Houston* will continue to reverberate. Together, they raise important issues in the campaign to strengthen our high schools. They remind us of the critical role student-teacher relationships play in establishing the expectations and climate that help everyone in a school do their best. They also provoke questions—and, implicitly, standards—that at first blush seem separate from academic performance but on closer inspection appear intimately linked. Does every student in a school, for example, have at least one adult in the building they can count on for support? Do teachers routinely talk with students one-on-one about their college or other future plans? Is discipline applied fairly? Is curriculum connected to the real world? Does the faculty truly value students' opinions?

As school communities grapple with these questions, we hope the process encourages students, in the words of one Houston teacher, to act as citizens in their school, not tourists.



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Student Survey Results

To jumpstart the student research component of *Students As Allies*, What Kids Can Do created student and teacher survey templates—drawn from questions on the 2001 and 2002 MetLife surveys that focused on school climate and student-teacher relationships—for SAA projects to augment and use as they saw fit.

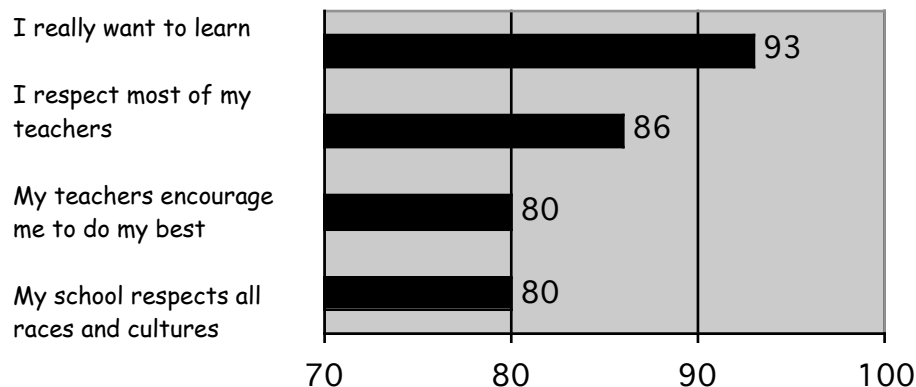
In Houston, SAA teams broke the student survey template into two parts, then students in individual schools added a third school-specific section just for their own peers. Colleagues at the University of Houston formatted the surveys for online use with a computer service called SurveyMonkey. In early October 2003, 821 students from the seven participating high schools completed the student survey on home computers or in computer labs at school. SurveyMonkey compiled results almost immediately, allowing students to focus on interpreting the resulting data, which they presented publicly at the Youth Summit in November 2003.

Findings across SAA schools

Students' responses to many of the survey questions are notably upbeat. More than three-quarters (76 percent) agree that their classes are challenging, 86 percent respect most of their teachers, and 80 percent agree that their teachers encourage them to do their best. Eighty percent also report that their school respects all races and cultures.

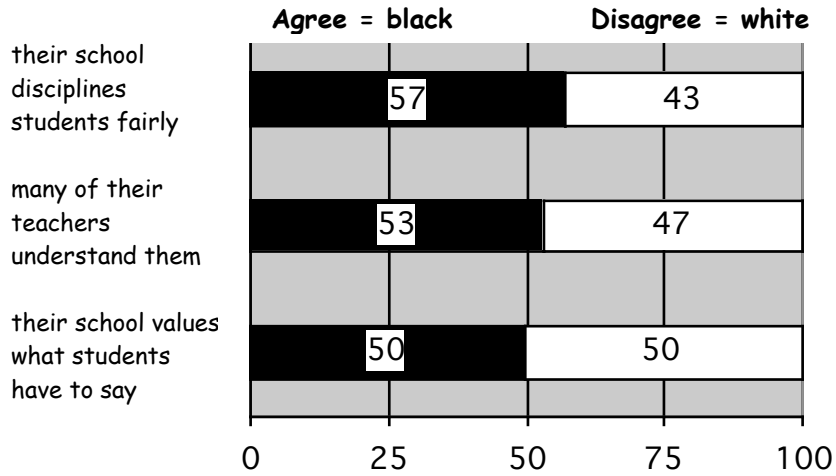
Students are equally positive about their own role, too. Ninety-three percent say the statement "I really want to learn" is "somewhat or a lot like me," and 83 percent say the same for "I participate regularly in class"—although when asked about their classmates, the number drops to 58 percent who agree that in their school "students care about learning and getting an education."

Percentage of students who agree that...



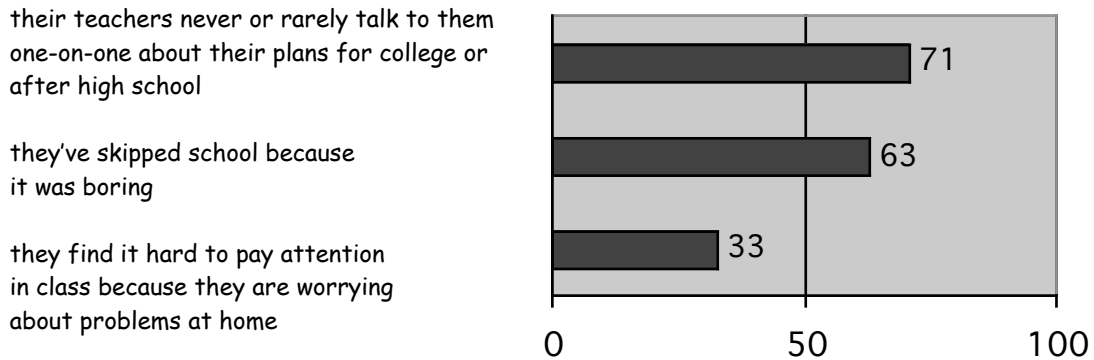
Some of the student responses are markedly divided, falling into the glass half-full or half-empty category. Fifty-seven percent of the students surveyed agree that their school disciplines students fairly, but on the flip side 43 percent disagree. On whether or not many of their teachers understand them, 53 percent agree and 47 percent disagree. They split evenly, 50-50, on whether they think their school values what students have to say.

Percentage of students who believe...



Digging deeper, the picture grows more complicated still. More than two-thirds of the students surveyed report that their teachers never or only a few times a year talk to them one-on-one about their plans for college or after high school or about their interests and things important to them. Nearly half the students (47 percent) admit to skipping a class or school during the past two years because school was boring. A third said they often find it hard to pay attention in class because they are worrying about problems at home.

Percentage of students who say...



Here and on the pages that follow, we present a digest of the common survey findings. For complete results see the URLs listed at the end of this section.

Respondents' School and Demographic Information (n = 821)

School:

Madison High School	33%
Reagan High School	21%
Lee High School	15%
Chavez High School	13%
Bellaire High School	9%
Scarborough High School	5%
Furr High School	5%

Ethnicity:

Hispanic	58%
African-American	25%
Caucasian	9%
Mixed	6%
Asian	5%
Native American	< 1%

Gender:

Female	53%
Male	47%

Grade:

9th grade	24%
10th grade	36%
11th grade	26%
12th grade	15%

Responses

My School . . .

	Strongly/somewhat Agree	Strongly/somewhat Disagree
respects all races and cultures.	80%	20%
has classes that are challenging.	76%	24%
is safe.	68%	32%
is well organized.	62%	38%
has students who care about learning and getting a good education.	58%	42%
disciplines students fairly.	57%	43%
values what students have to say.	50%	50%

My Principal . . .

	Strongly/somewhat Agree	Strongly/somewhat Disagree
models respectful behavior.	80%	21%

About My Teachers . . .

	Strongly/somewhat Agree	Strongly/somewhat Disagree
I respect most of my teachers.	86%	14%
Most of my teachers know my name.	86%	15%
My teachers encourage me to do my best.	80%	20%
Most of my teachers like me.	79%	21%
Many of my teachers are helpful.	57%	43%
Many of my teachers understand me.	53%	46%

About Me . . .

	A lot or somewhat like me	Not much or not at all like me
I really want to learn.	93%	7%
I participate regularly in class.	83%	17%
I could have learned more at school this year.	67%	33%
I often need extra help with school.	52%	48%
I often find it hard to pay attention in class because I'm worrying about problems at home.	33%	67%

How often do your teachers talk with you one-on-one about . . .

	Never	A few times a year	Once a month	A few times a month	Once a week or more
interrupting or not behaving in class.	51%	22%	8%	11%	8%
your plans for college or work after high school.	41%	30%	8%	14%	8%
your interests and things important to you.	40%	28%	9%	16%	7%
how you are NOT doing well in school.	38%	26%	11%	18%	8%
how you ARE doing well in school.	28%	26%	12%	22%	13%

Have you ever thought about dropping out of school? If yes, have you ever talked to a teacher about dropping out or things you can do to stay in school?

	Yes	No
thought about dropping out	23%	77%
talked to teacher about dropping out	19%	81%

Why have you thought about dropping out?

School was boring.	63%
Something else.	50%
I wasn't doing well in school.	49%
I wasn't learning anything.	32%
I needed to work for money.	27%
I had family responsibilities.	26%
Other students were bullying or harassing me.	7%
I did not feel safe traveling to and from school.	6%
I did not feel safe at school.	5%

During the past two years, have you ever skipped a class or school because...

	Yes	No
school was boring.	47%	53%
you had family responsibilities.	29%	72%
you did not complete an assignment.	28%	72%
you did not feel ready to take a test.	23%	77%
you didn't want your teachers to call on you in class	16%	84%
you did not feel safe at school.	14%	86%
you did not feel safe traveling to and from school.	12%	88%
you were being bullied or harassed by other students.	6%	94%

How much would the following steps help you to be a better student?

	Help a lot	Help a little	Not at all
More examples of how the things I learn in school matter in the real world.	53%	39%	9%
More one-on-one attention from teachers.	40%	48%	12%
Classes that are more challenging.	33%	43%	24%

School-specific results

Adding to the survey responses reported above, students in each participating high school also created their own set of questions for classmates to answer. The number, type, and subject of these school-specific questions vary remarkably, no doubt reflecting the day-to-day differences in conditions from one school to the next—and their powerful impact on student concerns. At Bellaire, arguably one of the most rigorous high schools in the district, the pressure students feel to succeed tops the list of concerns. At Reagan, a recent spate of in-school fights has pushed concerns about violence to the fore. At Lee, fixing up the school's bathrooms and replacing unused tennis courts with a basketball court are among the issues commanding student attention.

Bellaire High School (n=77)

How much do you agree with the following statement? My teachers do a good job coordinating with one another when major projects are due.

At Bellaire High School, where over half the students are enrolled in Honors classes, the school-specific survey leaves little doubt about what is on students' minds. Covering topics like teachers' grading systems, availability of guidance counselors, amounts of homework, scheduling of tests, and students' attitudes about cheating, virtually all of the 45 survey questions deal in some fashion or other with the enormous pressure students feel to achieve and succeed. The students' responses paint a complex picture, sometimes conflicting, often provocative. Here's a sample. [Note: The "agree" column includes "strongly agree" and "somewhat agree" responses; the same is true for "disagree."]

	Agree	Disagree
Success in school is highly valued in my family.	97%	3%
Students at Bellaire know how to "play the GPA game" and make decisions on what courses to take and when based on GPA.	81%	19%
Teachers give me adequate feedback about my progress in class before report cards come out.	70%	30%
My teachers explain their grading systems fully and clearly.	67%	33%
The GPA scale at Bellaire H.S. should be changed to a 4.0 system with no extra point for pre-AP or AP courses.	40%	60%
When I try to choose or change a course, I learn about certain rules for the very first time—rules that I feel that I should have known about from the beginning.	74%	26%
I have adequate choice in choosing what course to take and whether or not to stay in a course in which I am struggling.	69%	31%
In general, the information and/or support I receive from my	68%	32%

counselor are helpful.		
My counselor is available to answer my questions about scheduling and academic issues.	64%	36%
My teachers give tests on days that are not designated test days for their subjects but call them "quizzes."	79%	21%
My teachers comply with school requirements for test days and major homework assignments.	57%	43%
My teachers provide a schedule of assignments so that I am able to plan for assignments weeks ahead of time.	52%	48%
My teachers do a good job coordinating with one another when major projects are due.	47%	53%
My teachers generally know how I am doing in my other classes, especially when I am struggling.	26%	73%
When I am sick, I come to school anyway because I will have too much make-up work if I stay home.	82%	18%
I am required to attend athletic practice or club meetings even if I am failing or struggling and need to spend time doing schoolwork instead.	25%	75%
Bellaire's competitive culture encourages cheating.	60%	40%
It is OK to cheat in order to get ahead.	22%	78%
Cheating is not cheating if you don't get caught.	14%	86%

Chavez High School (n=97)

How much do you agree with the following statements:

- ...My teachers are knowledgeable in the areas that they teach.*
- ...My teachers give me recognition when I am improving in my classes.*
- ...My principal is open-minded.*
- ...My principal visits my classroom.*

At Chavez High School, which opened in August 2001, the students' school-specific survey plumbs the issues of teacher quality and student-teacher relationships. Faced with two principals in three years, students also ask questions about the principal's role and presence in the school. Nearly all the 58 questions give statements that students are to agree or disagree with, but interestingly, students generally word these statements in a positive fashion—"My teachers are fair," for instance, as opposed to the more negative, "My teachers have shown discrimination towards me." Here are a number of the questions, along with selected responses about students' favorite teacher. [Note: The "agree" column includes "strongly agree" and "somewhat agree" responses; the same is true for "disagree."]

Teachers...	Agree	Disagree
My teachers are knowledgeable in the areas that they teach.	86%	13%
My teachers acknowledge me when I am successful in class.	84%	16%
My teachers carry themselves in a good manner.	83%	17%
My teachers see me as an individual person.	81%	19%
My teachers are responsible.	78%	22%
My teachers care about me.	77%	23%
I trust my teachers.	76%	24%
My teachers treat all students equally.	76%	24%
My teachers give me enough time to complete my work.	75%	25%
My teachers acknowledge me when I am doing poorly in class.	72%	28%
My teachers give everyone a chance to voice his/her opinion.	71%	28%
My school hires good teachers.	68%	32%
My teachers give me recognition when I am improving in my classes.	67%	33%
I can talk to my teachers about problems outside of their class.	62%	37%
When my teachers have bad days, they take it out on the class.	61%	39%
My teachers expect too much from me.	48%	51%
My teachers have made me feel stupid or dumb in class.	36%	64%
My teachers know about my life outside of school.	25%	75%
I think my teachers give me bad grades because they dislike me.	23%	77%
My teacher has made offensive comments about my culture.	14%	86%
Principal...	Agree	Disagree
My principal supports the students by attending games, plays, and student events.	68%	32%
My principal is open-minded.	58%	42%
My principal interacts with the students.	47%	53%
My principal visits my classroom.	43%	57%
My principal asks students about their opinions on possible new rules.	29%	70%

Describe your favorite teachers. What qualities made you feel like you could learn from this person?

- My favorite teacher interacts with the students and isn't afraid of a challenge, she is always there for her students 110%. I will learn from her because she is someone I can trust...

- they never scream at us. they let us talk and because they let us, we are good and aren't too loud. they always try their best to explain whatever you need help on. they go at our pace in doing the work.

- ...the one I like the most was my old history teacher. She always connected with us on a personal level. She gave us a lot of work, but she made sure that we understood it before we moved on. And the thing that I liked the most was how she could connect almost anything we were studying with our life today.

- My math teacher, she is great. She uses a variety of methods for learning, she challenges us and rewards for effectiveness of the students, she quizzes on recent information...if necessary, she teaches one-on-one. She puts effort into her students' learning.

- My favorite teachers don't judge you before they get to know you, and they know how to teach the subject, and they make it interesting for you to learn. They make you feel comfortable with them because they talk about their life, and it makes you seem that you know your teacher.

- They don't put you down or make you look bad in front of other people. They stay on your level and actually talk to you. They don't call on you when they know you don't know the answer.

- My favorite teachers are caring, funny, and inspiring. Those qualities make me want to learn and pay attention. I like it when my teachers are like this.

- My favorite teachers have always believed that I could do my best if I just put my mind to it and not be lazy. They are always there to help students instead of just letting them get all confused on their own.

- Ms. M— is my favorite teacher, because...it's less of a teach-learn situation and more of a display of ideas. There are corrections, of course, no one is ever steered in the wrong direction, but it's a calm and comfortable environment. I can honestly say that my English class is my favorite class because of the teacher. Even if my teacher wasn't my teacher, it would be hard to extinguish the fire burning for it...

- They let me know exactly what I have to do. They let me know when I'm doing a good job...

- My favorite teachers all have one thing in common, they relate school work to real life problems and how it relates to you and your future profession.

Lee High School (n=112)

Question: Would you like teachers visiting your home? Answer: " No, because they might judge me from where i live and feel sorry for me and stuff like that, and i'd rather they not feel sorry for me..."

More so than at any other school, the survey questions asked by Lee students cast an extraordinarily wide net, perhaps reflecting the students' diversity (over 40% speak limited English) as well as the array of challenges facing their school. The survey includes, for example, questions about the value placed on school success by parents and about opportunities to learn outside the classroom; it tests student support for fixing up the school's bathrooms and for replacing the tennis courts no one ever uses with a basketball court. Picking up on an issue from their reading of *What Kids Can Do's Fires in the Bathroom: Advice for Teachers from High School Students* (The New Press), Lee students also ask about the possibility of teachers visiting their homes and neighborhoods to learn more about students' personal circumstances. Here are some of their questions, plus a sample of their open-ended responses about teacher visits. [Note: The "agree" column includes "strongly agree" and "somewhat agree" responses; the same is true for "disagree."]

		Agree	Disagree
Success in school is highly valued in my family.		87%	13%
My parents are aware of what and how I am doing in school.		75%	24%
Teachers give me adequate feedback about my progress in class before report cards come out.		75%	25%
I feel safe from being insulted, embarrassed, or harassed by adults at my school.		49%	51%
Our school provides ample opportunities for learning outside the classroom.		48%	52%
I know all of the administrators in my school by name.		42%	58%
I know all of the counselors in my school by name.		39%	61%
		Very often/ Sometimes	Rarely/ Not at all
I would use an outside basketball court if Lee had one.		80%	20%
		Agree	Disagree
I would like to see cleaner restrooms.		96%	4%
		No	Maybe
I would be willing to help monitor and keep the restrooms clean.	Yes	18%	29%
	52%		

Would you like teachers visiting your home? Why or why not?

- NO, because I don't feel comfortable being in class after she sees where and how I live.
- NO, NOT REALLY, I REALLY WOULDN'T LIKE TEACHERS BEING ALL UP IN MY PERSONAL BUSINESS...
- Depends on the teacher, it would help them understand better about why I don't come to school everyday, or why I have late work...
- no, because they might judge me from where i live and feel sorry for me and stuff like that, and i'd rather they not feel sorry for me...
- Yes and no. I would like them to meet my family. But if the teacher tells my parents something I need to do and I don't want to do it, I wouldn't like that.
- no, because that is the only place I don't see them.
- Yeah, I don't see why not. I don't mind. I think it will be cool to have teachers come over and have a chance to talk outside of school in their own time. That really shows that they care.

How do you feel about teachers receiving a guided tour of the community where you live?

- This, I feel, is more comfortable, because they're not at your house. But they can at least see in what conditions we are. Perhaps they might understand sometimes the problems we go through as teenagers.
- There's not much to look at... they can do it if they want to...
- I don't agree because they are teachers not inspectors. They shouldn't be worried about that.
- It may help some, but where they live doesn't exactly say what goes on in the house or what kind of life i really live.
- I don't mind, but we are not responsible for his or her injuries that may or may not occur.

Madison High School (n = 206)

How much do you agree with the following statements:

...My teachers don't give up on students.

...My know how to motivate me to learn.

The seven questions asked by students at Madison High School push on issues of teacher performance, availability, and fairness. Madison, technically a suburban school, has enjoyed a remarkably steady student enrollment over the past five years. Two-thirds of the students are African-American, one-third are Hispanic. Over 80 percent of the faculty is African-American.

	Agree	Disagree
My teachers understand and respect different cultures.	80%	21%
My teachers don't give up on students.	75%	25%
My teachers offer tutorials when I need help.	75%	25%
Adults are available at school to talk to me when I have a problem.	66%	34%
My teachers grade fairly.	59%	41%
My teachers know how to motivate me to learn.	56%	44%
Most of my classes are challenging and exciting.	55%	45%

Reagan High School (n=144)

Question: Why do some students think fighting is the only way to solve a problem?

Answer: "Because they weren't raised to believe that walking away is an alternative."

The 17 questions on the Reagan High School survey reflect two pressing student concerns. The first involves the school's new Academy structure, about which students have mixed feelings in these early stages. "The strengths of the new academy structure are not few," states one student who continues, "You are able to specialize in certain areas. You get to know other people who are striving to do the same or along the same path. The teachers are strong when put together." Another student asserts, "I don't really like it, because you don't get to see as many people as last year and it really isolates you."

The second concern involves the high incidence of fights among students in the opening weeks of the 2003-2004 school year. When asked if they'd ever been in a fight, a full 48 percent of the students responded "yes." When asked how safe they felt in school, a third of the students indicated they rarely felt safe, although on a brighter note, more than two-thirds said there was at least one adult at Reagan they could go to for support and help. Here is a sample of student responses to two of the survey's open-ended questions about school violence and fighting.

What offends you and causes you to fight?

- when the other person is talking mess
- people who lie
- just when people disrespect me
- people talking about family
- NAME CALLING AND PUSHING
- racism
- when people don't leave you alone when you repeatedly tell them

Why do some students think fighting is the only way to solve a problem?

- because they will quit messing with you after you fight them.
- People need to defend themselves.
- Honestly, I think they just do it to show off.
- Because they are protecting their pride.
- BECAUSE IT IS FUN.
- because they think they can win.
- Because they don't think of talking it over with the other person.
- REVENGE OR POPULARITY
- Because the student probably went to the administration about it and they did nothing to help the situation.
- TO SHOW YOU AREN'T AFRAID.
- because after you fight the problem ends, and everyone goes on about their business
- Because they weren't raised to believe that walking away is an alternative.

For complete survey results go online to these URL's:

Common Survey Part A

<http://www.surveymonkey.com/Report.asp?U=25226560975>

Common Survey Part B

<http://www.surveymonkey.com/Report.asp?U=25267523766>

Chavez High School

<http://www.surveymonkey.com/Report.asp?U=27389295565>

Reagan High School

<http://www.surveymonkey.com/Report.asp?U=27427267834>

Furr High School

<http://www.surveymonkey.com/Report.asp?U=27287514999>

Lee High School

<http://www.surveymonkey.com/Report.asp?U=26713391463>

Bellaire High School

<http://www.surveymonkey.com/Report.asp?U=26260451917>

Madison High School

<http://www.surveymonkey.com/Report.asp?U=26100918493>

Scarborough High School

<http://www.surveymonkey.com/Report.asp?U=25550937681>



Teacher Planning Meetings

In Houston, a team of ten teachers from the seven *SAA* high schools spent hours in planning meetings over the summer of 2003, preparing for their school's involvement in *SAA* with staff from the Houston Writing Project. The conversation transcribed below, from a meeting held in late July, focuses on issues regarding the student survey and the Youth Summit. But its tangents also offer compelling insight into the kinds of concerns expressed by teachers—as well as the commitment required of them—when they undertake a project like this on behalf of their students and school.

Transcript from July 2003 *SAA* Meeting

Note: Names used below are not those of actual participants.

Maria: ...These are great open-ended [survey] questions! Any school could use them.

Christine: You know, another one [question] I thought of—maybe because I was thinking of my own biological children—was: “Do your teachers give you adequate instructions and guidelines for major projects?” My own kid said to me, “Mom, I just got this assignment, but [the teacher] didn't tell me how to do it.” And I just thought, “If I wasn't a teacher—what do the parents of those other kids do?” This wasn't at our school, but it got me thinking, “Gosh, are we giving our kids as much as they need, background-wise?” When you're a parent and you're a teacher, all of a sudden you bring a lot more to the classroom, I've noticed.

Several teachers murmur in agreement.

Bill: ...And the kids will think of other questions...

Several teachers (replying at once): They sure will. Lots of them. Because there are all sorts of layers to school we don't always see.

Amber: We had a parent that brought up an interesting point a couple of days ago. At our school we have a real problem with kids either living alone or with other teenagers. But she said: “You know, *every* kid has a parent. Even if they don't really live with an adult, there's somebody, probably, that you could contact that would influence them more.” And so I was thinking of a question like, “My school knows who really takes care of me” or “My prime caretakers are...” or something like that.

Sheila: That's a great question! I had that same thing come up when I was teaching in Chicago. We took this kid in—he was having nosebleeds—and nobody knew where his parents were or who they were.

Bill: It reminds me of that part we talked about in the book [*Fires in the Bathroom*], about teachers knowing the neighborhoods where their kids live.

Christine: Well, teachers don't live in the neighborhoods that they teach in anymore. They just don't.

Amber: When I started teaching at my school, just in terms of the community, it was just a really big shock to me... The first year, I had a student from Pakistan, and I couldn't get his parents there, so I went to his home—which upset a lot of teachers, because they felt like that put you at risk. But it was such an eye-opener for me. You could smell curry when you walked in. And the mother was a professional. She'd graduated [from college] in India; she was brilliant, but she didn't speak any English. It was a life-changing experience for the young man and an eye-opener for me. And because I'm the varsity soccer coach, I take the girls home a lot of times. One time I took a girl home to a run-down motel! And I thought, "Oh my gosh, it's no wonder she never has a clean soccer uniform. She doesn't even have a place to wash clothes." So, it's powerful to be able to go to their homes.

Paulette (*after a pause*): So, any concerns, questions?

Amber: The [Youth] Summit itself, do we know how many kids can go? And what the format is?

Bill: And the timeline, too.

Amber: Also, who's going to be there. Who is the audience? Our students are (*pauses*) very selective about whom they'll talk to and whom they won't talk to. They're kind of defensive, and so they're going to need to know that.

Amber: Our kids are not very trusting, and they're used to people saying [bad] things about them. And so a major concern that we have is that a lot will be said on the 13th [at the Youth Summit], and then they're gonna say, "Oh, see," and then nothing happens. So what we did was establish already a group of kids from every grade level that are going to spearhead any plan of action—even if it's something that might be for a day or something that'll take a month. But we already have a group of kids who are going to be public and vocal and out-spoken, saying, "This is what we're doing, this is what you said on the survey, this is what is happening."

Sheila: Is that one of your classes?

Amber: It's our Unity Council. At our school we have five academies, so we have Unity Council comprised of teachers and kids from each academy. So we're going to have them—once the [survey] results come back—choose a topic, make a committee, and then start publicizing it. Because I think what's going to be more important to our kids than anything is that they see stuff happening all the time. Because if something happens one day and then a month goes by, they're going to be like, "Oh, you didn't do anything."

Bill: So we talk about reflection and all that, but what we should really try to make the kids understand is that this is an entire year's project. Even though the 13th of November

will be sort of a cumulative moment, they'll be involved in that ongoing reflection, then the school taking action, the teachers—

Paulette: I would think a big piece would be just that wonderful reflection—like, “These are the things we suggested. Are we seeing them happen or not?”

Maria: And they may happen in ways that are sort of subversive, too. So if they can begin to say, “Oh, yeah, my teacher now is handing out a syllabus, and doing some hands-on kinds of things, and she’s telling us exactly what she wants for her project—it’s more clear now.”

Christine: And it may be, too, that on November 13th they’re bringing it to the school summit, but maybe during the year they can bring it forward [elsewhere]—have this group present to a faculty meeting or whatever, be the voice [for change] within the school.

Maria: That’s what I was thinking: the school board could have this core group of students...

Paulette: And you know who really is responsive to things like this? TEA, the state board of education. I think it would be really neat at the end of the year if you want to get all of you and maybe each of you take a student and get on a bus and go on up to TEA for one of their board meetings. They always set aside time for a special information piece—and they would love this—and they have state media there.

Sheila: And they love it when the students make the presentations.

Maria: And they love the teachers and students coming up together.

Paulette: And [they love] the writing for a real and authentic purpose. You’re writing for a real purpose: “this matters to me—there is no toilet paper in the girls’ bathroom or the boys’ bathroom.” And being able to put that whole social discourse down on paper, being able to articulate that. It’s not just an assignment, with the teacher saying, “Here, you gotta write this.”

Maria: It’s interesting—they did something on a much smaller scale at Northridge when I went out to visit one of their high schools. The girls’ bathroom was beautiful! The girls decided to bring in little rugs to put by the sinks, and they had fragrances in there and nice soap. It was just a really nice place to be. It smelled good, and it was clean. And the girls took total responsibility for it. Something like that can really change your attitude, even though it’s something small.

Sheila: You know, that’s true. With my theatre arts class last year, I had each person get up and present what they thought their ideal school would physically look like. And nine times out of ten, they included landscaping or beautification projects that we don’t tend to think about. Or they’ll talk about when you walk into the classroom and teachers have things up [on the wall as decoration].

Paulette: My kind of schema here for the summit day was not as a culminating day. It was more just the bare facts, like here is what we did. Then the real work starts after that day: “Okay, now let’s take these things and let’s see what we can do.”

Christine: Well, and we have to prioritize them, too, and pick something that we can change at our school.

Paulette: And what kinds of action can we take? The real work—the *real* work—comes after the 13th. And it's ongoing. Did we pick the number one thing, and did we articulate well enough to bring about change? What kinds of changes did we see? So to me, this [November 13th summit] is just the report, and what's important is taking the kids with ownership and working with them through this whole year.

Discussion ensues about the logistics of common and school-specific survey questions and the numbers of students involved in random sampling.

Maria: I thought, when we talked last time, that there were those 13 questions that we all had to use—and that's what you all are calling the national survey, right? And that we as a group were going to provide seven more questions, and then as [an individual] school, we could add our own questions. So I was thinking that it was just one survey. And it was questions 1 through 20 or 1 through 25 were all common, and then 26 through however many extra you wanted might be different.

Bill: So the kids who took the national survey would also take their school's survey.

Christine: Then after the random sample takes the national survey, anybody else who wanted to could take it.

Maria: Well, I think we need to make this as simple as possible. We're here meeting after meeting after meeting still trying to get a view of it. And these kids are coming in, and our peers, and they're going to go "What?" This is just a small thing in their lives, and they're not going to put time into understanding it, if we don't have a clear view of it ourselves.

Amber: What I feel will interest my students is if they really believe—and it's really true—that this is possibly going to bring about changes in our school. Because they hate our school. It's a very old, run-down, dilapidated school. I think that if we say, "Okay, now, you guys are going to present this to the faculty, and we're going to call the newspaper, and it's *you* who are doing this. And so if teachers are really bad or the restrooms—and they're horrendous—this [SAA project] may affect this. This may be the thing that brings about change." And so they have to really know that or otherwise they're just going to put anything [down on the survey], they could care less. I know that when we did our community survey last year, a lot of the kids just slept, they didn't do it. Or when they took their pre-TAAS test, they didn't care, they just slept or marked whatever. Somehow I've got to create ownership. Somehow I've got to create the idea of change.

Paulette: But I think that that's where your questions that your groups come up with come in: "This is pertinent to me, and if I make up these questions and I know that my other friends have these same kind of concerns, then how do we go about that and how do we go about making change?"

Sheila: And what are the results?

Paulette: And how can you say this is going to bring about school reform when we really don't know [what issues people care about]. But if we don't start somewhere, you can never do it. We try our best, and not every time do we win. But we look at the problems and address them and get those kids to really believe in that—that we could possibly change.

Amber: Ironically, my first year of teaching, which was only two years ago, I was so appalled that these poor kids had to go to restrooms like that. I mean, there was no soap, there was no toilet paper. I cleaned houses for 15 years while I went to school, so I brought in all my stuff, and I started cleaning. But the kids weren't taking ownership of the restrooms. And I put up signs and I put up pictures, and they would mark all over them. And so my goal for this year is in my community these kids are going to take ownership of their restroom. And to me, this is a good way to start that.

Maria: I think that we have to realize, too, that if the bathrooms are not a high priority, [the kids] are *not* going to take ownership. Something else might—if they're fine with the bathrooms, and it just bugs you, then they really won't care. But if the bathrooms are a high priority, then you might be able to see something. So, I think as you go through those [survey] questions, and maybe rank them, then ask: What can we start with at the top? Where can we make the best change? What do we see that we can really come together to do?

Paulette: So the students have to decide what is important to them. Because over here, the bathrooms might be the number one priority, and in your school it might be something different. And that's the purpose of those other [school-specific survey] questions—those questions that your students generate. What do we have in common? What is separate at our campuses? And can we take one or two things and change them?

Sheila: Another point, too, is to tell the kids, "The school is willing to make some changes, but sometimes we as adults change things that you all don't care about, so this is your chance to tell us what your priorities are."

Bill: We don't just want to spin the wheels of change...

Amber: I always start out by telling my students that there's a difference between being a tourist and being a citizen. If they're going to be tourists in their school, they're never going to get what they want out of it. But if they're citizens—

Paulette: But to bring about change—or the possibility of change—they have to be able to say, "These are the 1, 2, 3 things that we can change." And it may not be the bathroom—it may be something that you don't think about. But if this is really important to them, and they have a real purpose for all the reading and the writing and the discussing, then who knows what the outcome could be?

The discussion moves on to details regarding the survey and the summit, and then begins to wrap up.

Amber: You know, we read the [*Fires in the Bathroom*] book and talked about how powerful and how good change can be. And I just think that this [SAA project] is so great to follow up with after that. I mean no one likes change—teachers especially don't like change—and yet change can be the greatest thing that can happen to you.

Youth Summit

Here we provide excerpted transcripts from several student presentations made at Houston's Youth Summit, *Voices in the Hall*, on November 13, 2003.



Bellaire High School

Students present their survey data via four skits that reflect the four main themes of their findings: student/teacher relationships, student/counselor relationships, school/social environment, and family factors that influence student learning. They conclude each skit by lining up and reading aloud protest-like signs that bear messages related to the survey findings of that particular vignette.

Skit One: Student/Teacher Relationships

Students present two short scenes that portray ineffective and effective teachers. In the first, an unresponsive and authoritarian teacher ignores students' requests for review, re-testing, and extra credit and instead repeats his only response to the class' poor performance on a recent test: students must study harder. The second scene shows a more responsive teacher, one who asks students why they did poorly on the test, then compromises with them to incorporate some review and re-testing of the previous material before moving on to the next unit.



Sign Messages:

- Thirty-five percent of students agree that their teachers don't understand them.
- Thirty-five percent of students agree that their teachers are not helpful.
- How can we fix this?
- A better learning environment + more interactive teachers = stronger teacher/student relationships.

Skit Two: Student/Counselor Relationships

The scene depicts a busy school guidance office. A counselor sits at her desk, constantly on the phone, replying over her shoulder to students who seek her assistance to come back tomorrow. The next day, when students return, her assistant informs them that the counselor has taken the day off.



Sign Messages:

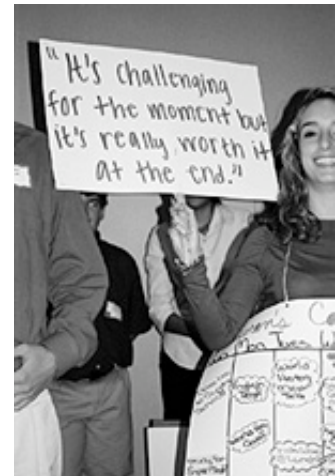
- Many students don't know who their administrators are.
- Many students don't know the rules.
- They feel they are not well informed.
- They want their counselors to be more dedicated.
- Most students wish that their counselors knew their names.
- When counselors aren't available, whom do we turn to?

Skit Three: School Environment

A student stands before the audience, wearing a large calendar that hangs from her neck like an albatross. She is assaulted by a series of friends, classmates, teachers, and her parents, who one after another make urgent demands on her limited time. She cannot possibly accommodate all their requests.

Sign Messages:

- The stress level is too hard to handle.
- There's too much pressure.
- How do I handle all of this?
- Should I cheat?
- Should I pretend to be sick?
- The stress of things makes my body sick.
- It's challenging at the moment, but it's really worth it in the end.



Skit Four: Family Factors

Student contestants compete in a game show called GPA: Greedy Point Achiever that details the pressures students face in their quest for college admission. Afterward, a student greets his father at the end of the day: "Good evening, Daddy, I got an A!"

Sign Messages:

To conclude their presentation, all the Bellaire students take turns stepping forward to hold up their sign, each speaking just one word (sometimes two) at a time.

At → Bellaire → High School → students → have → input. → Students → ask. → Students → listen. → Students → answer. → Students → know. → Students → care. → Students → speak out. → It's → time → for → a change. → It's → time → for → students → to → be → heard → !



Chavez High School

Chavez students present their survey data through skits that portray aspects of good and bad teaching.

Scene: Two "good students" work quietly at their desks before class begins. In the row behind them, a struggling student peers over their shoulders trying to read their work. In the next row back, two students talk and laugh. The bell rings. Two male students stroll into the room, clearly late for class, with the teacher hurrying in just behind them.

Teacher: Mark, Rene, you're late again.

Rene: So are you.

Teacher: This is not open for discussion. Just sign the tardy sheet and sit down and be quiet.

The boys take their seats in the back row. The teacher paces up and down the classroom, busily writing on a clipboard.

Struggling student (waving her hand frantically, desperate for the teacher's attention): Miss, Miss, please, Miss, I need your help.

Teacher (aside to the audience): This one's always asking questions. I just taught this stuff last week. (To the student) Try reading the directions.

Struggling student: But, Miss—

Teacher: Just read the directions carefully, and I'm sure you'll understand.

The teacher leaves to answer a question from one of the good students. She gently pats the student's shoulder, responding with encouragement and a smile. A narrator offstage freezes the scene.

Struggling student (addressing the audience): The teacher always ignores me. She only pays attention to the smart kids. It's so frustrating. I don't know what I'm doing, and she doesn't want to help me. Why does she help them anyway? They already know the material. And then she often says to me, "Why can't you be more like them?" I don't know about the others, but it makes me feel stupid. It makes me feel like I can't do anything right.

Teacher (resumes her pacing up and down the rows, clipboard still in hand, then stops to admonish the two chatting girls): Please be quiet, she's trying to study.

Girl: Actually, she's trying to help me because you won't.



Narrator freezes the scene.

Girl (*to the audience*): I'm so tired of this! I come to school every day, and every day I go home feeling like I haven't learned anything. The teacher never helps us when we have a problem. Aren't teachers supposed to help us, encourage us, motivate us? Well, she's not doing that for us.

Teacher (*approaches the back row, where Rene is now asleep on his desk*): Why aren't you studying? You need to study this.

Rene lifts his head and mumbles something inaudible.

Teacher (*incredulously*): You're closing your eyes and you're studying? You need to wake up and to study. Don't come complaining to me when you flunk the test.

The scene freezes.

Rene (*to the audience*): I know this looks bad. But it's just hard. I have to go to work right after school, then I have to stay up late to do my homework. It doesn't help that the teacher is always on my back. She's always putting us down. I thought teachers were supposed to help and to care. I guess I was wrong.

The scene freezes a last time.

Teacher (*to audience*): I just don't understand these kids. These two students (*nods to the pair in the front row*) are such perfect angels, and these (*gesturing towards the others*) are just horrible! They're rude, they complain too much, and they are so non-compliant.

The bell rings; the classroom empties.

In several contrasting scenes, a fictional teacher named Miss Martinez models the qualities and behaviors that Chavez students want to see in their teachers. For instance:

- Instead of chastising students who are late to class, Miss Martinez waits a few moments for them to arrive before she begins her lesson. She encourages them to try to be on time.
- Miss Martinez monitors students' progress on homework and collects their papers. She gently informs one girl who hasn't finished of the consequence the class has agreed to regarding late work.
- Miss Martinez conducts a quick review of the previous lesson before launching into new material.
- When a student asks her a question about the material, Miss Martinez responds readily, arranging to meet the student after class for some extra help.
- When an over-eager student blurts out his answer out of turn, Miss Martinez asks him good-naturedly to wait until she calls on him the next time.
- When a student gives a correct answer, Miss Martinez offers praise and encouragement.

Furr High School

Students convey the themes of their survey findings by staging several mock job interviews between school administrators and teacher candidates. The questions asked give insight to students' concerns about their relationships with teachers. Following the interviews, a student (posing as teacher) reads a letter from an anonymous educator.



The following brief scene is a composite of several mock interviews.

Principal: Why are you applying for this job?

Candidate: Since I was a little kid, I've always wanted to be a teacher. It's just been a really strong desire.

Principal: Do you like kids?

Candidate: Yes, I love kids.

Principal: What about disruptive kids?

Candidate: I'm all about discipline. Well, I'm not that strict. It depends on what the student did.

Principal: If a kid was cursing or just being straight out disruptive, you'd take a paddle to him or what?

Candidate: If I were allowed to do that maybe I would.

Principal: Okay, so you don't use the paddle, what do you do?

Candidate: Basically kick him out of class. Make him sit out in the hall. I don't really care.

Principal: You say you like kids, but you don't really care what they do?

Candidate: I don't care what they do, no. I like the kids that listen to me. I'm not going to tolerate the kids who don't listen to me. I don't care what they do.

Principal: Shouldn't you as a teacher be able to adjust to the students?

[Later] **Principal:** Each student is an individual, with

Other mock interview questions of teacher candidates

- Every class has different people, with different abilities. Would you have the same objectives for every class or would you change your lessons?
- Say a kid isn't doing any work. What would you do?
- Here's another scenario. Say a kid is asking questions all the time—question after question, never stopping. What would you do?
- What if a kid threatens the school? What action would you take?
- If a student told you she was being abused, would you try to help her?
- What makes you different?
- What can you contribute to this school?
- What type of attitude do you have?
- What books would you assign your students?
- Do you like to lead students on field trips?
- Would you attend games or other school events?

their own style. What if a student has a style you don't like, would you not like him?

Candidate: No, every student is unique. They all have their own individual style. Unless it's offensive or inappropriate, then I'd say something.

Principal: What if it's a style different from yours? Say he's a rapper, with baggy pants falling down, would you tell him to pull his pants up to his chest?

Candidate: If it's the school policy I would, but otherwise, no.

Principal: So you wouldn't discriminate against kids for what they like. Okay, that's very good.

[Later] Principal: What if a kid asked you a question about your personal business, would you answer him?

Candidate: No, I wouldn't tell him my personal business.

Principal: If he asked how many kids you had?

Candidate: Oh, sure, I'd tell him how many kids I had. I'd talk about things like that.

Principal: So you are willing to let the kids get to know you a little and to be like a counselor. That's good, because teachers in my school need to care.

Anonymous teacher's letter read at the end of the skit by the last student to play a mock teacher candidate:

Let me see if I got this right. You want me to go into that room with all those kids and fill their every waking moment with a love of learning. And I'm supposed to instill a sense of pride in their ethnicity, modify their destructive behavior, observe them for signs of abuse, and even censor their t-shirt messages and dress habits.

You want me to wage war on drugs and sexually transmitted disease, check their backpacks for weapons, and raise their self-esteem.

You want me to teach them patriotism, good citizenship, fair play, sportsmanship, how to register to vote, how to balance a checkbook, and how to apply for a job.

I am to feed them breakfast, check their head for lice, maintain a safe environment, offer advice, write recommendation letters for students' employment and scholarships, encourage respect for cultural diversity of others, and oh yes, make sure that I give the girls in my class 50 percent of my attention.

My contract requires me to work on my time after school, evenings, and weekends grading papers and deconstructing test data. Also, I must spend my summer vacations at my own expense working towards advanced certification and a

master's degree. And on my own time, you want me to attend community and faculty meetings, PTA meetings, school events, and participate in staff development.

I am to be a paragon of virtue, larger than life, such that my very presence will awe my students into being obedient and respectful of authority.

I am to pledge allegiance to my family values and this school administration and to incorporate technology into the learning experience, monitor websites, and relate personally with each student. This includes deciding who might be potentially dangerous or liable to commit a crime in school.

I am to make sure all my students pass the mandatory state exams, even those who do not come to school regularly or complete any of their assignments. Plus I am to make sure that all of the students with handicaps get an equal education regardless of the extent of their mental or physical handicaps.

I am to communicate regularly with the parents by letter, telephone, email, newsletter, progress reports, and report cards.

All of this I am to do with just a piece of chalk, a computer, a few books, a bulletin board, a big smile, and a starting salary that qualifies my family for food stamps.

You expect me to do all this and yet you expect me not to pray?

Lee High School

Dressed in matching black t-shirts bearing their school's name, Lee students present their survey results in a skit that features rap performances.

Scene: *The anchor desk of a local TV news station.*

Announcer: Good morning, ladies and gentlemen, and welcome to the 10 o'clock news on Channel 713. It's Thursday, and Jose is going to tell us what's going on in the city of Houston this week.

Jose: Thanks, Crystal. Reliant Stadium is busy this week as workers are getting ready for Super Bowl XXXVIII. Over 10,000 volunteers are involved in this undertaking. The city of Houston has been planting trees, creating waterfalls, fixing parks, and preparing for the onslaught of thousands of people coming to town. This is a unique opportunity for the city of Houston to show how very special it is.

Announcer: Thanks, Jose. Now we're going live to Lee High School, one of HISD's finest schools. The students in sophomore English classes have been reading *Fires in the Bathroom*. Through this book, students have realized that their voice is important to their school. And with this in mind, they decided to take a survey to see what students want. A few weeks ago they surveyed over 100 students, and they are going to show us the results in an unusual way. Arturo, are you there?

Arturo: This is Arturo live from Lee High School. The students are excited about the results of their survey and are going to share them now. Students, are you ready?

Lee Students (take turns performing the following rap, called *Voices in the Hallways*, with accompanying hip-hop):

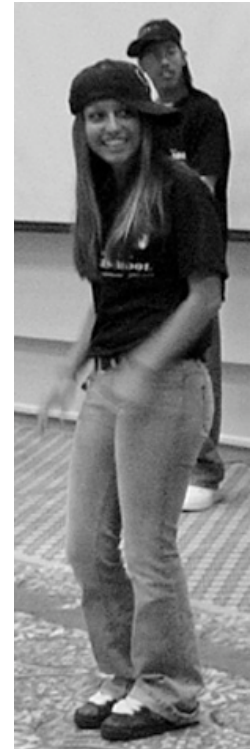
Have you ever wondered
While you ponder in your mind
Asking questions talking to yourself
To see what you could find
Just to realize the inner
Is trying to come about
So all my people rise up
Students it's time to speak out
And make choices with your voices
We come from 72 countries
For this we are pleased
We speak over 40 languages
Lee students are unique and free
We have Asians, African-Americans and
white students too
Lee students are special
And this is the truth
As thoughts multiply
Add them up 79%
For a basketball court outside
For people to show their skills
And play against each other
Full court or half it really doesn't matter
You may play together
Maybe apart
The NBA needs more players
This is where it starts
59% of the students really want to learn.



Because we all want an education that we earn
But someone must be shown
Because we need a leader too
Show us the road teachers
And we will follow you
We all want a teacher
Who actually wants to teach us
It's not all about the money
But if you learn how to reach us
Then you can really teach us
But teachers remember to hear us
And for all the substitutes relax and teach don't fear us
89% of us students want our restrooms clean
And 52% are willing to help keep them fresh
and squeaky-clean
So after this tell us what you guys think
About we the students at Lee
Is it just us or does our voice really mean
Something to society
Tell us if you agree
And we'll be on our way to the top
Where everyone wants to be
We decided we didn't want teachers in our homes
The majority did agree
We said it was too personal
And we should have the choice you see
But what we really want is for
Our teachers to know our neighborhoods
Find out where we shop and play
It will open your eyes to lots that's good
Understand this is just our way
But let us also show you places
That really aren't the safest
Understand we've made the choices
To stay away from those places
We hope your heart rejoices
There are gangs and drugs and guns
Sometimes there are people on the run
We may not live in suburbs like some
But we still love our homes and have some fun
See our churches, synagogues, mosques, and temples too
Find out we are special in our own way, that's the truth!
64% of us want to say
Our teachers have forgotten to show us the way



Most don't talk to us about our lives after school
But please, we want you to help us
With plans for our future too
54% of our teachers don't know what is important to us
There are no discussions on our interests, goals, and dreams
We really want you to make a fuss over us
Even though we're in our teens
But a whopping 75% of us agree the teachers help us
Telling us our progress
Before report cards come out and surprise or scare us
Most of us say we don't know our administrators by name
And that goes for counselors too
We need some help here
It needs to be made clear
On just who runs all of our schools!
And last but not least
Before we take our seats
We want to include one last tool
We want you teachers to smile and laugh
We want you teachers to believe in us the best
We want you teachers to love teaching school
Can't you see we really want to learn
We really do care
We promise if you believe in us
If this you will see
All of us students will get our degree!
The voices in the hallway are important
Listen to them if you will
You'll be a better teacher for listening
And Lee will be a better high school as well!



Arturo: Thank you for that information, students. I have been told that you took your own advice and wrote a grant proposal requesting the renovation of your bathrooms. And I heard you were granted an award, is that right?

Students (*in unison and with enthusiasm*): Yes!

Arturo: Well, that's just great. This is Arturo, live at Lee High School. Back to you in the studio.

Announcer: It is so great to hear positive reports about students in HISD. For all the reporters, we hope you have a good morning, and we'll see you for the 6 o'clock news.

Scarborough High School

Students present a videotape they produced that features two, contrasting mock classroom scenes. The small ways a teacher sets a positive tone and shows respect—or fails to do so—are the video's themes.

Take One: Fifth period, Room 315, Teacher A

Teacher A enters the classroom late and the students are moving around, shouting to each other across the room, laughing, playfully jabbing one another. It takes him several minutes to get their attention. When the students finally quiet, he asks them to work on the assignment he has placed on each of their desks. As they read it over, several students ask the teacher questions about the assignment. His response: "Read the directions." Taking the cue that their questions aren't welcome, students fall silent and dig into the assignment. Although they are seated in small groups, there is no interaction. The teacher stands idle. Someone enters the classroom and hands the teacher a note requesting that a particular student report to the vice principal's office. The teacher addresses the student out loud, saying "you're wanted in the office" and asking "what foolish thing did you do this time." When other students take an interest in the exchange, the teacher tells them it is none of their business.

Take Two: Fifth period, Room 312, Teacher B

Teacher B stands at the classroom door as students enter. She greets every student and hands him or her the day's assignment. Students take their seats quietly. The teacher begins the class by saying, "I hope everyone had a good weekend." She then calls attention to a chart at the front of the classroom (a "rapid organizer") and explains how it should help students do the assignment. She asks if there are any questions—there are and she answers them briefly. Before setting students loose on the assignment, she reviews a few ground rules; she encourages them, for example, to use dictionaries and to discuss their ideas with one another. The class, which had been quiet before as students listened carefully to the teacher's instructions, now hums with conversations among the small groups. The teacher moves freely among the groups, answering questions, prodding, and coaching students. Suddenly, one student begins to sob quietly. The teacher rushes over, puts an arm around her, and asks what is wrong. She suggests that the girl and the friend who is trying to console her take a quick break and come back when the student's tears have stopped.

Question: Where would you want to be during fifth period: in Room 312 or 315?



Project's impact

At the end of March 2004, teachers from the seven SAA high schools met to talk about sustaining the project's momentum and its immediate impact within their schools. Below are some of their comments about the project's impact.

Charlotte from Madison High School:

The greatest change is with the staff: they are listening more. [The entire faculty was very interested in how the students discussed the needs of teachers—and what makes a good teacher. Of course, they also wanted to know what kids said about them [which I didn't share]. Now there is an open door policy for students to come in and talk to both teachers and administrators. The principal has a regular time each day for students to drop by to talk. She has also expanded the advisory council to meet regularly and to include more students.]

There have been specific actions, too. For example, because of the student responses on the survey, we have taken up the issue of the school dress code again. With student input, we have relaxed it to allow for a little more variety in clothing. We're attempting to address the discipline policy and students' feeling that it is unfair. With input from students, the vice principals are reworking policies to make them more consistent and fair. And we've realized the power of student surveys and have conducted additional ones since the November Summit.

For students, it was a real surprise for them to learn that other high schools in Houston have similar problems. This was one of the many benefits of the Summit; it put their experiences in perspective. As a result of the project, the students want to be more involved than ever in school decisions and they want people to listen. They have more confidence to voice their opinions and believe, more than in the past, that their voices may make a difference. In the past, when students were unhappy, they kept it to themselves. Now they are more inclined to talk, to get help, and to press for changes.

For many teachers, it was a surprise to hear how strongly students yearn for good teachers and recognize good teaching when they see it, how they long to learn, and how they are annoyed by students who don't take learning seriously.

Chris from Chavez High School

In our small school academy there is much change. [Remarkably, a lot of it is within the faculty. We are communicating better, there is more of a bond, and we see each other

as faculty more regularly. I can't pinpoint what about the project has made this happen, but it has. And teachers and students are both checking out of the library in droves the book *Fires in the Bathroom: Advice for Teachers from High School* (by Kathleen Cushman and the Students of What Kids Can Do, The New Press, April 2003). There's simply a lot more attention being paid to relationships within the school than before.

The tough spot continues to be around leadership. Chavez is now on its third principal in as many years. This churning at the top frustrates students and teachers.

Students are clearer than ever that they want to get rid of students who don't value learning. They are serious about learning—and teaching. [Recently, there was an incident where the students pulled a teacher aside and told her what they wanted in a good teacher. Rather than being defensive, the teacher indicated that she appreciated their comments and then made changes to address their concerns. And I see instances of learning becoming much more collaborative, of students working with the teachers as partners and not as passive recipients of knowledge or, worse yet, adversaries. [In my academy, we are reading the book *The Hot Zone*, about the Ebola virus. [Working together, students and teachers are researching the impact of a virus like this on society as a whole, bringing health, science, English, math, and social studies all to bear. The curriculum has become much more dynamic.]

So, at the end of the day, it feels like everyone's voice is getting heard a little bit more in our school. And it's not just student voices. We used to feel that our voices as teachers were not heard enough, either. [Now both teachers and students are speaking up and listening to each other more.]

Diane at Lee High School

I'd have to say that the project's biggest impact has been on the students, themselves: it has given them a sense of "found worth." [They have never done anything that made them feel important until now. [Presenting at the Summit or at the recent Navidad del Barrio meeting, they learned how important their voices are in school reform. [When the school board came to visit the school and sat down and listened to them it spoke volumes.

The project has given students not only an opportunity to speak but also to be bluntly honest. [Students have told us, in ways we never understood, how horrible and wasteful school suspensions can be. They have underscored the things we'd prefer not to see: how easily kids can obtain drugs within school walls, how much time gets wasted in class without real learning, how dropping out or getting pregnant seem like legitimate alternatives to students who have fallen far behind. Things *must* change, they tell us.

They have also opened our eyes to how hip-hop can teach them language, vocabulary, stories, and lessons. They have reminded us of the importance of reaching into the middle schools and beginning our prevention efforts there. And they have taught us how

much small, concrete victories matter. When students identified the school bathrooms as a problem in their survey and then wrote and won a grant to fix up the bathrooms, you could feel the morale lift.

There's been a snowball effect. Students remain highly motivated since the November summit performance. They have far more self confidence and are vocal about their rights. Students who were failing before are now passing. It is not an overstatement to say that it has changed some students' lives. I have a student, a girl, from a very troubled home and I was afraid I'd lose her; now she hangs on to school as the thing that is saving her. This has been a magical year for these sophomore kids. I am determined to follow these same students throughout the rest of high school. I predict that their participation in the project will have a tremendous impact on their persisting in school.

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EDITING, TRANSCRIPTION, LAYOUT: What Kids Can Do, Inc.

I learned that **there is room for improvement at every school...** ... that **all of us need attention; we want to voice our opinions...** that whether you're a brain princess, a jock, or an outcast, we face many of the same situations in our schools and we all have something to offer...that **we need to learn more from each other, from one school to another...** that **we need to pool strategies for how to combat issues that cut across schools...**that you can give survey results to reflect every point you want to sell. **I learned** that **some teachers only pay attention to the good students rather than the ones that really need help...** that students want the teachers to be more human...**that teachers need to get more involved with students and stop having favorites ...**that many teachers share the same concerns as students ... that **respect between students and teachers works both ways.** **I learned** that **it's not fair to stereotype other schools as stupid, bull, dumb, or "ghetto"...** that I should have more compassion for the problems faced by fellow students and more appreciation for the efforts of other schools...**that students need to stop fighting, no more bullying, no more trashing the school...** that **we need more writers at our school to open up and connect with each other in a common interest.** **I learned** that I would like to change my school's bathrooms and teachers' attitudes towards students—help me!!!...**that students really do care about their education and safety...that it's up to us to speak out and make a difference in our schools...that together we can make big things happen.**

—Student reflections from Houston Youth Summit