



Taking Democracy in Hand

Youth Action for Educational Change in the San Francisco Bay Area

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**What Kids Can Do *with*
The Forum for Youth Investment**

What Kids Can Do, Inc. promotes the value of young people, working with teachers and other adults, on projects that combine powerful learning with public purpose. We collect and share feature stories, student work and voices, research and resources that expand current views of what constitutes challenging learning and achievement, particularly for adolescent students. We believe deeply in the contributions of youth as citizens. We put youth voices and work at the forefront of all we produce.

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The Forum for Youth Investment was created to increase the quality and quantity of youth investments and youth involvement, by promoting a “big picture” approach to planning, research, advocacy and policy development among the broad range of national organizations that help constituents and communities invest in children, youth and families. To do this, the Forum commits itself to building connections, increasing capacity and tackling persistent challenges across the allied youth fields.

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Preface

The year 2000 brought momentous change to the education of Oakland, California's fifty-five thousand public school students. Inspired by research that shows small schools better serve students—especially lower-income and of color—a coalition of reform-minded educators, community leaders, parent activists, and political heavyweights including Mayor Jerry Brown achieved what many considered near impossible. They secured a commitment from the school district to break up one or more of Oakland's large, failing high schools into small autonomous units (of no more than 400 students each) and to start from the ground up a new network of small schools. The decision made headlines in education circles around the country.

But the news had not reached the young people most affected by it. In March 2002, 200 students gathered in the cavernous auditorium of Fremont High, one of the schools (enrollment 2,250) designated for smaller units. As students learned of the emerging plans, they responded with surprise—and outrage. Whether or not they approved of the small school decision, they protested, how could the entire process of making it have failed so utterly to include them?

“If you wanted students to get behind this idea, why are we just hearing about this now? Why has no one in the administration ever explained it to us? Why didn't anyone ask us if we wanted small schools?”

“This is our school. Broken or not, it's our community. How could this happen without anyone consulting us?”

These students' questions should give long and immediate pause to school reformers everywhere. Democracy rests on the consent of the governed, and to leave out young adults from decisions about *their* schools seems a fundamental betrayal of this important principle. Besides, young people bring such valuable attributes to the decision making table: fresh approaches, a keen sense of fairness, energy, optimism, a view from the back of the classroom.

The pragmatic implications of the omission are just as profound. In high schools especially, students are fully capable of bringing down a plan from which they feel excluded, regardless of its merits. As one of the students in the audience at the Fremont High forum concluded: “You can divide us into five schools, you can divide us into 100 schools. But if the students aren't behind it, it will fail. You need—you have—to convince us to believe in this. Right now, we don't.”

Whether for reasons of principle or pragmatism, the notion of welcoming young people as active and responsible partners in school change—the focus of this paper—is long overdue.

**TAKING DEMOCRACY IN HAND:
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IN THE SAN FRANCISCO BAY AREA**

“This is the first time I’ve had something so important to participate in. It seems like I now know much more than most kids at my school—about how the education and juvenile justice systems connect, about how to analyze a speaker or writer’s perspective, about how to motivate people. It makes me want to run something myself!”

— Alan, age 14, Books Not Bars

“Who is drawn to Books Not Bars? Hip hop, Asian, Latino, white, black, pink and pierced, straight—good kids fighting a good cause. They are socially responsible and committed young people, challenging the daily injustices in the way we treat kids. They may speak at a Rotary Club on Thursday night and spend their weekend leafleting their neighborhood. And we fear them?”

— Rachel Jackson, State Field Director, Books Not Bars

The desire of community organizing groups to press their interests in the school reform movement has grown dramatically during the past ten years. Nationally and locally, new players emerge steadily while established groups add education to their agenda. A recent report documented almost 70 groups engaged in education organizing in just seven U.S. cities and the Mississippi Delta. Nowhere is this drive to participate stronger than in lower income communities and communities of color.¹

Against this backdrop, the Forum for Youth Investment and What Kids Can Do jointly launched in 2002 a small project to raise awareness about a vital component of these larger efforts. In what

¹ *Mapping the Field of Organizing for School Improvement: A Report on Education Organizing in Baltimore, Chicago, Los Angeles, the Mississippi Delta, New York City, Philadelphia, San Francisco, and Washington DC.* Institute for Education and Social Policy, New York University, August 2001. Nationwide, Research for Action found close to 200 community groups involved in education organizing in 2000.

we call “youth action for educational change,” young people work alongside adults to advocate for better schools and more supportive policies, as they learn to build and exercise power. Focusing on such youth action in the San Francisco Bay Area seemed the right place to start. Few other regions in the country can boast as many organizations working with such energy to help young people take democracy in hand, in and outside school. California Tomorrow’s recent, wide-ranging study of school reform organizing in the San Francisco Bay and Los Angeles also provided strong shoulders upon which to stand.²

More than field notes but less than a case study, this informal paper draws upon site interviews and conversations with ten Bay Area youth organizing groups, highlighting some of their burgeoning accomplishments and growing wisdom. It also sketches how their work builds, step by step, capital and capacity among participants; why youth-adult partnerships are important; where dots are being connected (between issues, between strategies, across races) and where they need connection (between youth and adult school reformers). Hoping to spur further discussion and analysis, the paper ends with a series of hard questions relevant to youth activists and adult partners everywhere—with much of the work in the Bay Area pointing to promising answers.

If readers remember only one message, though, we hope it will be this. What these young activists want is not just a detailed list of specific demands or outcomes. What they also seek urgently is the *opportunity to engage meaningfully* as citizens in their schools and communities, to develop their power and use it effectively. As Julie Iny, associate director of Kids First says:

What’s the intervention that is going to truly shift students from being passive about their education? It is engagement, democratic action. When you do youth organizing work and get young people thinking about what would improve their schools, their community, our world, you realize that engagement is the key, it’s what young people want and need most.

Inequities that ignite

It should come as no surprise that the San Francisco Bay Area serves as a hub for youth organizing, especially among youth of color. For the past two decades, change and growth have escalated divisions across race, language, age, and social class, rocking the Bay Area along with the rest of California. Youth activists—in a region with a proud history of “taking it to the streets”—encounter no shortage of inequities to ignite their sense of fairness or stoke their thirst for impact. Glass citadels to Pacific Rim trade shine above rough storefronts where new immigrants exchange worn money at stiff prices. Downtown street corners bustle with young professionals cell phone in hand, while on the city’s fringe, day laborers congregate to wait for drive-by offers of work. World-class universities flourish less than 10 miles from schools too poor to patch the roof.

² *School Reform Organizing in The San Francisco Bay Area and Los Angeles, California*, by California Tomorrow staff members Mamie Chow, Laurie Olsen, Ruben Lizardo and Carol Dowell, August 2001. This report provides a detailed map of parent and community groups involved in school reform in these two regions, along with the results of surveys and interviews with 29 organizations. It was conducted under a sub-contract from the Institute for Educational and Social Policy at New York University, as part of its national effort to research community organizing efforts directed at school change. While the work of youth organizers was part of the California Tomorrow study (and IESP’s national report), it was embedded in a much larger examination of community-based school reform activity.

Nowhere are these juxtapositions more glaring than in the public schools. California ranks 13th in the nation in per capita income but 40th in per pupil expenditures. During the past decade, meanwhile, California's school age population has grown at twice the national rate, far outpacing dwindling resources made scarcer still by "Proposition 13," which froze property taxes in 1978.

More than 40 youth organizations campaign for educational change in San Francisco and Oakland.

As a result, 23 percent of the state's school children, especially in low-income communities of color, now attend school year-round or in shifts. They crowd into facilities without libraries or labs, where bungalows for overflow enrollment overtake playgrounds. Close to 100 different language groups occupy the state's classrooms, while the teaching force remains 80 percent white and monolingual, and a state ballot initiative calling for "English Only" wins support. Compared to other states, California ranks 43rd in computers per child, 49th in class size, and dead last in school libraries and in the number of students per counselor.³

What is surprising is that more Bay Area residents, young and old alike, are not demanding increased public support for schools and youth services. Still, the number of youth organizations campaigning for educational change and for state and local policies that better serve young people is stunning. More than 40 groups operate in San Francisco and Oakland alone; Chicago, by comparison, counts only one.

The Bay Area groups are as diverse as they are numerous, with names that often declare their unique identity: Asian Pacific Islander Youth Promoting Advocacy and Leadership, Barrio Warriors, Books Not Bars, Center for Young Women's Development, Third Eye Movement, Youth of Oakland United, Californians for Justice, League of Filipino Students. They rally around issues like school violence and discipline (notably tardiness and suspension policies), student participation in formal decision making, and putting public education before juvenile incarceration. They advocate for nonacademic support for students, ethnic studies, and better transportation; they fight against high stakes testing, environmental hazards, and sexual harassment. Their composition and institutional base vary from youth to adult-led with a small youth "wing" and from free standing to embedded within a larger organization. Some are adequately financed, others entirely volunteer.

Mounting wins

Organizations lobbying for change typically measure their success in "wins," whatever their other benefits to participants. Over the past ten years, youth activists in the Bay Area have scored many wins. For example:

- In 1996, Oakland's Kids First an intergenerational, multiracial coalition achieved a major victory in its quest for policies that promote the well being of area youth and families. The group designed and won voter approval for a ballot initiative that sets aside for youth services 2.5 percent of the city's unrestricted general fund revenues (in addition to existing

³ *School Reform Organizing in The San Francisco Bay Area and Los Angeles, California*, California Tomorrow, 2001, p. 3-4.

appropriations). A 19-member planning and oversight committee, with at least nine members under 21 years old, makes funding recommendations. In 1995, before the initiative, the City of Oakland contributed less than \$200,000 to private, nonprofit agencies serving youth; in 2001, the figure totaled \$6 million. But the victory involves more than money, those supporting the effort point out. It offers the community an underlying philosophy, a strategy, behind youth development that promotes a positive alternative to the current punitive approach of youth curfews, harsher penalties for gangs, and zero tolerance policies in schools.

Young people involved in Kids First also gathered school data and published their own report, "Locked Out: Exposing the Suspension Epidemic in the Oakland Public Schools." They used the report to negotiate with the school board and superintendent a revised school discipline policy, adopted in full, that provides ongoing monitoring for bias of every campus' discipline policies and practices, implementation of new strategies to reduce school suspensions, and special training for principals and administrators. This past December, Kids First youth also won support for a two-year pilot plan to provide free bus transportation to 33,000 of the city's most indigent students, who currently pay \$27 for a monthly pass or as much as \$4 a day to get to school, after school jobs, and back home.

Youth activists convinced officials to commit \$1.4 million for health clinics and mental health centers in seven San Francisco high schools.

- Youth Making a Change (YMAC), a program of Coleman Advocates for Children started in 1991, works with teens from San Francisco high schools to mobilize peers around student voice and nonacademic supports. As part of its outreach, YMAC conducts an annual election—parallel to city and state elections and supported by ballot handbooks written by Y-MACers—that attracts over 5,000 students. The project also includes a youth survey on issues that affect them directly. A recent YMAC survey asked students: 1) do you have health insurance (25% answered no); 2) do you have easy access to health care (70% said no); and 3) would you use a school-based health clinic (75% said yes). Armed with these data, youth activists convinced the school district and city council to commit \$1.4 million to support health clinics and mental health centers in seven San Francisco high schools.

Securing youth voice in district-wide decision-making stands as another, visible YMAC victory—including creating and strengthening the San Francisco school board's Student Advisory Council (SAC), as well as working to legally establish the San Francisco Youth Commission in city hall.

- Since 1996 Youth Together has worked with student teams in five East Bay high schools (in Berkeley, Oakland, and Richmond) to promote multiracial understanding and justice, student-led school change, and leadership development. The resulting reduction in racial tension and violence at all five high schools has won Youth Together an array of honors, including the "Promising Practice" award from the President's Initiative on Race. In addition, YT has created a unity center, Youth Empowerment Services at local county offices, and a yearlong Youth Leadership Institute to address racial tensions.

The One Land, One People Youth Center at Oakland's Skyline High School is another concrete product of YT's efforts. In the fall of 2000, YT students at Skyline conducted an intensive needs assessment among students, created an advisory board with key

stakeholders in and outside school, and prepared a business plan for offering, on campus but in conjunction with the community, academic support, health services, and youth programs to all of Skyline’s 2,400 students. The new Center hopes to open its doors in the fall of 2002.

One Land, One People Programs and Services

ACADEMIC SERVICES

<u>Activities</u>	<u>Outcomes</u>	<u>Providers</u>
Peer Advocacy, Academic Case Management, Tutoring, College & Career Counseling, SAT prep writing lab, computer access, coordination of academic programs.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ The percentage of underrepresented groups in AP and Honors courses will increase by 20%. ◆ 400 students will receive assistance with succeeding in courses or accessing more advanced classes from peer advocates. ◆ 360 students will improve their academic performance through tutoring programs. ◆ 200 underachieving and struggling students will increase investment in education. ◆ At least 1000 students will receive assistance with preparing for or applying to college. ◆ 60 students will increase their SAT scores by 75 points. ◆ 150 students will improve their writing skills. ◆ Computer access will increase for students who do not own computers. ◆ Access to existing programs will be expanded through coordination and publicity. 	Youth Center staff, Haas Business School, East Bay Consortium, Cal-Soap, Skyline Peer Advocates, Academics for Success, Montclair United Methodist Church, Early Academic Outreach Program, Educational Guidance Center, UC Berkeley Upward Bound, Mills College Trio Programs, Bridge Over to Success, People’s Testing Preparation Service, Skyline Math Department, Members of the Skyline English Department.

— From *Skyline One Land, One People Youth Center Business Plan*, November 2001, Youth Together Leadership Team at Skyline High School, Oakland, CA

- On May 17, 2001, 70 young people active in the Youth Force Coalition and Books Not Bars traveled to San Diego to convince the California Board of Corrections (BOC) to deny pre-approved state funding for the construction in San Francisco’s Alameda County of the biggest per capita juvenile hall in the country. Launched last year by the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights, the Books Not Bars campaign rose in response to a 1999 California ballot initiative that increased the number of crimes for which youth can be tried as adults and the stiffness of their sentences—symptoms of a nationwide over incarceration of young people, particularly youth of color. The Youth Force Coalition, a network of close to 40 youth groups around the Bay, spearheaded the “Stop the Super Jail” campaign. At the San Diego Board of Corrections hearing, one young person after another spoke passionately against spending more money on the state’s juvenile facilities at a time when schools are crumbling—and youth crime *dropping*. BOC members listened patiently, argued among themselves for 20 minutes, then stunned Alameda County officials by voting 10 – 2 to reject their \$2.3 million funding request.

Behind these prominent wins lie less-touted but sturdy achievements, such as:

- For almost a decade, Asian Youth Advocates (AYA) has helped high school-aged Laotian women in the East Bay cities of Richmond and San Pablo take a leadership role in their school and community. Recently, AYA's young women successfully advanced a plan at Richmond High School whereby homeroom teachers would also serve as advisors, giving students, in the words of AYA coordinator Grace Kong, "an adult they felt they could turn to for a basic level of support and [through which] they could access all the other resources of the school."⁴
- Originally developed as a grassroots campaign to defeat California's anti-affirmative action ballot initiative (Prop 209), Oakland-based Californians for Justice in 2000 undertook an extensive study of unequal school conditions in San Jose, Long Beach, and San Diego. High school students conducted a good portion of the survey and information gathering that made up the ground breaking report, *Still Separate and Unequal: A Look at Racial Inequality in California Schools 47 Years After Brown vs. Board of Education*. The study's release received statewide press coverage.
- In 1999, a youth-led group called Media Bomb, part of Changemakers (a youth leadership and organizing project based in the San Francisco neighborhood Beacon Centers), secured a regular time slot for broadcasting on the school district radio station. Up until this point, KALW had no student-run programming, despite its affiliation with the San Francisco Unified School District. These broadcasts feature a variety of programs interesting to students. Media Bomb organizers wrote grants, held rallies and met with district radio executives in their successful quest to secure airtime.

Indeed, the 2001 California Tomorrow report cites over 75 areas in which youth and adult groups lobbying for school reform in the Bay Area, along with Los Angeles, have made substantive gains. The list ranges from repairing a school's air conditioning system to increasing student retention; from initiating workshops for students and teachers on inter-ethnic mediation to holding public hearings with key education decision makers.⁵

To be sure, the defeats mount, too. But rejected proposals and closed doors often provide a valuable occasion to rethink goals and strategies. "The negative interactions with public officials," says Books Not Bars' field director Rachel Jackson, "teach us lessons and help us set priorities just as well as the good interactions."

After youth activists lost a fight against stationing police in their schools, for instance, they made an important discovery. The issue wasn't whether or not police belonged in schools, they realized; it was that *police presence did not equal safety*. Their schools simply did not feel safe, with or without police. More determined than ever, they turned to holding school-wide conversations among peers as a way to stem the violence. This spring, for example, 100 Berkeley High School students

After youth activists lost a fight against police in schools, they discovered the issue wasn't whether law enforcement belonged there, but that *police presence did not equal safety*.

⁴ *School Reform Organizing in The San Francisco Bay Area and Los Angeles, California*, California Tomorrow, 2001, p. 53.

⁵ *School Reform Organizing in The San Francisco Bay Area and Los Angeles, California*, California Tomorrow, 2001, pp. 86-89.

conducted anti-violence workshops on campus that reached 90 percent of the student body. In San Francisco, students pushed for a “safe school resolution” and convinced the school board to adopt steps to minimize the punitive aspect of school policing, including a citywide monitoring committee to collect and review data related to school police work.

Parallel gains: engaging youth, building capacity

Advocates for youth empowerment have long argued that in addition to producing “wins,” engaging in democratic action builds capacity and capital among those involved—successes of a different sort but equal in value. The sustained work and observations of youth activists in the Bay Area suggest how this development occurs. As Taj James, director of the newly formed Movement Strategies Center, states: “Increasing democracy in the education process increases students’ *connections* to success.” Or as Bay Area adults supporting youth activists said repeatedly, the intervention that truly “shifts” kids is *engagement*.

Typically, capacity grows incrementally, with steps intermingling. It is also recursive: the inclination to “become involved” takes different forms as awareness and organizing skills deepen, as the young person whose motivation gets sparked becomes one who sparks others. (For organizing veterans and many in the youth development field, the following steps will be familiar. Here they are traced within the specific arena of Bay Area youth acting for educational change—a reminder that the sturdiest skills are developed in context, in the course of grappling with real issues.)

Changing attitudes. “By the time most kids start high school, they’ve already developed a posture towards school, most often of disengagement,” says Julie Iny, associate director of Kids First. “So we start there. We say to them, ‘Hey, you’re in school. Don’t let them waste your time. Make it an active rather than a passive experience. Own your education, speak up, contribute.’”

The first step towards such action comes from making oneself “the subject and not just the direct or indirect object,” explains one Oakland teen. Says another, “Lots of kids look at themselves and the adults and other kids around them and see A-P-A-T-H-Y. It’s a transmitted disease in many schools and neighborhoods. But apathy gets you nowhere. You’ve got to sit up and pay attention.”

Growing awareness. “Before youth are going to get involved, they need to get motivated, and before they get motivated, they need to be *made aware*,” explains a staff member with Youth of Oakland United. “They know something’s wrong, but they can’t name it, see a pattern, or connect it to other issues.” Promoting this awareness is a task Bay Area young activists pursue aggressively. Notes one San Francisco 16-year old: “If you just go around and have meetings, you won’t create the energy and the awareness you need. So we create surveys, hold assemblies and speak outs, talk to the media, paint murals.”

Surveys prove a jumping off point for much youth organizing in the Bay Area, given their usefulness in staking out issues, collecting feedback, and raising awareness. For Youth Making a Change, its annual survey of San Francisco high school students provides a regular vehicle for

“Lots of kids look at themselves and the adults and other kids around them and see A-P-A-T-H-Y, a transmitted disease in many schools and neighborhoods,” said one student. “But you’ve got to sit up and pay attention.”

flagging issues and gathering feedback. When Berkeley High School students with Youth Together began this spring's anti-violence campaign, they surveyed peers to gauge perceptions of violence and to start developing potential solutions. At Oakland's Fremont High School, a survey devised by its Youth Together team apparently did more to inform some students about the ambitious plan to break their large school into smaller units than the faculty's own awareness efforts had.

Other staples of young Bay Area education activists are assemblies, workshops, and rallies. Ideally, of course, more of this awareness-raising

They harness energy from hip hop, video, improvisational theater, and other forms of youth expression and public art.

should happen (or be allowed to happen) *in* school: in student-led meetings or "teach-ins," as part of school clubs, in special forums devoted to topics like racial understanding, tracking, or teacher-student relationships. But that sort of student discourse and engagement is exactly what is missing from most of the schools these young people attend, forcing them to mobilize energy outside schools in an attempt to gain voice within them.

As part of their awareness strategies, area youth activists also harness the energy they and their peers draw from hip hop, video, improvisational theater, and other forms of youth expression and public art. "Hip hop attracts a lot of kids, especially those who feel on the outside," explains a 14-year old with Books Not Bars. "Kids go to it not knowing it's political. They go to listen, but then it opens their eyes, and they get hooked on the issues." Kids First recently added two young artists to help with outreach. Film festivals like "Keeping It Reel," a youth-organized event held at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in May 2002, encourage young people to create or see films that highlight the importance of community institutions that, as the flyer announcing the festival says, are "youth-inclusive and supportive of youth representation."

Of course, the causes that attract the passions of the Bay Area's young organizers carry their own fuel. "The issues kids care about most," says Rachel Jackson of Books Not Bars, "are the ones that hit them and their friends and family the hardest. Just about every young person involved in Books Not Bars knows someone who's been affected adversely by the (in)justice system—friends, family, and neighbors. They all know of kids who didn't get the help they needed, who found themselves on the 'prison track' in school and unable to get off." Explains a youth with OLIN, "the reason we've had as many as a thousand youth come to our events is that our push for ethnic studies hits home with the thousands of students who can't find their race or language anywhere in the curriculum."

Often, these young activists must reach peers and build awareness *outside* schools to gain voice *within* them.

Youth voices from the video, *Books Not Bars*, 2001

“We’re not going to be silenced. We’re not going to take this. Our youth need education. We need training. We need the opportunity to go to college. We need love. And we’re not going to let you take us and lock us up, without giving us the opportunity to thrive, to become the type of people we need to be.”

“They say prisons create jobs. Why not create jobs by building schools and universities?”

“The system is out of whack. They spend \$9,000 a year to educate us and \$32,000 a year to lock us up. [And in school] we have untrained teachers and outdated books, but trained police officers and metal detectors. There are so many things that affect young people like myself. We have to fight this. If we don’t fight it, who will?”

“It’s critical that youth resist. Where will we all be 15 years from now if the money that should be going to universities and schools goes to prisons instead?”

“They said I was a menace to society. [What’s society?] Society is: ‘That black boy is not going to make it. He doesn’t think like us. He’s an animal.’”

“I got to carry a message that says more than ‘just say no.’ I want to say ‘yes’ to life, ‘yes’ to my future.

Becoming an analyst and advocate. Once mobilized and aware, young people often join a project or campaign, taking on the roles of analyst and advocate. The lessons that come with this deepened involvement, says one Bay Area youth, are as “powerful as any I learned in school.”

The same surveys intended to raise awareness among those polled, for example, also teach their student creators about action research. They learn to ask questions that solicit valid feedback and to compile the subsequent data. As they summarize results, they hone report-writing skills. As they present their findings and arguments in public—often before official panels and committees—they learn presentation skills.

In other instances, participants learn to form questions and seek answers in public records and interviews. The influential Kids First report on suspension practices in the Oakland schools was produced by a multi-racial group of more than 40 middle and high school students and recent graduates who searched public records and interviewed students, parents, administrators, teachers, community members, and policy makers. As often happens, the student research team also created a video to educate their peers—in this case, about student rights and responsibilities regarding the disciplinary process.

The many opportunities for learning and skill building that youth encounter in the course of a single campaign are detailed below, in excerpted form, from a newsletter published by Oakland Asian Students Educational Services.

After three early months of discussions and debate, the members of the Asian Youth Promoting Advocacy and Leadership (AYPAL) program finally narrowed their community campaign issues around school problems, settling on Ethnic Studies as its one citywide campaign. AYPAL then joined the Kid's First! Coalition, which was spearheading a multi-pronged, anti-racism school improvement agenda, including ethnic studies, revised student rights and suspension policy, student centers, and teacher training within Oakland schools.

Youth from AYPAL attended the Asian and Pacific Islander Youth Institute conference on Ethnic Studies in downtown Oakland. This one-day event provided workshops for youth on Asian Pacific Islander history, rethinking education, power analysis, and strategizing. A panel of ethnic studies veterans also was in the program, which allowed the youth to listen to actual accounts of young people who made ethnic studies a reality in their own schools.

The AYPAL young community leaders are advancing their campaign by interviewing teachers, administration, and other adults for support. They are making site visits to neighboring high schools that have an ethnic studies program and researching how those schools got the program started. The School Of Unity & Liberation (SOUL) has also been holding workshops, which specializes on alternative education such as ethnic studies, for the youth to attend. These meetings and training help the youth better understand their mission and allow them the opportunity to work in collaboration with other youth of the Oakland area.

AYPAL youth also spoke on a panel at the Third World Strike Crossing Over Conference at U.C. Berkeley to announce to the public their campaign for Ethnic Studies.

In addition to their advocacy work, the AYPAL youth produced the first Asian and Pacific Islander Film Series at the Oakland Asian Cultural Center. Other projects they are working on include mural paintings, poetry writing, culinary arts, and dance, culminating in a two-day cultural performance.⁶

As young activists engage in the back-and-forth that invigorates such campaigns, they also grow more comfortable with challenging their own and others' assumptions. Says one San Francisco youth, "The 'schools not jails' campaign has taught me something my school barely stressed—to question." Karlene Lloyd, a parent who organizes with Youth of Oakland United, agrees. "Most of the time, kids are not allowed to express their opinions, or at least they're not helped to express them in productive ways. We need to urge kids to speak up—and to create the space and time for them to do so. Then we must encourage them to analyze what they see and have said, to look critically at their assumptions, to back them up with hard evidence or change them in the face of conflicting evidence." "What better way to teach critical thinking," she concludes, "than around real and hard problems?"

"The 'schools not jails' campaign has taught me something my school barely stressed—to question," a student said.

Turning individual capacity into community capital. Although expanding the capacity of individual teens is an important accomplishment in itself, turning this individual growth into community capital is just as critical. Typically measured in anecdotes and testimonials, this new capital includes enlarged personal ambitions and more role models. The 17-year old, for instance,

⁶ "AYPAL Youth Making Efforts for Ethnic Studies," *Oases Newsletter*, Vol. 3, Issue 3, Spring 1999.

who after lobbying the Oakland City Council for free bus tokens for indigent students, set his sights on college; the youngster incarcerated at 15 is now, at 21, a college graduate and state leader in the juvenile justice campaign. It shows up in the first of what hopefully will become a body of independent studies that assess the impact of youth action in educational change on the young people involved. A two year evaluation of Youth Together by Berkeley researchers details how the work of YT's student leadership teams in five Bay Area high schools has built "social and cultural capital"—reducing racial tensions and promoting multicultural knowledge—among both these student leaders and the peers their efforts target.⁷ And it shows up in the ongoing birth of new youth groups throughout the Bay dedicated to strengthening communities, improving schools, shaping policy, and re-directing public resources in support of young people—the emergence of a bona fide "field."

Leadership development has been pivotal to this momentum, and Bay Area groups supporting youth activists have wisely directed resources towards training opportunities intended to seed a strong and resilient cadre of youth leaders. Twice a year, for example, Youth Making a Change recruits a diverse leadership cadre of 15 youth ages 14-17 from high schools throughout San Francisco; they are trained (and paid) to work as organizers, recruiting and developing the organizing skills of their high school peers. Youth of Oakland United trains 15-20 youth at a time—in research, in strategies for raising awareness and promoting discussion, in making an effective case—and then supports them as they lead campaigns of their own design. Developing multi-racial student leadership teams lies at the heart of Youth Together. The monthly calendar of the Youth Leadership Institute includes training or leadership opportunities for Bay Area young people almost every night: a three-day institute on teen pregnancy policy work, "refresher" training for those sitting on decision making or advisory boards; a Saturday morning "training series" on topics like public speaking; a workshop on strategic planning.

Still, the resources available for leadership development fall far short of the need. "Yes, we're creating new role models," says one youth, "but we need many more youth leaders capable of opening young people's minds." And with this growth in leadership, experience, and new groups has come an increased recognition of the many ways the existing work needs shoring up: better outreach, more knowledge about individual issues (especially those paramount to professional school reformers), more practice in written and oral presentations, additional group facilitation skills, assistance in organizational management. As youth leaders gain experience, the standards to which they hold their work rise, too—as do the resources needed to meet those expectations.⁸

"We're creating new role models," says one Bay Area teen, "but we need many more youth leaders capable of opening young people's minds."

⁷ "Youth Together: Multiracial Student Teams Leading for Justice, Unity & Peace in Our Schools. Year Two Evaluation Report: September 1, 1998 to August 31, 1999," by Pedro Noguera, PhD, Department of Social and Cultural Studies/Graduate School of Education, University of California at Berkeley, for the U.S. Department of Education Safe and Drug Free School Violence Prevention Initiative.

⁸ For a much fuller discussion of some of the key issues impacting the infrastructure of youth organizing in California (and elsewhere)—from insufficient resources to leadership turnover and "aging out"—see pp. 79-84 and pp. 99-102 of California Tomorrow's 2001 report.

The power of youth-adult partnerships

Youth activists in the Bay Area speak often of the challenges created by what they call “adulthood”—the skepticism among adults about young people’s intentions, knowledge, or capabilities. It often surfaces in assumptions like “kids don’t know what’s good for them” or “kids don’t care” and in how adults speak to and treat young people. The experience recounted by one youth activist, cited in the California Tomorrow report, unfortunately is not uncommon.⁹

It was hard for us to go on campus to do our organizing because [the assistant principal] was always there giving us a hard time... She’d give youth a hard time, calling them ‘trouble makers,’ and asking, ‘why are you guys starting trouble?’ Teachers would give us a hard time too. When we’re doing organizing on campus, adult staff will send subliminal threats (e.g., giving F’s), making it harder for youth in their classes. Some school board members were discouraging to youth. When students went to them to address the criteria of a new principal, they told the youth, ‘Don’t worry about it. Just keep studying.’

Despite such obstacles, few these young activists argue that adults should step aside. Rather, they underscore (as have studies by groups like Public Agenda¹⁰) the importance of strong youth-adult partnerships—in this case, when working for educational change.

“Young people need to have adult partners who are experienced in policy and in what’s do-able,” says Khin Mai Aung, director of governance and policy for the San Francisco-based Youth Leadership Institute. “Young people can have great ideas, and adults can bring feasibility to those ideas. A good adult partner respects the freshness of their ideas, and helps young people develop them into something do-able.”

Adds NTanya Lee, head of youth development and policy at Youth Making a Change: “For youth engagement, empowerment, voice to have an impact, you have to have adults around to interpret and share knowledge about the system, to present the opportunities and landscape to young people so that they can negotiate it successfully.”

“Young people can have great ideas,” explains a staff member of one leadership group, “and a good adult partner helps develop them into something do-able.”

To make her point, Lee talks about the various ethnic studies campaigns that criss-cross the San Francisco Bay—and how they have worked synergistically. She cites the remarkable grassroots efforts of OLIN in catalyzing a multiracial coalition of more than 1,000 Bay Area students to advocate for ethnic studies. And then she describes the ways in which YMAC has been able to tap the energy OLIN created, pairing the issue of ethnic studies with a scheduled review by San Francisco Unified of its citywide ninth grade ethnic literature course—a small but concrete opportunity to press the demand for greater inclusiveness that unites ethnic studies activists around the region. “Now you can’t expect kids to know about this scheduled review, to have this sort of strategic information,” explains Lee. “But it’s a good example of what the adults, with their greater access, can bring to the grassroots efforts of teens. Given this knowledge, kids know how to take effective action.”

⁹ *School Reform Organizing in The San Francisco Bay Area and Los Angeles*, California, California Tomorrow, 2001, p. 81.

¹⁰ See, for example, “Kids These Days: What Americans Really Think About the Next Generation,” Public Agenda Foundation, 1997.

In return, what do youth bring to these partnerships for change that make their contributions so important? According to Bay Area adults working with these youth, the list is long:

- “A fierce sense of fairness.”
- “They bring a wise simplicity to issues that lets them get to the core. . . They have a keen eye for what’s working or not.”
- “Teens are experts on other teens. They know certain things that adults might not.”
- “Kids. . . are better at making good compromises.”
- “They bring fresh blood and an open perspective.”
- “A new sense of problem solving.”
- “An uncanny ability to see the seemingly little things and connect them to a bigger picture.”
- “Humor.”
- “Flexibility. An aversion to grand standing.”
- “Energy and optimism.”
- “The ability to work effectively across races and with coalitions.”
- “Young people clutch their idealism while older people give it up.”
- “They tell the truth and challenge the norm.”

Connecting the dots

In a region as diverse as the Bay Area, with such a rich collection of groups involved in community organizing, youth development, and school reform, there are many “dots” that can or should be connected—even *within* these traditionally separate fields. Making these connections is hard work, and the linkages being forged by the region’s youth organizing groups, in their effort to improve schools and related policies, are extraordinary. However, the resources needed to further these ties are substantial; and the disinterest of the area’s “professional” school reformers is stunning.

Across issues. The campaigns that have attracted Bay Area youth activists lie notably outside what the education change community sees as “leading” issues. While Oakland’s adult school reformers joined the national push to “reinvent large high schools,” for example, the city’s youth organizers pressed for textbooks that better reflect their ethnicity, fair suspension policies, and free bus tokens for indigent students. As San Francisco’s school board wrestled with school segregation by income and class, young activists there lobbied for school-based health clinics for students without medical care. While school officials throughout the Bay spoke of enlisting the support and input of parents and other community members, groups like YMAC and Youth Together pressed for greater student voice in their schools. As educators statewide worked to reduce class size, youth with Books Not Bars fought to decrease the size and reach of the state’s juvenile detention halls.

What unite Bay Area youth activists—and the campaigns just listed—are deep concerns about access and inclusion. These young reformers have a sharp eye for the basics, like public transportation to and from school or access to school bathrooms. They ask tough questions about discipline policies that send tardy students to a day’s detention rather than the classroom or that push onto the streets the very students who most need attention. They seek representation on decision-making bodies that affect their education. They call for academic courses that bring

forward the diverse culture, language, and history of the region's student body (which is less than ten percent white) that "make us visible and proud of who we are," as one Latino youth said.

Like the public at large, they too long for "safe schools." Since most school violence occurs among students, they know firsthand the damage of chronic fighting and assaults. But their solutions differ from those of adults. They link the issue of school safety to programs in multi-racial understanding, not metal detectors and police.

These young activists also make clear connections between students' achievement and the supports they receive in and outside schools. They see a direct tie, for example, between academic performance and their access to mental health counseling or safe places in which to meet after school.

And they challenge vehemently state policies that perpetuate or aggravate the under-financing of schools, most especially where the need for additional resources is desperate. At a rally on the steps of Oakland High School last spring, students protested the state's new accountability system, which provides extra funds to schools scoring well on the Stanford 9 achievement tests while locking the lowest scorers—typically the neediest schools like Oakland High—into second-class status with fewer resources. "The more we take the test," exclaimed one of the student protesters, "the more broke we're going to get."¹¹

The Books Not Bars' campaign taps a similar anger about the allocation of resources. "The reason youth have become so deeply engaged, so passionate about the Books Not Bars campaign is that they see California is making a tragically bad trade-off," says staff member Rachel Jackson. "Their schools are shot, the investments in prevention—in helping adolescents contend with the hard, key questions they face—is minimal. But then there seems to be plenty of money for jails." Bay Area youth activists speak of a "juvenile justice" track in their schools, citing friends whose misdemeanors started with exclusion from classrooms for tardiness, grew to behavior that barred them from school, then led to arrests that landed them in state custody.

Across groups and strategies. One of the remarkable features of youth action for educational change across the Bay Area is the extent to which it includes, indeed embraces, coalitions. Groups commonly work together on city-based as well as regional campaigns—much more so than adult organizers. These coalitions are unarguably fluid, as individual leaders of groups change and the organizations themselves grow new names and affiliations. But a belief in the power of concerted action runs deep. The recently created Youth Force Coalition includes 40 Bay Area youth organizing groups stretching from San Rafael in the northwest to Concord in the northeast, to San Jose and East Palo Alto in the south.

Indeed, the Youth Force Coalition's birth bears quick telling. In September 1998, over 250 young activists—representing organizations throughout the Bay Area, as well as nationally, and ranging from gang members to student leaders—met for two days to discuss their different programs and "what [they should ask for] from adults and policy makers to improve the lives and chances of young people." From this came a draft statement of thirteen points, calling for more education and less incarceration of problem-youth and for programs and jobs that help young people contribute positively to their communities. As organizers solicited feedback on these points, over the next

These youth activists care deeply about access and inclusion. And they make clear connections between students' achievement and the supports they receive in and outside schools

¹¹ "Applause for students who oppose SAT-9 Testing," *The Oakland Tribune*, May 10, 2001.

six months, they realized their top concern should not be agreement but creating a space where the differences among the diverse youth groups working in the Bay Area could be shared and discussed, overcoming isolation and building a long term commitment to collaboration. In April 1999 representatives from 20 youth organizations gathered to plan and formalize a regional coalition where, together, they would become “more than the sum of our parts.”¹²

Coalitions like the Youth Force network not only “gather the troops” but cross racial and ethnic boundaries, too. Multi-racial youth teams also make up the leadership within a number of individual groups. “Seeing young people genuinely bond with each other, across these divides, is one of our largest but less visible accomplishments,” says Julie Iny of Kids First.

Harder, it seems, is bridging the two primary strategies by which Bay Area youth participate in school reform. Youth Leadership Institute staff member Khin Mai Aung explains: “There are basically two options for young people: 1) representation on formal committees and decision making bodies; and 2) organizing and advocacy, in and outside schools.” The trade-offs that come with students making their case from inside or outside school walls stir ongoing debate among the area’s youth organizers. Deeper still is the divide between students in an advisory role and an action role. “We need to bring the two together, to combine their power,” says Tanya Lee of Youth Making a Change. “There is no institutional barrier to young people serving in these various advisory boards and commissions and organizing at the same time. We need to be more strategic so that we don’t have two separate crowds of young people: the delegates and the organizers.”

“We need to combine the power of students in advisory and action roles,” argues one youth advocate.

With “un-involved” youth. Encouraging more young people to become active in education change efforts is, predictably, a perennial concern. “I worry about how we can move beyond small groups of young people clustered around one or two adults, which is the current shape of most youth action around the Bay,” says Julie Iny. “It leaves lots of youths ‘unattached.’” As inventive as the region’s groups have become in creating awareness among their peers—from videos to poetry slams to drawing media attention—they underscore the critical need for additional resources to attract uninvolved youth.

Some tie this outreach to creating more youth spaces that engage kids in any fashion, particularly “throw away” youth. Others pinpoint the importance of more leadership opportunities for young people, especially those dismissed as lacking “leadership potential.” “We need more kids up front that you wouldn’t expect to see there,” notes one young organizer. “You want the other kids to sit up and take notice and say, ‘Hey, look what he’s doing! Maybe it’s time I opened my mind.’”

“We need more kids up front that you wouldn’t expect to see there,” notes one young organizer. “You want the other kids to sit up and take notice.”

The notion that teen-aged education activists have a special cachet with classmates “goes only so far,” adds one youth. Initially, their age may help gain the attention of peers, but it is their knowledge of the issues and leadership skills that will turn this attention to good result.

¹² “Youth Force” (<http://www.youthec.org/youthforce/>)

Of course, the largest barrier to involving more youth in educational change, most agree, comes from the schools themselves. The structures and supports are few, and the culture among both students and faculty reinforces disengagement. Students who challenge these norms can find themselves isolated from classmates and rebuffed by teachers—hardly an effective selling point for recruiting greater participation.

With school reformers. The California Tomorrow report addresses at length the gulf between both youth and adult organizers and the Bay Area’s “school reform community.” The divides include differences in the basic theory of change, in goals, in the analysis of what needs changing in schools, in language. It includes, as well, the huge mismatch between the strength and legitimacy of professional reformers and fledgling community-based groups.¹³

The successful joint campaign by the Bay Area Coalition of Equitable Schools and several community groups to launch small schools within the Oakland school district offers a notable exception. But even here, the planning omitted students. When Youth Together’s student team at Fremont High organized a forum for classmates to discuss how their school would be broken into “small learning environments”—a first step in redressing the under-involvement of students—their peers wondered how such a dramatic plan had happened without their input.¹⁴

“...if the [administration] wanted students to get behind this idea, why are we just hearing about this now? Why has no one in the administration ever explained it to us? Why didn’t anyone ask us if we wanted small schools?”

The School Reform Partnerships Project, a new initiative by the Youth Leadership Institute, hopes to make a small dent in this large breach. It provides cash grants of up to \$5,000 to student-teacher teams that tackle challenges like increasing attendance rates, building better relationships between teachers and students, improving how and what students are taught. Grant recipients also join a network where they can learn from each other’s successes and challenges. Encouragingly, students make up the core of the review board that approves each grant.

Nonetheless, the disconnect between the Bay Area’s “professional” and youth school reform communities remains profound, especially given their similarities—the extraordinary robustness of each, their common effort to gain traction from outside “the system,” their shared mission of improving outcomes for all youth. For youth activists eager to forge ties with the professional school reform community, the gap is discouraging. “It is not that we don’t care about issues like improving teaching or using tests in wrong ways,” explains one San Francisco youth. “Sure, we want good principals and teachers, too. But we are given little chance to contribute our ideas. They must think we don’t have them. You’d think being in the classroom five hours a day would give us some sort of expertise. I guess not.”

“We are given little chance to contribute our ideas. You’d think being in the classroom five hours a day would give us some sort of expertise. I guess not,” a San Francisco teen concluded

¹³ *School Reform Organizing in The San Francisco Bay Area and Los Angeles, California*, California Tomorrow, 2001, pp. 94-98.

¹⁴ See attached notes from Fremont High School student forum, March 26, 2002.

Youth Leadership Institute: Examples of Spring 2002 School Reform Partnerships

- Students at Tennyson High in Hayward are creating a class on activism and community organizing called “Student Voice.” The general enrollment course will provide hands-on training in how to turn promising ideas into lasting change, focusing on issues at Tennyson. During summer institutes, students will design the curriculum and learn skills they’ll need to teach portions of the course themselves and to conduct presentations to the student body.
- The Leadership Class at Berkeley High is starting a Multicultural Assembly to combat recent incidents of violence among the school’s diverse student groups. With representation from all the school’s clubs and activities, the Assembly will sponsor diversity workshops, cultural assemblies, and speakers to promote school-wide interaction and understanding.
- The Castlemont High chapter of Youth Together (a school-based student organizing network in Oakland) is launching a “Student Unity Center,” a single venue for the campus’ myriad, though currently dispersed, student activities. Concurrently, it is rallying allies across California against the high school exit exam, a statewide graduation requirement that the group believes disproportionately affects students from under-resourced schools.

Missing are the first steps towards making connection: awareness, dialogue, a modicum of give and take. “The professional school reformers rarely come to the events students organize and their own events are rarely youth friendly,” says Julie Iny of Kids First. “It would make a great difference if the established school reform groups ventured out into student-run spaces. It would be a sign of good faith—and essential if intergenerational organizing is to grow.”

The fundamental notion of students as partners in school change barely registers in the many campaigns that grip adult reformers. For practical reasons alone, that must change. As one of the students attending the small schools forum at Oakland’s Fremont High School cautions: “You can divide us into five schools, you can divide us into 100 schools. But if the students aren’t behind it, it will fail.”

Some hard questions

As “youth action for educational change” emerges as a legitimate field, it commands increasingly serious attention and discussion, including difficult questions. The parallel pushes for “student engagement” and increased “civic participation” by young people adds further urgency to these questions—for which the ongoing work in the San Francisco Bay Area holds important lessons and promising answers.

- How do we engage students as active partners in school change—from small efforts, like revamping an ethnic studies course, to ambitious reform plans that get to the heart of teaching and learning (like breaking large high schools into smaller schools)? How do we mobilize students to help turnaround a school’s climate, replacing a culture of apathy with one of academic striving and hope? How do we, as adults, build a tone of trust among students for whom mistrusting authority is automatic?

- How do we remove the structural obstacles to youth engagement in schools—when schools narrow the options for participation such that there are few, if any, formal and substantial vehicles for student voice? How do students effectively raise concerns and advocate for their needs when they lack the meaningful and democratic structures for doing so?
- How do we include students in the current debates about holding schools accountable? How do we shift or expand the power dynamic in school “accountability systems” to include student input, especially in relation to teacher quality, school climate, and expectations for students—matters in which student feedback should weigh heavily?
- How do outside groups gain traction inside schools? How do inside groups mobilize support outside schools? How do reform and social justice minded teachers and students forge common ground, in and outside schools?
- How do we gather the patience, time, and resources to help young people become practiced in democracy—regardless of where they practice it? How do we do this *in* school, with teachers who have little training in youth development and who confront high stakes tests that reward growth in literacy and numeracy but not civic behavior?
- How do we move beyond the tokenized involvement of young people—for example, the sole student representative on a committee of adults? How do we move beyond the group of “elite youth” whom adults routinely tap for their boards as the “youth representative” and then assume speak for all youth—that is, how do we reach across race and class to find youth delegates whose voices are rarely solicited? How do we give young people recruited for such positions the skills they need to effectively advocate, negotiate, command respect, and stave off marginalization? How do we as adults give young people the space and supports to lead?
- How do we build a larger and larger corps of activist youth leaders, especially among our most marginalized youth? How do we turn their increased capacity into enduring community capital—as role models for other youth, as advocates for rigorous and relevant learning, as a ballast to the inevitable turnover that occurs as youth move on from their schools and neighborhoods? How do we channel critical resources to emerging youth leaders, helping them share their skills with the communities and schools that urgently need strengthening?

For those committed to helping young people exercise their citizenship well—most of all in the schools they attend—these questions are as daunting as the answers are important.

**Appendix: Notes on student-organized forum on small schools
at Fremont HS, Oakland, CA
(April 1, 2002; Barbara Cervone)**

Background

In the spring of 2002 The Forum for Youth Investment and What Kids Can Do launched a small joint project aimed at raising awareness about youth action for educational change nationwide. More than anywhere else in the country, the San Francisco Bay Area is home to a remarkable array of groups—some youth-led, others involving youth-adult partnerships—energetically bringing the voices and ideas of young people to daily issues in the lives of students and schools. Slogans like “Books Not Bars. Schools Not Jails” (from a San Francisco youth-led campaign to fight the increasing incarceration of California juveniles) focus on the larger policies that drive local and state investments in young people.

In March, I visited some ten organizations active in the youth action for educational change “movement” in the Bay Area. During my stay, Youth Together, a group that cultivates student leadership teams in five high schools in Oakland, Berkeley, and Richmond hosted a forum for classmates at Oakland’s Fremont High to discuss the school’s upcoming “transformation” into small learning communities. One of the Youth Together team members is a student representative on Fremont’s first small-school design committee, and the YT team as a whole had spent time researching small schools as part of their activities. The forum offered a unique chance to observe a student-to-student dialogue about the ambitious vision of (adult) school reformers to break large high schools into smaller units—a plan for which Oakland, like a number of other school districts nationwide, has won private grant funds.

Fremont High School is, by most accounts, a poster child for all that ails large urban high schools today: an under-resourced school where 63 percent of entering freshmen do not graduate; where folks commonly refer to the “juvenile justice track” along with the “college-bound”; where various principals as well as school reform ideas have come and gone. But Fremont also remains a place where determined pockets of teachers and students imagine better things for their school and for themselves, fighting “the daily virus of low expectations,” as one teacher put it.

Covering a large city block in one of Oakland’s most challenged neighborhoods, Fremont High is surrounded by a 20-foot-high chain link fence. A security kiosk next to a small chink in the fence appears to be the main point of entry onto the campus. It’s hard to know whether the fence aims to protect the community from the students or vice versa.

Notes from the student forum

The students on Youth Together’s leadership team at Fremont had gained the principal’s permission, a month previously, to host their forum on small schools—a first step in their larger campaign to redress the lack of knowledge, involvement, or access to information about small learning communities among their classmates. They’d devised a plan wherein five students from each class would attend the discussion, then return to their class and explain small schools to their peers. They’d also created a survey that these student emissaries would give to and retrieve from classmates; the YT team would later analyze and share the results with the school community and small schools planners.

The forum began with short presentations by a Fremont teacher, by a staff member from the Bay Area Coalition of Equitable Schools (a group active in the campaign to win Oakland school board support), and by two Youth Together/ Fremont High students. The floor then opened for questions and comments.

Hands flew up among the approximately 150 students in attendance—along with a rush of wisecracks and the “restless energy” that leads adults in these settings to say things like, “Quiet down! There’s no point in our talking if you don’t listen.”

“This school is broke,” one student said. “What guarantee can you give us that this won’t make it even worse?”

“It can’t get no worse!” another student exclaimed.

Several answers came from the stage:

“The research shows it works, that small schools are a promising strategy for improving outcomes for students.” [An audience member retorted: “But did they do research at a school like ours?”]

“It’s our job to make it work. It’s up to us to prove the research true, to make small schools successful here at Fremont.”

“There are no guarantees. It will be hard work, requiring us all to build strong relationships with one another.”

“The most important thing is to make sure that the adults who are leading this change hear your voices. The worst thing that could happen would be if the adults run it without student input.” [From one of the Youth Together students]

One of the students on stage explained how students can provide this input:

“Anyone can start a design team, get others around their ideas, and then become a small school. Once they’ve filled out a detailed plan and get approval for it from the school board, they can start a small school.”

A scattering of questions and comments from the floor followed, such as:

“Why should we be limited to only being with just the people in our small school? If we wanted to go to a small school and just know a few kids, we would have gone to one of the charter schools. We’re here because we wanted to go to a large school and be with lots of kids.”

“What if we don’t want to focus in a particular area, like arts or computers?”

“With small schools, would it mean that events at this school wouldn’t always be being cancelled? Why are things at this school always cancelled? [Answer from teacher on stage: Because we can’t arrange the security. Because kids don’t come up with the money for tickets.]

A student in the rear of the auditorium stood up and asked:

“Here’s what I want to know. Do you have a back-up plan in case this doesn’t work out? This is our school, our lives. We may be bad, but that doesn’t mean we should be an experiment for others.”

The teacher on stage responded:

“That’s a really good question. Our schools are indeed broken. We’ve all seen so much that doesn’t work, reform ideas that didn’t stick. We’re close to the end of the line. It’s time we commit to something. We’ve got to hold onto the belief that things can change, can get better. Small schools aren’t a miracle solution. But they create the opportunities for kids to work on their relationships, to work out their problems, to work on real problems. It’s an idea with hope, something in short supply these days. But it’s an idea that will work only if we make it work, only if the students get behind it and believe in it too.”

Students around the auditorium replied:

“Well, if you wanted students to get behind this idea, why are we just hearing about this now? Why has no one in the administration ever explained it to us? Why didn’t anyone ask us if we wanted small schools?”

“None of the students I know want this. We came to Fremont to go to a regular school.”

“This is our school. Broken or not, it’s our community. How could this happen without anyone consulting us?”

“This just came out of nowhere. Why didn’t you ask the students?”

The adults on stage offered a variety of responses, agreeing that the process for engaging student input has been poor but urging students to contribute their voices now—to talk to teachers and others about their concerns, to join a design team. The community member added:

“There was a coalition of school reformers and community groups that pushed for this. Thousands of parents petitioned for small schools in Oakland.”

To which one student in the audience responded:

“But do any of those people go to our school? Do those school reformers go to our school? Do our parents go to this school? Whose school is Fremont?”

And from the stage:

“Again, this is the reason you all need to bring your voices, now! We need to work together to include your voices.”

“In truth, we’re all in the same boat of having a mandate delivered to us from the school board. I believe in the outcome—small schools—but the process has been wrong. But instead of complaining, we must get involved, we must deal.”

Final comment from the floor:

“You can divide us into five schools, you can divide us into 100 schools. But if the students aren’t behind it, it will fail. You need—you have—to convince us to believe in this. Right now, we don’t.”