



# Students as Allies in Improving Their Schools

A REPORT ON WORK IN PROGRESS

from What Kids Can Do, Inc. and MetLife Foundation

October 2004

|   |    |
|---|----|
| Introduction                                      | 1  |
| Who We Are  | 2  |
| Part I. Nurturing Non-Traditional Student Leaders | 3  |
| Part II. Participatory Research                   | 4  |
| Part III. Thoughtful Dialogue                     | 8  |
| Part IV. Taking Action                            | 12 |

## How can you better engage students in learning? Here is the answer from students.

Start by including us in your planning and conversations, knowing that we care just as much as you do about creating high schools that bring out the best in students and teachers. Invite our ideas and perspectives. Let us explore together where we agree and differ, what's doable and what's not. Make us part of the solution and not the problem.

If you asked what we most want, here's what we would tell you. We want policies that produce schools where . . .

- Teachers know their subject matter well and know how to explain it so that students understand.
- We see the connections between what we are learning and the real world.
- There is at least one person we can go to for support and advice, for both academics and personal issues.
- The relationships between and among students and adults in the school are grounded in respect and trust.
- Discipline is applied equitably and meaningfully across the student body.
- We receive regular feedback on how we're doing and how we can improve.
- Our teachers and counselors talk to us one-on-one about college or other plans for after high school.
- The bathrooms are clean.
- There are enough textbooks and educational supplies for every student.

And where . . .

**Our voices matter.**

# Introduction

*“You love school when it makes you feel smart. When you know the teachers care about you and your future, when they act like they think you’ll be someone in life.”*

— VERONICA, OAKLAND, CA

In many classrooms across the country, neither students nor teachers feel very smart. The refrains are familiar. School is boring, students complain. It’s hard to see a connection between what we’re taught and the real world. Teachers don’t explain things in ways we understand. What we think doesn’t seem to matter.

We can’t do everything, teachers respond. Students are unprepared. It’s tough to reach kids whose backgrounds are so different from our own. Too much of teaching is really just classroom management. Students need to meet us halfway.

Even in “high performing” schools, the aspirations of students and teachers require persistent tending, and pockets of alienation belie the trophy cases. A relentless focus on tests and grades can consume all the oxygen, snuffing out the sort of learning that ignites excitement. School becomes a place where you go through the motions. Students and teachers alike feel robbed of their sense of agency; the most discouraged simply quit.

*What if teachers and students became steady allies rather than frequent adversaries? What would it take for students to become stakeholders not just in their own success but also in that of their teachers and schools?*

With support from MetLife Foundation, What Kids Can Do (WKCD) has explored these questions for several years in an initiative called “Students as Allies.” In Chicago, Houston, Oakland, Philadelphia, and St. Louis, WKCD has collaborated with teams of students and teachers organized by a local non-profit intermediary. The work in each city includes several parts: helping students conduct survey research about their own schools, then supporting dialogue and constructive action around the research results, while nurturing youth leadership all along the way. Here we summarize our efforts to date, mindful that they are still taking shape.

Making students daily allies in improving schools is patient work. Although we refer to it here as a project, it’s really more of a mindset, perspective, or attitude. It requires practice in inviting and asking questions, listening closely, building trust and respect, and taking action with students. We’d like to think that this kind of engaging students as problem solvers in their own schools is becoming its own movement—one to which this report and the WKCD website are proud contributors. Accordingly, the end of this report lists contact information not only for Students as Allies partners but for other groups around the country that seek to immerse students in inquiry and action around a subject close at hand: their own school.

**For more about Students as Allies,**  
go to [http://www.whatkidscando.org/  
studentasalliesintro.html](http://www.whatkidscando.org/studentasalliesintro.html)

Here you will find:

- Sample surveys from the projects
- Final reports from Chicago, Houston, and St. Louis, which include survey findings, plus detailed descriptions of their process
- Tools for engaging students as researchers and decision makers gathered from colleagues nationwide

# Who We Are

MetLife Foundation and What Kids Can Do selected together the five Students as Allies sites, and then WKCD identified local partners, each with unique strengths and relationships to schools in their district. The Cross-City Campaign for Urban School Reform, a national organization based in Chicago, took on the project there as part of a new youth initiative and ongoing efforts in the Chicago Public Schools. In Houston, the Houston A-Plus Challenge recruited the Greater Houston Area Writing Project to spearhead the work. In Oakland, a recently established youth leadership office in the Oakland Unified School District joined forces with several community and university-based youth organizations. In Philadelphia, a university-community collaborative based at Temple University and with seven years' experience working with local teenagers on civic projects, incorporated Students as Allies into its activities. In St. Louis, CHARACTER<sup>plus</sup>, a program with roots in 48 surrounding school districts, embraced the project as a way to strengthen and honor student voices as part of character education.

Local partners, in turn, selected the schools with which they would work (with the exception of Philadelphia where there were no schools directly involved). In St. Louis and Houston, schools applied to the local partner to participate in the project and were chosen on the basis of their proposal. Schools then assembled their own student-research teams, which ranged from five students and three adults per team in St. Louis and Chicago to an entire class in Houston and Oakland.

University-based researchers provided technical assistance in all five sites.

---

## Who We Are: Student as Allies Projects

### CHICAGO, IL

*Partner:* Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform

*University:* Chicago Consortium on School Research

*High Schools:* Dyett Academic Center, Orr, Roosevelt, and the Young Women's Leadership Charter School

### HOUSTON, TX

*Partners:* Houston A-Plus Challenge and the Greater Houston Area Writing Project

*University:* University of Houston at Clear Lake

*High Schools:* Bellaire, Chavez, Furr, Lee, Madison, Reagan, and Scarborough

### OAKLAND, CA

*Partners:* Oakland Unified School District, along with Youth Engaged in Leadership and Learning (YELL), Youth Together, and Youth In Focus

*University:* John W. Gardner Center at Stanford University

*High Schools:* Oakland Tech, McClymonds, Skyline

PHILADELPHIA, PA

*Partner:* University Community Collaborative of Philadelphia at Temple University

*High Schools:* No direct school partners

ST. LOUIS, MO

*Partner:* CHARACTERplus/Cooperating School Districts of St. Louis

*University:* University of Missouri-St. Louis

*High Schools:* Francis Howell Central, Lindbergh, Perryville, Rockwood Summit, Webster Groves, Wentzville Holt

## I. Nurturing Non-Traditional Student Leaders

### Student Comments about TryUMF, the leadership class at Oakland Tech High School

“What TryUMF does is provide a forum, like a family, for us to say what we want. Because we’re in a program, it’s easier for us to say something positive and not get shot down.”

“Oakland students, particularly minority students, are at a disadvantage. We’re seen as ignorant, dumb, so we need to represent ourselves well to buck those stereotypes. We need to listen, watch how we speak and with whom we speak. We need to know who we are and what we want. This program teaches us these things.”

“I think TryUMF offers a way for students to change the vibe of a school and how it operates. A lot of times students are scared to stand out and do something different or positive because there is a lot of antagonizing. In Oakland schools, many people don’t want to see anything positive; they’re satisfied with the status quo and just come to school to kick it and not really to learn.”

*“I think that every student who participated in this program is going to be an example to their school. Students will look up to them and hopefully listen and try to understand and support them. Maybe this will make school a better place for all of us.”* – ERMARDIA, ST. LOUIS, MO

From the start, a goal of Students as Allies was to enlist students who weren’t recognized leaders in their schools. We believed that engaging students who were not academic or social standouts (though the student teams did include these traditional leaders, too) would enrich the participatory research process. The questions they would ask—and the kids to whom they’d put their questions—would bring out student voices that otherwise might go unheard.

In some cases, this inclusiveness happened naturally. The teachers in the Greater Houston Area Writing Project wove the initiative into one or more of their regular classes, turning every student in the class into a participant. In Philadelphia, the 90 student researchers, all participants in the “Youth Voices” summer program, came from the city’s poorest neighborhoods and schools.

When composing the research teams in St. Louis, however, teachers purposefully thought about the many cliques that made up their student body, then recruited students that reflected this diversity.

At one school, teachers enlisted a male student who always seemed on the leading edge of trouble in the cafeteria and another whose black attire, body piercing, and diffidence screamed “off limits.” (They ended up being the team’s most reliable members.)

In Oakland, the 90 student participants were enrolled in a special class, in each of their high schools, designed to cultivate non-traditional student leaders. The curriculum

examined obstacles to learning in high schools where poverty, alienation, and violence sap hope, and many of the students brought this consciousness to the project. It shaped the issues covered in their surveys, from what happened too often (student profanity or class disruptions) to what didn't happen enough (being greeted in the morning by administrators or studying with friends outside school). Later, it also rightly fueled their impatience with moving findings to action.

In all the Students as Allies sites, reaching out to students who seemed unlikely leaders gave these young people the chance to learn important leadership skills. Lessons in team-building and communication skills thus intertwined with survey design and analysis in the training students received—and these enduring benefits to individual students count among the initiative's strongest contributions.

## II. Participatory Research

*“Adult researchers have written all these reports about which students are failing and why. It's time students became the studiers and not just the studied. We might even teach the professionals a few things.”* — JOSE, HOUSTON, TX

When first invited then supported to carry out their own research on their schools, students can ask questions and collect answers as rigorously as any adults. They also ask questions that wouldn't occur to academic researchers and use language that's more youth-friendly, increasing the likelihood that fellow students will respond thoughtfully. This was certainly our experience with Students as Allies.

### Tips from Student Researchers

- Remember that you only get answers to the questions you ask. Also, be sure to ask the same question in different ways.
- Be careful how you word your questions. Poor questions get poor answers.
- Survey teachers along with students, especially on the same issues. We found big differences in each group's experience of school.
- Explain to students and teachers in advance of administering the survey what it involves and why it's important. Remind students that it's not a test—nor a joke. Tell them how you'll use the results.
- Use SurveyMonkey.com. Students and teachers can answer surveys online and get organized data back immediately.

### What we did

We launched our research collaborative by studying recent national surveys of teachers and students conducted by MetLife. We identified areas where knowing the thoughts of students and teachers would help students become actors in improving their schools, such as: school climate, student-teacher relationships, teaching styles, academic expectations, safety and discipline, student voice, and improving student learning. Having agreed that a survey would be our primary research tool, we then drafted questions tied to these areas and circulated them among the student research teams in all five sites. We encouraged students and teachers to reword, collapse, or omit questions as they saw fit, as well as to add questions specific to their own school. We cared more about students learning survey design and owning their research than about keeping questions identical and the generalizability of their results.

The student research teams took this invitation to heart, sharpening questions that seemed ambiguous and engaging classmates in focused discussions to determine what needed investigating within their school. The team at one St. Louis school, for example, conducted 75 interviews before drafting and finalizing the school-specific part of their survey.

We ended up with almost as many different surveys as schools participating. They all included, though, a common core of questions within and across sites, along with questions particular to each team—a blend that would yield data that could be added up across the project as a whole and data whose meaning resided within a specific school.

More than 6,350 students completed surveys, and in St. Louis and Chicago 446 teachers did so as well. (Houston teachers will be surveyed in fall 2004.) Student teams determined whom they would survey within their school, aiming for a representative sample, and administered surveys during class time. The schools, by and large, were medium to large urban high schools facing numerous challenges; few would end up on a district's "high performing" list.

## **What we found**

Predictably, student researchers uncovered both positive and troubling news.

### *Much good will and intentions*

Despite constant headlines about schools in crisis, our results show an abundance of good will, even at schools described as failing. Eighty-nine percent of the students polled across the five sites said, "I really want to learn," and 83 percent said they participate regularly in class. Eighty-seven percent respected most of their teachers; 84 percent thought their teachers respected them.

When asked to grade their teachers, 84 percent gave their teachers an "A" or "B" on "knowing their subject well"; 76 percent graded teachers with an "A" or "B" on "being well organized" and "believing all children can learn."

Teachers were even more upbeat. Ninety-three percent of those surveyed agreed that other teachers at their school were committed to teaching and doing what's best for students; 87 percent believed their school curriculum challenges students. Eighty-nine percent thought the teachers at their school respected all races and cultures, and 81 percent said their colleagues had high expectations for students.

### *Concerns about treating students as individuals and with respect*

The survey also surfaced a number of concerns. Students split down the middle on whether they believed the majority of teachers at their school regard students as individuals and do not stereotype them. While 52 percent gave their teachers an "A" or "B" on teaching students according to their individual needs and abilities, 17 percent gave them a "D" or "F."

Students were equally divided on the fairness of their school’s discipline policy—or more precisely, whether it was applied uniformly across the student body. At one Oakland high school, 57 percent of the students said the administration did a good job of “posting and clarifying school rules,” but only 38 percent thought the administration “enforced school rules evenly.”

Only half of all students surveyed agreed that faculty and administrators value what they have to say. This was perhaps our most consistent finding, rarely wavering more than a few percentage points from school to school and site to site.

Among students who reported they had considered dropping out of school (18 percent), 58 percent cited not getting along with their teachers as the biggest factor. Only a quarter picked bullying or school safety.

***Discrepancies in views of student-teacher relations***

The survey turned up troubling discrepancies in how students and teachers view their interactions with each other. Two-thirds of the students said their teachers don’t understand them or their life outside school. More than a quarter of the students surveyed said there isn’t a single adult in their school whom they feel they could approach with a problem.

Survey results reveal a striking gap between how frequently students and teachers report talking one-on-one with each other about various issues. In Chicago, 27 percent of students said their teachers often talked to them one-on-one about active classroom participation and good academic performance; 80 percent of the teachers, though, said they brought up these subjects often in one-on-one conversations with students. While only 33 percent of the students said their teachers often explain to them individually how to complete a homework assignment, 70 percent of the teachers report having this conversation frequently with individual students. The numbers in St. Louis tell a parallel story.

| <b>St. Louis students and teachers who report often or very often talking one-on-one about . . .</b> | <b>Students (N=4,460)</b> | <b>Teachers (N=358)</b> | <b>Percentage Difference</b> |
|--|---------------------------|-------------------------|------------------------------|
| class behavior   | 19.0%                     | 40.4%                   | 21.4%                        |
| plans for college or work after high school  | 32.4%                     | 58.8%                   | 26.2%                        |
| academic performance   | 28.6%                     | 66.5%                   | 37.9%                        |
| completing homework assignments  | 24.9%                     | 67.0%                   | 42.1%                        |
| interests and things important to students   | 29.6%                     | 77.7%                   | 48.1%                        |

***What would help students do better***

In several sites, students asked peers how much various items would support their learning. The list included real world applications, more one-on-one attention from teachers, more challenging classes, and more parent/guardian involvement. Real world learning



won the most votes from students; 47 percent said it would “help a lot.” One-third of students agreed that being able to take textbooks home would help their studies a lot.

### ***Variations among sites***

Student responses varied considerably across cities on several issues. For example, only 46 percent of the Chicago students thought their school was safe; in Oakland the percentage was similar at 51. In Houston and St. Louis, however, 68 and 83 percent, respectively, believed their school was safe. While 84 percent of the St. Louis students said their teachers were respectful of students, the percentage drops to 68 in Oakland. Fewer Chicago students rated their school’s curriculum as challenging (61 percent) than in the other four sites.

### ***School-specific findings***

The questions students asked in the school-specific portion of their surveys are as interesting as their answers; they reveal profound differences in culture and opportunity that distinguish schools not just in different parts of the country but within miles of each other.

In Houston, for example, academic pressure topped the list of student concerns in one of the district’s most rigorous high schools, where half the students are enrolled in honors classes. The survey students created had no fewer than 45 questions on the subject, some alarming: “Bellaire’s competitive culture encourages cheating” (60 percent agreed) or “When I am sick, I come to school anyway because I will have too much make-up work if I stay home” (82 percent agreed).

By contrast, three very different issues received special billing on the students’ survey at Houston’s Lee High School, where the once largely white, middle-class student body has given way to immigrant students. (Over 40 percent speak limited English.) These included replacing tennis courts that no one uses with a basketball court (80 percent were in favor); cleaning up the bathrooms (96 percent agreed, but only 52 percent were willing to help clean them); and taking teachers on guided tours of students’ neighborhoods (opinion split on this idea).

Taken together, the school-specific questions also show how much students care about their school and what they value. They ask, among other things:

- Are our teachers passionate about what they do?
- Do our counselors know us?
- Is it easy to make new friends at our school?
- Are we getting the computer instruction we need to succeed?
- Should our school have an open campus? a school mural? a school store?
- What items should get top priority in the school budget?
- When it comes to diversity, does our school practice what it preaches?

# III. Thoughtful Dialogue

*“We hope this report sparks important conversations among students, teachers, and administrators across our city. We must all talk if our schools are to improve.”* – INTRODUCTION TO STUDENTS AS ALLIES CHICAGO FINAL REPORT, APRIL 2004

Among adult researchers, the process of gathering data and weaving it into a written report sometimes stands in for energetic dialogue about the findings. With our student researchers there was no mistaking one for the other. They were eager, even impatient, to generate conversations about their survey results with those who mattered most: their teachers, administrators, and classmates.

## Sample Analysis

*[from student researchers at  
Young Women’s Leadership Charter School, Chicago]*

### STATEMENT:

Sixty-five percent of the teachers in our survey said that not having enough time to get to know students was a minimal problem, while 64 percent of the students said there were no teachers, or at most one, with whom they can talk about personal issues.

### HYPOTHESES: What may explain this disconnect?

- Many teachers don’t value getting to know their students. Students pick this up in a teacher’s body language, their attitude, the things they don’t say, as much as what they do say. A cycle of mutual avoidance sets in.
- Many teachers may feel that they shouldn’t deal with student issues that are someone else’s responsibility, like a social worker. If it’s not in their area of expertise, there’s not a lot of incentive to take on the responsibility. Getting to know students well doesn’t show up in a teacher’s paycheck.
- Many teachers have a habit of dismissing personal issues students bring up as irrelevant to the subject. This gives students the impression that a teacher is unapproachable. It creates a mental barrier between students and teachers.
- Some teachers may be afraid to let down the student-teacher barrier for fear that it will result in the student bringing false accusations against the teacher.

## Analysis

The conversations began with students making sense of the data they had collected. Within their schools, they analyzed the results from their school-specific surveys; at special meetings that brought together teams from across schools, they dissected their citywide results.

Students debated what might account for a particular finding. Why, the team at one Chicago high school wondered, did 83 percent of the teachers believe their school was safe when only 32 percent of students did? Another Chicago team explored why 35 percent of the students surveyed said they’d considered dropping out of school, but only 9 percent had ever talked to a teacher about it.

Students also asked hard questions about what made a finding reassuring or troubling, and what they hoped to see if, as one student put it, “things in our school were in good working order.” In St. Louis, for example, 57 percent of the 4,460 students surveyed agreed that they were involved in school decision-making and that their teachers valued their opinions. Reversing the result, however, students judged the 43 percent of students who felt they had little or no voice as unacceptable. “It should be more like 25 percent,” they agreed,

*From an article in the Philadelphia Inquirer, August 6, 2003*

### **Boredom cited as a reason for thoughts of dropping out**

*by Susan Snyder, Staff Writer*

The top reason that Philadelphia students consider dropping out of school is boredom. At least that's the result of a survey conducted by students themselves in a summer program at Temple University.

Of 239 students polled, 27 percent said they had considered dropping out. Sixty-six percent of those who said they weighed quitting cited boredom as one of the reasons.

Deloris Johnson, 15, a student at South Philadelphia High School who helped conduct the survey, agreed with the findings. "A lot of the teachers give you one worksheet a day and after that, you're sitting there the rest of the day. Students want to go to school and learn things," she said.

Yesterday, in a discussion at Temple among surveyors, parents and educators, Naja Hill, 15, of University City High School, asked teachers to listen. "They need to really engage their students to make their classroom more exciting and hands-on," she said.

Nathaniel Fabian, a student at George Washington Carver High School of Engineering and Science, one of the city's academic magnets, said some responsibility lies with students. "We must be organized as students, too, and not just organized in our materials, but organized in our minds."

To improve city high schools, students recommended more activities that get students excited about learning, taking more responsibility for their own learning, and more one-on-one attention from teachers. A safer school environment and more challenging classes also were among the top suggestions.

Anastasia Stogiannis, of the district's office of school and community relations, was impressed with the students' work and said the high school curriculum was being overhauled to make classes more rigorous and engaging.

"Overall, it was an amazing presentation," she said. "It really showcased that students are opinionated, do know the issues, and have ideas

reasoning that for probably a quarter of the students in any school, voice may not be a concern.

With regard to a "sense of belonging," the St. Louis students set the bar higher still. Seventy-nine percent agreed with the statement "I feel I belong at my school, that I'm accepted and liked." For some of the student researchers, the fact that a fifth of the students felt they didn't belong was disturbing. "I know it sounds unrealistic," one student said, "but if we really mean no child left behind, then every student needs to feel they matter in a school."

### **Public presentations**

In all five Students as Allies sites, student research teams presented their findings at public summits that brought together students, teachers, and administrators. Each summit followed its own script.

The largest, in Houston, gathered 400 students and teachers from 15 of the city's 24 comprehensive high school for a day of presentations, workshops, and discussions. Student teams shared their research using familiar presentation tools like flip charts and PowerPoint but also through skits, video, and hip hop poetry.

The smallest meeting, in Chicago, engaged all 65 participants in interactive exercises. In one, participants indicated their level of agreement with a specific survey question by moving to specified areas of the room – "strongly agrees" in one corner, "somewhat disagrees" in another, and so on. Student facilitators then invited participants from each corner to explain their choices, opening up spirited discussion.

At Philadelphia's summit, students presented their findings to a panel composed of a district adminis-

trator, funder, university researcher, and community activist. “You have real concrete data here,” said the district administrator, “and we must make it part of our planning.” The university researcher challenged the students to explore the root causes underlying the problems they had surfaced. “You need more analysis to know where to look for leverage and allies,” he advised.

In St. Louis, student-teacher teams and university and community partners gathered to compare notes in “mini” summits every three months. At the fourth and final meeting, students and faculty from other St. Louis high schools joined the conversation (along with students from the Chicago project), and in roundtable discussions queried each research team in depth about their work. Later, a dozen of the student guests took part in a “fishbowl” exercise where they talked among themselves about what they’d learned while the Students As Allies research teams listened in.

### What makes a teacher worth paying attention to?

*[from students at Chavez High School, Houston]*

- ... **when** the teacher interacts with the students and isn’t afraid of a challenge, she is always there for her students
- ... **when** they are caring, funny, and inspiring
- ... **when** they don’t put you down or make you look bad in front of other people, when they stay on your level and actually talk to you, when they don’t call on you when they know you don’t know the answer
- ... **when** they believe I can do my best if I just put my mind to it and not be lazy
- ... **when** they let me know exactly what I have to do and when I’m doing a good job
- ... **when** they relate schoolwork to real life problems
- ... **when** they give us a lot of work but make sure we understand it before they move on
- ... **when** they don’t scream at us, when they always try their best to explain whatever you need help on
- ... **when** they don’t judge you before they get to know you, when they make you comfortable because they talk about their life so that it seems like you know them
- ... **when** they use a variety of methods for learning, when they teach one-on-one if necessary, when they put effort into their students’ learning

Oakland’s summit convened student, teacher, and community activists from throughout the city, in addition to the Students as Allies research teams (from three of the city’s six comprehensive high schools). The agenda paired student presentations about their research with concrete skill-building workshops on topics like youth organizing and college access.

### Classroom discussions

Public meetings like these offer crucial venues for students to make their voices heard. However, as one of our student researchers commented, “what really truly counts is when we can talk about these issues in class, with the teachers and students we mix with daily, where the conversation can make an immediate difference.”

Many teachers in the project carved out time in their classrooms for just such conversations. To help them along, we provided discussion prompts and exercises, drawing from the questions WKCD author Kathleen Cushman used with 40 students to create *Fires in the Bathroom: Advice for Teachers from High School Students* (The New Press, 2003).

Students and teachers explored, for example, ways that teachers unknowingly encourage or discourage students: How does a teacher give little signals that

she expects you to try hard and do well? That she doesn't expect you to? That she thinks you are smart, or not?

They critiqued teaching strategies in which students are invited to be more active: What do you like or dislike about group work, hands-on activities, projects and presentations, and why? If they're not working, what could teachers do to make them work better?

They explored tensions between students and teachers that sometimes disrupt classrooms: What does it feel like to be in a class where there's a lot of tension? How does a teacher know when a student has disrespected her—or vice versa? How can the teacher fix the situation?

They learned more about each other's strengths. In one exercise, students and teachers listed everything they knew a lot about, regardless of whether they learned it in or outside school, along with who had helped them learn it. As they shared their lists, they discovered talents in others they'd never known about—plus a heightened awareness of all the ways and places that learning occurs.

Of all the sites, Houston students and teachers in particular invested in classroom discussions like these as part of their Students as Allies work. Many read and discussed *Fires in the Bathroom* as a classroom text. Later teachers there spoke glowingly of the ripple effects:

- *“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 annoyed they are by students who don't take learning seriously.”*
- *“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. There's simply a lot more attention being paid to relationships within the school than ever before.”*
- *“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.”*

## IV. Taking Action

*“For once, I hope my students believe this is going to bring about real changes in our school. Otherwise, they could care less. The real work starts where the data leaves off.”*

— TEACHER, HOUSTON, TX

Even for seasoned researchers and activists, translating data into change can be enormously difficult. For our student teams, taking action on the issues flagged by their research—something most are just now starting to do, having completed the research

and discussion phases—requires that they learn additional new skills. First, they must decide what they will tackle, picking issues that are both meaningful and “winnable.” Second, they must figure out where their leverage lies with respect to these issues. Third, they must cultivate allies; and fourth they must maintain their seriousness of purpose as they ask others to take them seriously.

In Chicago and Oakland, where individual school teams also joined together to form a larger cross-school team, the initial action step has been to engage district administration around their findings. In Oakland, students met with the state-appointed administrator who now oversees the district, his chief of staff, and the director of high schools in a discussion that lasted two hours. A group of students also filmed the meeting, adding to it other footage they have taken as part of a video documentary of the project, which will air on local public television in December 2004. In addition, the state-appointed administrator attended the students’ public summit, where conversation continued about how to tackle the recommendations students had produced from the data.

### Checklist for choosing an issue

#### Will working on the issue . . .

- . . . result in real improvement in people’s lives?
  - . . . give people a sense of their power?
  - . . . alter the relations of power?
    - . . . be winnable?
    - . . . be widely felt?
    - . . . be deeply felt?
  - . . . be easy to understand?
  - . . . have a clear target?
- . . . have a clear time frame that works for the group?
  - . . . be non-divisive?
  - . . . build leadership?
- . . . be consistent with your mission, values, and vision?

- Adapted from *The Midwest Academy*,  
Chicago, IL

In Houston, students are chipping away at small, discrete items raised in their school-specific surveys. At Lee High School, for example, where refurbishing the school bathrooms stirred strong feelings, students wrote a proposal and won funds from a local foundation to overhaul the bathrooms, contingent on students helping to keep them clean. At Bellaire High School, students and teachers are taking a hard look at healthy ways to relieve academic pressure, like improving coordination among teachers with respect to scheduling major assignments and frank discussions about cheating. At another Houston school, the principal has established a regular time each day for students to drop by to talk; with input from students, the vice principals are also reworking disciplinary policies and taking another look at the dress code.

The action taken in St. Louis is distinguished by how systematic the student-teacher teams have been. Each team selected and developed a plan of attack for one or more issues that met the criteria of being both meaningful and winnable. Remedies have been small but immediately tangible—one of the questions students had to answer as they identified an issue was, “What do you want to see, hear, and feel [as a result of this action]?”

Improving student-teacher relationships has been a focus of much of this energy, and the strategies are plentiful. They include shortening classes by a few minutes to create 20-30 minutes each morning for students and teachers to meet; creating a student-coordinated “teacher of the month” award; facilitating email communication among teachers and students; developing a program of student-teacher symposiums on topics of mutual concern. At one school, teachers posted in the faculty room a chart listing the name and grade of every student. They asked teachers to check off the students with whom they had at least a modest relationship in order to identify those students whom faculty barely knew—and then to do something about it.

As much as any school, St. Louis’s Webster Grove High School shows what is possible when will and data join forces. First, the student-teacher team flagged the most troubling survey items (like teachers feeling frustrated and unappreciated in their jobs, or students complaining about teachers playing favorites); then they grouped the items in themes. Later they organized and held a weekend retreat that brought together 40 students, 15 teachers, and 15 community members and parents to draw up strategies that would forcibly respond to the identified concerns.

Some of the actions are surprisingly easy or inexpensive: putting up more student work on the walls, creating a peer tutoring program, allowing students to pursue independent study, encouraging teachers to stand at their classroom door to greet entering students. As one teacher commented, “it’s the small things that add up, especially when they are noticeable, and make people feel hopeful.”

The Webster Grove retreat, however, also produced what many would consider a large decision. The administration has agreed to make students part of all hiring decisions at the school. Students also will regularly evaluate teachers, providing written feedback on both the effectiveness of their teaching and their relationships with students.

Lea Garcia, a student on the Webster Grove Students as Allies team, ticks off her accomplishments: “I’ve talked with the principal in early morning meetings. I’ve discussed the situation with fellow students. I’ve discussed the survey and how we can condense it. I’ve gotten valid opinions and concerns from my peers. I’ve learned about some things that need to be changed in our school. I’ve taken on a leadership role in the process.”

We would add to her list one last item: this student has helped breath renewed hope and purpose into her school.

## Students as Allies contact information

### Chicago

Liza Pappas | Cross-City Campaign for Urban School Reform | 312.322.4884 | lpappas@crosscity.org

---

### Houston

Tim Martindell | Houston A-Plus Challenge | 713.658.1881 | tmartindell@houston-aplus.org

Peggy Hill | Greater Houston Area Writing Project | 281.283.3533 | hillp@cl.uh.edu

---

### Oakland

Michele Levine | Oakland Unified School District | 510.879.8382 | mlevine@ousd.k12.ca.us

---

### Philadelphia

Barbara Ferman | Community Collaborative of Philadelphia/Temple University | 215.204.6276 | bferman@astro.temple.edu

---

### St. Louis

Diane Stirling | CHARACTER*plus*/Cooperating School Districts of St. Louis | 314.692.9722 | dstirling@csd.org

## Valuable links and resources

**Forum for Youth Investment** | Case studies and readings on “Youth Action for Educational Change” | 202.207.3333 | www.fyi.org

---

**Funders’ Collaborative on Youth Organizing** | Supports youth research and organizing around a number of issues, including school reform | 212.213.2113 | www.fcyo.org

---

**John W. Gardner Center at Stanford University** | “Youth Engaged in Leadership and Learning” (YELL) project in SF Bay Area | 650.725.1845 | www.gardnercenter.stanford.edu

---

**Opportunity Gap Project at C.U.N.Y. Graduate Center** | Multi-year youth research collaborative studying learning inequities within and across urban and suburban schools | Michelle Fine, Distinguished Professor of Social Psychology and Urban Education | mfine@gc.cuny.edu



**Northwest Regional Education Lab** | “Listening to Student Voices” toolkit | 503.275.9519 | [www.nwrel.org/scpd/scc/studentvoices](http://www.nwrel.org/scpd/scc/studentvoices)

---

**Soundout.org** | An online resource center designed to promote meaningful student involvement in school change | 360.753.2686 | [www.soundout.org](http://www.soundout.org)

---

**Youth in Focus** | Spearheads youth-led research and evaluation on how communities and schools meet pressing youth needs | 510.251.9800 | [www.youthinfocus.net](http://www.youthinfocus.net)

---

**Youth on Board** | Strengthens relationships between youth and adults—especially those serving on advisory board—through publications, customized workshops, and technical assistance | 617.623.9900 X1242 | [www.youthonboard.org](http://www.youthonboard.org)



**What Kids Can Do, Inc.**

Through an array of programs, publication, and media, What Kids Can Do brings youth voices and work to bear on critical issues facing schools and communities. It also presents powerful examples of what young people, guided by teachers and other adults, can contribute and achieve. [www.whatkidscando.org](http://www.whatkidscando.org)

WKCD | P.O. Box 603252 | Providence, RI 02906 | 401.247.7665

**MetLife Foundation**

**MetLife Foundation**

MetLife Foundation, established in 1976 by MetLife, supports programs that increase opportunities for young people to succeed, give students and teachers a voice in improving education, develop partnerships between schools and communities, and strengthen relationships among parents, teachers and students.

MetLife Foundation | 27-01 Queens Plaza North | Long Island City, NY 11101



**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**.



## **Students as Allies in Improving Their Schools:** A Report on Work in Progress

from What Kids Can Do, Inc. and MetLife Foundation

October 2004