

RESEARCH TO PRACTICE

From Research to Practice, a column dedicated to recognizing successful “bridges” between researchers and practitioners, reports on research with practical implications for youth civic engagement. Additionally, it presents concrete examples of how practitioners have applied this research to encourage the participation of young people in civic and political life.

YOUTH-LED RESEARCH: INDIANAPOLIS STUDENT RESEARCHERS INVESTIGATE THEIR SCHOOLS

What would

it take for every high school student to be successful in school? The question has been asked by teachers, school administrators, and education researchers around the country. And now, it is being asked on a daily basis by high school students in Indiana's most urban school district – Indianapolis Public Schools. With support from a CIRCLE Youth-Led Research grant, students in five public high schools are investigating what students think will best enable them to learn. The student research teams operate in partnership with CELL (Center of Excellence in Leadership of Learning) at the University of Indianapolis and with VISTA volunteers through the Harmony/VISTA Service Learning Demonstration Project. Each of the five schools has at least one full-time VISTA volunteers serving as a mentor to about ten student researchers. All of the student researchers receive a stipend for their work. Toya Cosby, a researcher at Northwest High School, described her first encounter with the research project: “I heard about it from the VISTA at my school. And, to be honest, the money drew my attention. But, by the end of the semester I knew it was real serious and I had forgotten all about the money...As a student, I know something about what goes around in school, and this project gave me a voice.” Student researchers are able to harness their “inside” knowledge about their schools to ask pointed questions of their peers; questions that they hope will yield lessons not just for students, but for teachers and school administrators.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The researchers have structured their project design in order to identify factors related to their and their fellow students' success and motivation. Specifically, they are asking questions about school climate, the supportiveness of teachers and other students, school size, and the extent to which students are included in school decisions.

All five of the participating high schools have received funding from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to begin conversion to small schools. Thus far, the schools have established small learning communities that emphasize different topics or subjects; IPS' new small school conver-

sions are scheduled to open their doors in August 2005. Student researchers hope to assess how and if these changes in school structure have impacted all students, and whether the changes have had the desired effects.

Before student researchers began collecting any data, all five teams went through joint trainings. Ruth Green, Senior Research Fellow at CELL, designed training exercises to introduce students to research concepts. According to Green, “A lot of initial work was on the responsibility of research and the differences between opinion, fact, and judgment - which I don't think the students had been exposed to before.” Combining the training with hands-on practice made lessons on the responsibility of research come to life. “These concepts became real through applying them in a context with personal meaning for the students...that's when they identified themselves as ‘real researchers.’”

In order to collect a variety of data, the research teams have opted for a three-part methodology. First, they administered a student and teacher survey in all five schools. Next, they solicited student input and opinions through “informal data collection” activities. For example, they held “chalk talks” where they left an open question to students on a blackboard. Throughout the week, students contributed their thoughts and responses, and the final product was transcribed. Finally, the researchers will conduct interviews with classmates to ask more in-depth questions.



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PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

The Indianapolis student researchers surveyed a total of 4,200 students in five public high schools. In the process they created one of the most comprehensive local data sources on student attitudes. Amanda Carter, a student researcher at Emmerich Manual High School, said some of their findings came as a surprise. "People didn't know what was going on. Teachers thought students were prepared for college, but they had no idea how many were actually dropping out." The survey found that a strong majority of students - over 70% - intended to pursue some college. While this seemed to reflect a real desire on the part of students, it conflicted with IPS educators who estimate the drop-out rate to be as high as 65%. Among the students surveyed only 2% predicted they would drop out of high school. The researchers unveiled other surprising findings including that the majority of students do not have an adult in the school who knows anything about their home lives and most think there is too much disrespect among students.

BRINGING IN THE EXPERTS

As a result of their work, students were invited to present their findings to principals, teachers, parents, and key school administrators. Toya Cosby recalls that when her team heard about the presentation opportunity they were nervous. "At first we were like, 'how are we going to do this.' But we were ready." According to researcher Quentin Vaden from Arsenal Technical High School, "The teachers asked us a lot of questions - a lot of "why" questions. But to me, they were easy to answer. We had it all down." In fact, the students did have the facts down, and

the presentations were something of a role reversal in terms of expertise. Explains Megan Howey, State Director of the Harmony/VISTA Service Learning Demonstration Project, "So many teachers' minds were changed that day by students. It was powerful because the student researchers started with the facts and teachers couldn't accuse them of biases because they had the data...It made the teachers want to change and made the kids really think about the true purpose of schools."

In spite of their findings, the work of the student research teams is far from over. Student researchers are in the process of drafting interview questions as a follow-up to their survey. And, in the process, they are working with the Indianapolis Public Schools department of educational programming to create a documentary of their project. Students will be involved in the creative design and editing, and of course, their work will be the main feature. ★

LESSONS FROM ADULT MENTORS

- ≡ Get buy-in from the school district you are working with.
- ≡ Identify district resources and partners; for example the district's department of educational programming.
- ≡ Don't be afraid to broaden a project using full-time VISTA volunteers: national service can be a tool to support youth voice and youth-led research.

LESSONS FROM YOUTH-LED RESEARCHERS

- ≡ Be willing to learn what you don't know.
- ≡ Make sure you listen.
- ≡ Be committed & dedicated.
- ≡ Know what you're talking about.

(Compiled by student researchers: Toya Cosby, Daryl Jones, Erica Shovan, and Quentin Vaden).