POLICY BRIEF

TO: Natalie Beyer
SUBJECT: Best Practices for Involving Students in Decision Making with DPS

Durham Public Schools strategic plan, “One Vision. One Durham” that was released in January 2011 seeks to develop a community of students who are engaged, active citizens. This plan contains goals that will unite “Parents, staff and the community create the triangle we need to make this Strategic Plan a reality” while establishing a “standard [that] must be raised to address the needs of the students”1. One strategy to help accomplish these goals would involve building on existing efforts within DPS to increase student involvement. This memo will highlight the benefits of promoting students’ involvement in decision making on issues that effect their education and address the following questions:

- Why is meaningful student involvement in decision making important?
- What are the characteristics that promote meaningful student involvement?
- What current policies are in place to provide students with input into decision making in Durham Public Schools?
- What do current DPS students say about their involvement and awareness?
- What are possible avenues to improve student-involvement in the Durham Public Schools?

These questions were addressed through reviewing the literature pertaining to student involvement, through interviews conducted with leaders in education and youth engagement in the Durham Public Schools, and through a student survey administered to students at Jordan High School and Riverside High School. Additional details on the issues addressed below can be found in the longer research paper prepared in conjunction with this brief.

Why is meaningful student involvement in decision making important?

Research on promoting student involvement in decision-making has indicated that this engagement supports youth autonomy and other characteristics of self-determination, which have positive outcomes for students’ academic performance2. Other research has linked increased autonomy to enhanced feelings of well-being, academic achievement, more adaptive behaviour, and an increased value placed on education, suggesting that promoting students’ involvement in decision making may also contribute to these positive educational outcomes.

Several case study examples of the impacts of student involvement and autonomy on relevant educational outcomes are outlined below.
• Second-graders in Pittsburgh were given some choice about their learning, including the chance to decide which tasks they would work on at any given moment; they tended to “complete more learning tasks in less time.”

• When teachers of inner city black children were trained in a program designed to promote a sense of self-determination and autonomy, the students in these classes missed less school and scored better on a national test of basic skills than those in conventional classrooms.

• In Pennsylvania, students’ involvement in wellness goals was promoted by having them work with local education agencies to develop Local Wellness Policies. Students’ engagement in school nutrition policies was shown to increase, as did student acceptance in an array of health-related areas. This program may have promise in the area of obesity prevention.

As discussed below, survey results obtained from current Durham Public Schools students would also suggest benefits to involving students in decision-making. Given these results, it would be beneficial to assess how Durham Public Schools can increase collaboration with students in decision making.

What are the characteristics of programs that promote meaningful student involvement?

Although there is no standard “how-to” guide for promoting students’ involvement in policy decisions that affect their educational experience, several programs have achieved significant and sustainable student involvement. These programs exist in Boston, San Francisco and Anne Arundel County, Maryland. Key elements that these programs share include the following:

• **Adult facilitation** – A designated adult who is not a member of the Board of Education is responsible for overseeing the program and organizational logistics, e.g., securing meeting space, facilitating meetings & communication between students and school leaders.

• **Alliances** – These programs utilize national organizations or local non-profits that provide students and administrators with training and resources for involving students in decision making (examples include; SoundOut – [http://www.soundout.org/webbreport.html](http://www.soundout.org/webbreport.html), Youth on Board – [www.youthonboard.org](http://www.youthonboard.org), and Youth Leadership Institute – [www.yli.org](http://www.yli.org)).

• **Establishing effective communication** – These programs have mechanisms in place to keep students informed of policy issues in which their input would be valuable. Effective communication means keeping students informed of policy changes and keeping policymakers informed of students’ ideas and opinions on these policies.
More detailed information about how these policies are implemented can be found in the research paper that supplements this brief.

What current policies are in place to provide students with input into decision making in the Durham Public Schools?

In 2007, Policy 4900 – the High School Student Advisory Council - was created to give students a voice in decision making in the Durham Public Schools and to facilitate communication between students and DPS administration. This policy stipulates that:

- Students will elect a member from each high school in the district to serve on a Student Advisory Council.
- Members of the Student Advisory Council will attend board meetings and committee meetings of interest and report on these activities at their school and at student council meetings.
- The Student Advisory Council will attend one joint meeting with the superintendent and interested school board members to discuss matters of concern and interest to the students.

Interviews with leaders in education in Durham Public Schools (see below) indicate that this policy has yet to be enacted in a meaningful way.

Interview and Survey Results

Board of Education Members

Three Durham Public Schools Board of Education members were interviewed to obtain their views on current efforts to involve students in decision-making within DPS. Key findings from these interviews indicate that:

- All three board members feel that obtaining meaningful student involvement is important.
- All three board members feel that the policy in place to give students a voice in decision making has not yet been effectively implemented.
- Perceived barriers to implementation include the need to prioritize other issues over student involvement, and not being able to receive input from a diverse group of students in an effective way.

Teachers
Two Durham Public School teachers were interviewed; one teacher from Jordan High School and one teacher from Riverside High School. Both teachers felt student voice was not as strong as it could be, and that significant efforts to enhance student involvement should be made. Both teachers gave suggestions on a variety of areas that they felt students should be able to provide input to including teacher evaluations, school policy evaluations, dress code, cell phone use, tardy policy, what time the school day starts, and what time the school day ends. One suggestion was to conduct a series of web-based surveys to gauge student opinion on a variety of issues, the most important being teacher effectiveness.

Survey Results

Thirty-one high schools students – 22 at Jordan and 9 at Riverside – completed an anonymous survey to obtain their views on students’ involvement in decision making within DPS. Although the sample is small, it was ethnically diverse with 71% Caucasian students, 19% African American students, and 10% Hispanic students. Key findings are summarized below.

How do students feel that enhancing their involvement in decision making would affect them?

Students felt that increasing their involvement in decision making would impact their education in the following ways:

- 35% of students surveyed felt that greater involvement in decision-making would increase their attendance.
- 39% of students expect that involvement in decision making would lead to an increase in class effort.
- 42% of students expect that involvement in decision making would increase their class participation.

Roughly 60% of the students felt that including students in decision making would have no discernible impact on their education, but as indicated above, a significant minority felt it would have important educational benefits. These results are noteworthy in that any policy that may benefit a substantial number of students while having no adverse effects on others could be highly beneficial.

Student awareness of current policy

Echoing what board members and teachers reported, survey results indicate only 1 of 31 students are aware of the policy for a student advisory council, and 80% reported wanting to be made more aware of policies that directly impact them.

Student interest in having greater involvement
On average, students reported wanting to be more involved in issues that directly impact their daily lives and classroom involvement as opposed to personnel issues affecting DPS staff. Some areas where students’ desire for input was greatest included selecting textbooks, providing input on teacher effectiveness, determining their class schedule, establishing classroom policies and managing co-curricular issues or non-academic issues that are still a formal part of education, e.g., internship opportunities and freshman seminars. Issues related to school appearance and school dress code were also ones where students’ desire for input was greater.

**Summary and Recommendations**

To date, policy 4900 that is intended to acquire students’ input and promote students’ involvement in educational issues that affect them has not been successfully implemented. There is reason to believe that programs that effectively promote students’ input and involvement can have positive educational results for students and the pilot survey results obtained from students in this project support this view.

The DPS Board of Education could more effectively implement the current Student Advisory Council policy by incorporating elements that have been shown to characterize successful programs. Specific recommendations include the following:

1. **An adult facilitator should be designated to organize and oversee the process of obtaining student input and promoting student involvement is needed.**

   At present, a facilitator does not exist. Durham Public Schools should consider hiring an adult facilitator, extending the job description of a current employee in Durham, or seeking community volunteers to incorporate the tasks of an adult facilitator. In the absence of individual responsibility for implementing Policy 4900 it seems unlikely that meaningful progress on enacting this policy will be made.

2. **Establish alliances with external organizations that have expertise in developing and sustaining student involvement programs.**

   A strong Student Advisory Council will need to build alliances by reaching out to both national and local agencies for frameworks for student involvement. Alliances can be made by contacting specific people within these organizations and enlisting their help in the development of student input, or by simply utilizing the resources on their webpages such as Idea Guides and organizational suggestions. Organization with which alliances may be beneficial include:

   - SoundOut- [http://www.soundout.org/tools.html](http://www.soundout.org/tools.html)
• Durham CAN- [http://www.durhamcan.org/index.php](http://www.durhamcan.org/index.php)

For more information on how these agencies can be utilized, see the research paper that supplements this brief.

3.) Establish a system for facilitating effective communication between students and DPS administrators

Based on interview and survey data, there is currently no effective means of communication between students and DPS policymakers. Suggestions for implementing effective communication between students and DPS administrators and board members include the following:

• A student on the Advisory Council may be delegated to manage a council Twitter or Facebook that can be followed by all students.

• Board Members could work with the Advisory Council to create press releases to school papers when policy changes are being developed.

• Board of Education members could work with students to create and administer surveys to students to obtain wider student input on issues of importance to them. Available web-based survey technology makes this far more feasible than it was several years ago.

• Students on the council could meet with their respective school Principals to brainstorm and determine other avenues for informing students about policy issues at their school.

More detailed information on these recommendations can be found in the research paper prepared in conjunction with this brief.

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