

Student Voices for School Change

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- Principal Michael Rooney



Gateway Regional High School in Huntington, Massachusetts has been very busy promoting student voice in the school. Little did they know, however, just how strong that voice would become when drastic budget cuts left students with no activities, clubs, or sports after school.

Promoting student voice isn't filling the gymnasium for a student rally. It doesn't mean students talk whenever they want to in class or take over the PA system. It does mean providing students with the opportunity and ability to influence school decision-making.

"High schools should be preparing students to participate in a democratic society," says Joe DiMartino, director of Secondary School Redesign at The Education Alliance. "If we want to help young adults gain the knowledge and experience necessary to become productive citizens in such a society, we must provide them with the opportunity to exercise their voice in the variety of settings that a high school offers. Beyond student government, students should have the opportunity to contribute to decisions that affect their everyday life in school."

Some schools are encouraging student voice as an important step toward personalization. Gateway is one such school, located in a rural district of seven towns ranging in population from 354 to 1600. The high school has 435 students drawn from 200 square miles of western Massachusetts, one of the largest districts in the state.

Learning to speak out

"I wanted to empower students to become more involved in the direction of the school," says principal Michael Rooney. "We are currently in our third year of a combined CSR [Comprehensive School Reform]/Breaking Ranks model for school improvement. One of the goals of our improvement plan is to promote the development of a strong student voice within the school."

To get started, four students from each grade attended a Secondary School Showcase conference in 2002 — a forum where exemplary schools from across the country share their reform strategies, hosted annually by The Education Alliance's Northeast and Islands Regional Educational Laboratory.

"We went to the conference and saw students and administrators talk about what they were doing with this [CSR] grant at their school," says Mariel, a junior. "We saw kids making an impact on their school and came back with all these ideas." They saw a group of students give a presentation on Student Voice and it inspired them to try something similar at Gateway.

"Conferences help," says Rooney, "because students hear from other students about what works and their impact on their schools. It only takes a couple of dedicated students to make a difference and spread the word."

Getting involved

Back at school, the students wasted no time in putting their conference experience to work. They created ACTIONS (Advisory Committee To Improve Our School) to improve communication between the student body and the school administration. "We wanted more kids to have a voice in what was happening," says Peter, an ACTIONS member. "It was a good time to involve kids, since the school building was undergoing renovation. We started with a Question of the Week poster and asked students to give anonymous input. One of the first questions was, 'What should this group ACTIONS look into and focus on?' They asked about better/different food in the cafeteria, about tardiness, and bell scheduling—saying that they couldn't change classes in two minutes because of crowded hallways—we were able to get that changed to four minutes. We made sure we posted why something couldn't be changed; we didn't want to ignore or reject a suggestion."

A year later, serious financial concerns caused drastic, unwanted changes. "In fiscal year '04 the district lost two million dollars; we're looking at losing 2.6 million this year," says ACTIONS member, Sarah. Gateway lost staff, out of league sports, and class sections, and student fees were increased. "We lost all after-school activities, just keeping one grant-funded after-school MCAS prep class, but there was no late bus." After the contract negotiations and budget cuts, teachers who had been advisors to after-school activity groups/clubs were not able to continue. Later, the School Board cut the funding for these programs as well.

"ACTIONS wanted to try and keep some activities, so we came up with a 40-minute activity block to put into the daily schedule," says Sarah. The students especially wanted to keep Student Council and Renaissance—a nationwide program designed to reward academic achievement and positive behavior. "Dr. Rooney brought [our idea] to the faculty, and they said no. He went into study halls and other places to get student input about what they wanted to keep. Kids were devastated. We went home for the summer not knowing what we were going to come back to," says Sarah. "We met at the beginning of the year to decide what we could do."

Students on their own

Without their teacher advisors, students took it upon themselves to keep the CSR student voice project going, and worked closely with the principal. "The kids weren't being paid either," says Rooney. "The example shows teachers that kids do care, whether somebody is telling them what to do or not."

"The biggest thing we lost was Student Government/Council and Renaissance, so we wrapped them all into one committee," says Sarah. "We had no advisor, but the middle school received a grant to get the late bus back. We often met on our own and invited anyone who wanted to come and work. We put our minutes in the School Committee packet, and they were surprised to keep receiving them since there was no advisor to the group. They decided to give us the budget to get our advisors back because they saw we were doing it ourselves."

"I'm blessed to have a group of poised, mature students who took the bull by the horns," says Rooney. "We were going great, we were inspired...and the bottom just fell out. These kids came back after the summer and did something about it. They were angry, but they applied what they got from this process and retooled Student Government to represent all of the activities that had been done away with."

"We got \$200,000 from the state, and all the district administrators met to prioritize the funds, and they all agreed that we had to get after-school advisors back, even before classroom teachers."

The importance of having a voice

Principal Rooney met his goal to create a culture that values student voice. Not only did the students get involved in changes happening at the school, they also succeeded in influencing School Board decisions. And they learned that they could be heard and taken seriously in the process.

"Young adults have a personal need to test their voice among peers and adults," says DiMartino, "This was clearly evident during a study first reported in *Personalized Learning* [see Related Resources] where we shadowed students in several high schools across the Northeast. We saw that when school practices were based on democratic processes, all students were encouraged to take a personal stand. Students were able to offer their unique perspectives to the larger group process and gain recognition for their contribution to school life."

Gateway students started ACTIONS so students could express their personal perspectives. ACTIONS strengthened their individual voices enough to effect real change. The students are aware of how helpful the student voice project has been at their school, and several returned to the Secondary School Showcase '04 to give their own presentation on Student Voice, hoping to inspire more students to begin this work at their schools.

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