



NATIONAL
DROPOUT
PREVENTION
CENTER/NETWORK

NEWSLETTER

VOLUME 25 NUMBER 2

YOUTH VOICE

WHEN WE TALK ABOUT YOUTH VOICE, WE MUST UNDERSTAND IT AS A DYNAMIC OF YOUTH-ADULT RELATIONSHIPS, AN ONGOING EXCHANGE OF POWER, RATHER THAN A STATIC CONCEPT.

WE ALSO MUST UNDERSTAND THAT INVESTING IN YOUTH VOICE IS OFTEN COUNTER-CULTURE, EVEN AS IT IS FUNDAMENTAL TO POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT, SCHOOL CLIMATE, AND A HEALTHY DEMOCRACY.

All across the country, schools and school systems work tirelessly to educate young people. And yet, few focus on developing them holistically. Instead, education and youth development are treated as distinct fields with distinct professionals, practices, and training.

This is part of what makes Susan Ragsdale and Ann Saylor's book, *The Essential Handbook for Youth Leaders* (reviewed on page six of this issue), so compelling. Their frameworks, tools, and tips work across contexts because they are grounded in how we know young people develop—not merely in how they get “educated.” Youth are developing (positively or negatively) wherever they are, whatever they are doing.

Reinforcing this idea in one of two program profiles in this newsletter, Amy Meuers talks about the National Youth Leadership Council's districtwide model that deploys service-learning to erase the boundaries of the classroom. “Students learn by defining and solving real needs within their community,” says Meuers. As a result, she emphasizes, teachers must act more as “organizers, facilitators, and mediators [rather] than transmitters of knowledge.”

In our other program profile, Communities In Schools-San Antonio shows that, for many students, helping them find and engage their voice starts with providing structure and organization to what are often chaotic young lives. Their XY-Zone Program focuses on 5Rs: instilling Respect and Responsibility, creating meaningful Relationships, and engaging young men through Role modeling and Reaching out to their communities. They provide a framework and related supports to help

young people understand themselves, their communities, and their roles in a larger world.

Alternately, adults must be open to inviting critical feedback from young people to help us understand ourselves, our communities, and our roles in the larger world. And in that spirit, four young men and women from Options High School in Bellingham, WA, contributed this newsletter's first ever “Viewpoint” written by students.

Tiffany was among the article's contributors who shared her insights on the key topics of this issue, reflecting on how her experiences included being engaged and motivated at times, and “zoning out” at others. For her, motivation is critical to success. “If I am disengaged and unmotivated, I will likely not succeed or eventually not want to succeed.” She adds that if we want students to engage, tasks need to be relevant.

In “The Importance of Youth Voice” contributor Robert Shumer states: “One of the most important elements necessary to engage young people in learning, in civic activity, and in important youth development roles is voice: ensuring that young people are involved in the planning, the implementation, and the assessment of any effort.”

To engage youth well, however, we have to first understand what we as adults want, and what we have the skills and supports to implement. I had the opportunity to share my views on this in a wide-ranging interview on page 2 titled “The Q&A



of Youth Voice,” where I also share my “Continuum of Youth Involvement” framework. As with any effort, one of the keys to involving youth meaningfully is to begin by knowing what you're investing in, and what it should be called. I once worked with an organization for over a year with the goal of increasing “youth voice,” only to find out at the implementation stage that a youth survey was all they were really committed to. I had a definition of “voice” that differed from that of the organization. A lot of time, energy, and resources were wasted. I created the “Continuum of Youth Involvement” that afternoon, and have used it since to initiate discussion around this topic.

Youth voice starts with what adults want and are willing to do, not what we want youth to do. The resources in this issue offer opportunities for reflection, research, and strategies for implementing youth voice in a way that is right for you and your young people.

So, start by being honest with what you want and where you are now, and build from there.

—Anderson Williams
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The Q&A of Youth Voice

by Mark Cheatham

In a wide-ranging question and answer interview, Anderson Williams—an expert in the areas of youth voice and youth engagement—shared his insights on working with youth inside and outside the classroom. Williams, co-author of *The Core Principles for Engaging Young People in Community Change* and creator of the *Continuum of Youth Involvement* framework, which he discusses here, explains the myths and misunderstandings surrounding youth voice—what it is, what it isn’t—and his hopes for what youth voice and engagement can become.

Q: On page 1 of our newsletter, you reference what led you to create the youth voice framework *Continuum of Youth Involvement*. You say that the *Continuum* can help educators avoid some of the common pitfalls in executing youth engagement initiatives. What are they?

A: I think the reality is that when you look at the examples in the *Continuum*, you’ve got young people making a broad range of decisions, and implementing [projects] based on those decisions. There can be a couple of places where you can fall short: One is offering young people who’ve never practiced decision making the opportunity to make decisions, and then expecting them to do it with 100% success—that’s one problem. And when the project



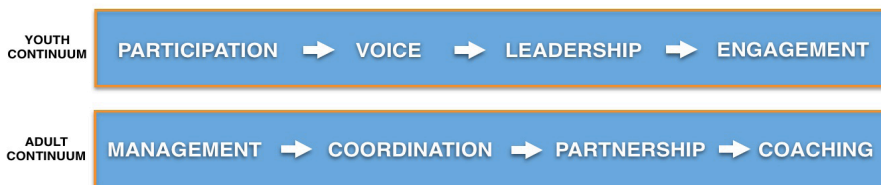
The *National Dropout Prevention Center/ Network Newsletter* is published quarterly by the National Dropout Prevention Center/Network. Your comments are always welcome.

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The challenge of moving along the Youth Continuum



is changing the way adults approach their work.

[Link to the expanded interview to review specific elements of the Continuum.](#)

is not successful, adults rescue the students so that the students don’t ever understand consequences, or feel accountability for their decision making. They either aren’t allowed to fail at all or are allowed to fail in an unproductive, unsafe way. [If students are going to fail], it needs to be in a safe environment where they learn and understand not just the results related to accountability, but the nature of the decision making that got them there. So it’s failure without learning, and that’s another pitfall that really pushes young people away. Failure with learning isn’t really failure. It’s learning.

Q: What constitutes a safe environment for students?

A: It’s about trusting that somebody has your back, that somebody shares your interests, and trusting that somebody can tell you the truth in a way that’s respectful and is about learning and shared goals. It’s all of those things that you’d expect in any trusting relationship—whether that’s within a family, in a community, the workplace, or if it’s a teenager in a school.

Q: Is there a temptation for an instructor to jump to the “Engagement” column of the *Continuum* and try to start there instead of building up to that achievement?

A: The way that I use the *Continuum*—and the reason I created it—was to say “be honest about where you are and start there.” The *Continuum* is not designed as a hierarchy: It’s a strategic growth map on how to get to engagement. Because if young people have previously only been participants, they’re not ready to be engaged fully; you don’t have a relationship

there to engage them successfully and effectively. [Young people] haven’t developed the tools, practices, or understanding of “cause and effect” with decisions, accountability, results, work and rework, and all of the things that go into being engaged. You aren’t ready and they aren’t ready.

Q: What do teachers and students need to keep in mind when venturing into a youth engagement initiative?

A: It would be a stretch to take someone who was, say, a successful assembly line employee, and suddenly make them CEO of the company and tell them to “go do it and bring everybody else along.” It doesn’t mean that an assembly line person couldn’t become CEO, but you don’t make that jump without some investment, practice, and learning over time because the skill sets are different—even though the context is theoretically the same. How you engage in the classroom requires a lot of different skill sets on the teacher’s part, but also on the student’s part, too. Youth engagement is not just a change in practice for the teacher, but a change in practice for the young person, as well. And that’s why on the *Continuum*, the emphasis on accountability is detailed for both teachers and students at every level of the work.

—Mark Cheatham, Editor
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For the expanded Q&A interview with Anderson Williams scan this QR code or go to <http://bit.ly/1CG5Eht>

Our New Look!

Welcome to the new, refreshed look of our newsletter. In this redesigned publication, you'll find newly added items such as QR Codes, Bitly links, and YouTube links that will take you to expanded stories, additional information, and helpful resources related to our Youth Voice theme. We will continue to use these periodically in future issues of the newsletter, so keep an eye out for them! We would also like to thank Sandra Parker and Cheryl Desellier of Clemson University's Creative Services for their collaboration in helping us realize this redesign. Please let us know your thoughts on our new format by emailing the editors at ndpc@clemson.edu or by tweeting us at @NDPCn.

NDPN Partners With WIN Learning and AdvancePath Academics

National Dropout Prevention Network (NDPN) has entered into school service partnerships with two leading national companies, both of which provide high quality solutions to improve student achievement.

The new partners are WIN Learning, located in Kingston, TN, and AdvancePath Academics, based in Williamsburg, VA.



WIN Learning provides career readiness solutions to help students prepare for their futures, whether they're bound for college, trade school, a military career, or the workplace.



AdvancePath Academics is a leader in K-12 alternative education solutions.

Through this collaboration, NDPN will highlight for its members the innovative services and programs aligned with the organization's mission to reduce dropout, increase graduation rates, and recover students who have yet to complete their high school education.

NDPC/N Staff and Board Update

Dr. Sandy Addis has been named Director of the NDPC/N by George J. Petersen, Professor & Founding Dean of the Eugene T. Moore School of Education at Clemson University. Dr. Addis had been serving as Interim Director since January 2015, and joined the organization as Associate Director in May of 2013.

Mr. Bob Collins, retired Chief Academic Officer and Regional Superintendent of the LAUSD, has been named Chairman of the Board of the NDPN. Other newly elected officers include Dr. Debra Duardo, LAUSD, Vice Chair; and Mr. Shawn Wilson, Ford Motor Company Fund, NDPN Recording Secretary.

Effectiveness of Dropout Prevention Strategies Confirmed

The recently released report, *A Meta-Analysis of Dropout Prevention Outcomes and Strategies*, provides educators, researchers, and policymakers with new, actionable information on applying NDPC's 15 Effective Strategies for Dropout Prevention.

Authored by a team led by NDPC Research Fellow, Dr. Shanan Chappell Moots of Old Dominion University, the *Meta-Analysis* establishes effect sizes for specific strategies such as mentoring, family engagement, service-learning, and more based on evaluations of programs using the strategies. The effect sizes can be used by local education leaders in whole or in part to guide dropout prevention initiatives so that students stay in school through graduation. A copy of the full report is available at <http://www.dropoutprevention.org/meta-analysis-dropout-prevention-outcome-strategies> or <http://bit.ly/1L9EDG2>.

Solutions to the Dropout Crisis

At 3:30 p.m. ET on the second Tuesday of each month, link to www.dropoutprevention.org/webcast or <http://bit.ly/1FRVWTy> for a free, hour-long professional development webcast. Upcoming guests (subject to change) include August 11—Dr. Hobart Harmon on dropout prevention in rural districts and

September 8—Joe Hendershott on understanding and reaching the “wounded” student.

Save the Dates!

NDPC/N will present a Diploma Planning Institute (DPI) event September 20-23, 2015, at the IP Casino Resort & Spa in Biloxi, MS. This dropout prevention planning event provides an opportunity for school and district teams to develop customized, school-specific plans to increase graduation rates and prevent dropout. Registrants will be assisted by subject matter experts who will guide teams in the creation of plans based on effective, research-based strategies.

The 2015 National Dropout Prevention Network Conference, *Take A Stand For Student Success*, takes place October 25-28, 2015, at the Wyndham San Antonio Riverwalk Hotel in San Antonio, TX. Keynote presenters include Bill Daggett, educator and expert in school improvement initiatives, acclaimed speaker Aric Bostick who motivates students to embrace positive change, and Lt. Col. (Ret.) Consuelo Castillo Kickbusch, an author and motivational speaker dedicated to working with America's youth.

For additional information or to register for these upcoming events, please visit <http://bit.ly/1Hujnqk> or scan this code.



ENGAGE: The International Journal of Research and Practice on Student Engagement

ENGAGE, Volume 1, Number 2, is now online. Among other topics, this issue features articles on Kenyan primary education, implementing trauma informed interventions in an elementary school, and guidance for recovering high school dropouts.

You may view our latest edition by visiting www.dropoutprevention.org/engage or <http://bit.ly/1Odovl0>.

Engaging Students Through Service-Learning

by Amy Meuers

In Chicago, nearly 40,000 youths between the ages of 15 and 20 and approximately 97,000 youths ages 16 to 24 are high school dropouts. Without a high school diploma, the implications for these youths—and the community as a whole—are stark. Youth dropouts are more likely to be incarcerated and less likely to receive the skills and experience they need to be employed.

At Youth Connection Charter School (YCCS) in Chicago, educators are working to turn those statistics around. YCCS is a multicampus alternative education system solely dedicated to serving the growing population of dropouts and at-risk students in Illinois. YCCS works to create a collaborative learning environment through a series of initiatives including service-learning—an approach to teaching and learning in which students use academic knowledge and skills to address genuine community needs.

In partnership with the National Youth Leadership Council (NYLC), YCCS is integrating sustainable, standards-based, high-quality service-learning into the curriculum. Through NYLC's districtwide model, classroom boundaries are erased, and students learn by defining and solving real needs within their community. Building long-term relationships, NYLC custom-designs programs by which service-learning becomes the implementation strategy for academic goals identified by the district.

Connecting students to the community through positive, hands-on experiences like service-learning keeps students meaningfully engaged. And engagement translates to more time for teachers to improve students' academic skills, offering students opportunities to reconnect with their communities in positive ways.

Essential to quality service-learning, students are encouraged to develop and execute solutions, and reflect on the experience and the skills acquired through that project. In the report *Engaged for Success* (Bridgeland, DiIulio, & Wulsin, 2008), 82% of students who participated in service-learning projects said that their

feelings about attending high school became more positive, and more than half of at-risk students believed that service-learning could have a big effect on keeping potential dropouts in school. At Ada S. McKinley High School in Chicago—a YCCS Charter School—NYLC is working with teacher leaders and student ambassadors to improve school climate through service-learning. Students are making critical decisions and have a voice in their educational experience. They are taking personal responsibility, applying what they have learned in real-world contexts, seeing value in what they have learned, feeling valued and respected for their wisdom and leadership, and connecting in positive ways with their community.

When teachers utilize service-learning in the classroom thoughtfully, they act more as organizers, facilitators, and mediators than transmitters of knowledge. They challenge students with analytical problems which students must solve in teams by obtaining information or utilizing the information given to them. Students become engaged because what they are learning is relevant to the “real world.” Service-learning also demonstrates teachers' confidence in their students and in themselves. Research shows (Bridgeland, DiIulio, & Balfanz, 2009) that teachers' perceptions about their own general belief in the ability of their students to learn and teachers' beliefs in their own capacity to

effectively teach students has powerful effects on ultimate outcomes. Service-learning is advancing teacher and principal effectiveness at YCCS, and it is helping to meet the individual needs of students, preparing them for quality life experiences, technological literacy, graduation, vocational and postsecondary education, and competitive employment. Service-learning is engaging students to not only stay in school, but to improve the world around them.

—Amy Meuers, Chief Marketing Officer
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To learn more about NYLC, visit their YouTube page at www.youtube.com/user/nylcweb

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- Bridgeland, J. M., DiIulio, J. J., Jr., & Balfanz, R. (2009). *On the front lines of schools: Perspectives of teachers and principals on the high school dropout problem*. A report by Civic Enterprises in association with Peter D. Hart Research Associations for the AT&T Foundation and the America's Promise Alliance. Washington, DC: Civic Enterprises.



As part of an NYLC service-learning program, student volunteers work on a garden revitalization project.

The XY-Zone: Youth Advocating for Fellow Students

by Jessica Weaver

Since 1985, Communities In Schools—San Antonio (CIS-SA) has been a vital resource for underserved youth and families. Their mission is to surround students with a community of support, empowering them to stay in school and achieve in life. As a bridge between schools and the community, CIS-SA partners with businesses, volunteers, and nonprofit agencies to provide young people with the resources and support they need to overcome personal challenges and achieve academic success.

This year, CIS-SA is providing direct case management services to over 7,100 students in 78 local schools. Their team of Site Coordinators works with the most at-risk youth on each campus, offering a combination of services tailored to the needs of each student. From counseling and supportive guidance to career awareness, social service referrals, field trips, tutoring and emergency assistance, they offer an array of support services proven to keep kids in school and on track to graduate.

In 2013, CIS-SA launched the XY-Zone (the XY stands for the male chromosome) Male Involvement Program to target at-risk males in grades 9 through 12 who display the potential for leadership, but who lack positive male role models in their lives. This leadership development and peer support initiative and curriculum promotes productive life skills with at-risk adolescent males and works to decrease school drop-out and increase school success.

The XY-Zone Coordinators on high school campuses target, engage, and guide young men at risk of dropping out. The XY-Zone meets the individual needs of young male students at each campus, while ensuring that participants are part of a positive “fraternity,” which builds character and leadership skills.

The XY-Zone program teaches the 5 tenets of Respect, Responsibility, Relationships, Role Modeling, and Reaching Out through a series of activities that challenge boys to overcome obstacles, set personal goals, and give back to the community. Collectively, the XY-Zone facilitates group discussions around issues associated with adolescent risky behaviors, and provides participants with job readiness services,



XY-Zone Coordinator Gustavo Gonzales (center, in CIS-SA jacket) is flanked by successful XY Zone students including (from left), Merhadd Darraji, Kwame Hunter, Nelson Aviles, Jesus Nunez, Ernest Garcia, and Cristiam Herrera. XY Zone coordinators like Gonzales provide counseling, guidance, and a variety of support services to help keep students in school and on track for graduation. Photo Credit: CISSA

support groups, mentors, service-learning projects, college tours, and activism projects. The program works by developing responsibility, creating community awareness, and serving as an outlet for developing positive relationships with parents, peers, adult mentors, and partners.

The XY-Zone Male Involvement Program targeted 150 students in the 2013 - 2014 school year, and exceeded this goal by reaching almost 250 young men. Outcomes for these students include 80% improved in academics, 86% improved in behavior, 68% improved in attendance, and 99% stayed in school.

Miguel (not his real name) is a 10th-grade student at one of our high schools who has demonstrated extraordinary growth and maturity during his time in the XY-Zone program. Miguel lives on the East Side of San Antonio with his mother, younger brothers, and sisters. His father is in prison, and has not been a part of Miguel's life for some time. Although he is only a sophomore, Miguel has advanced to “Ambassador” level in the XY-Zone program, successfully completing the courses and requirements of the 5R's support group and leadership development group.

According to Miguel, the XY-Zone program saved his life. Instead of giving in to negative peer influences, skipping class, and following in his father's footsteps, Miguel is thriving in school, and has become a positive role model for his siblings and peers.

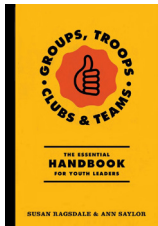
Miguel is a great example of how student voice is a key part of this program. Program participants at each campus determine what service-learning and activism project they will complete for the year, and then work together to ensure the success of their choices. Miguel was instrumental in the creation and success of the “Boys to Men” mentoring initiative at his school. This initiative pairs high school XY-Zone students with nearby at-risk male middle school students. He and other participants created a mentoring curriculum based on shared ideas and experiences, and implemented this curriculum in the “Boys to Men” initiative. This program is now being replicated at other XY-Zone sites, where participants can tailor the curriculum to their own ideas and experiences.

Participation in the XY-Zone is an opportunity for young men to promote healthy development by improving skills and options, bolstering self-esteem, promoting a sense of hope in their future, as well as providing opportunities for growth and achievement.

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For more information on CIS-San Antonio, visit their YouTube page at www.youtube.com/user/CISSanAntonio

BOOK REVIEW



The Essential Handbook for Youth Leaders. (2014). Susan Ragsdale & Ann Saylor, Search Institute Press, Publishers. [ISBN-10: 1574824880, hardcover; ISBN-13: 978-1574824889, paperback]

This book fills a need for advocates of youth development by providing high-quality frameworks and activities founded on a strengths-based approach to development. *The Essential Handbook for Youth Leaders*, according to the authors Susan Ragsdale and Ann Saylor, “is designed to help you create the best experience possible for the youth you’re working with.” The authors focus on that goal by ensuring there is a solid foundation to the high-quality activities outlined in the book.

The authors encourage readers to “own” the book, by finding appropriate resources to assist youth to develop competencies to be successful in schools, clubs, groups, and their communities now and in the future.

Far too often, dropout prevention focuses on the deficiencies students exhibit rather than their strengths. The resources, handouts, and activities in the book build on students’ experiences, insights, and attributes, inspiring them to fully develop their knowledge and skills.

The Essential Handbook for Youth Leaders is organized into three parts: (1) Youth, Strength, and Power; (2) Activating Power; and (3) Sustaining Power. It is refreshing to see a book focusing on youth development using “power” as an organizing principle. It is power, and the corresponding relationships, that connects youth to their schools, provides them a sense of belonging, and builds resiliency. This concept is demonstrated throughout the book’s theories and strategies.

Along with the specific activities and corresponding reflection guides, the book provides a wealth of additional resources found in the “For Your Bookshelf” section at the end of each chapter.

The resources, handouts, and activities in *The Essential Handbook for Youth Leaders* are adoptable and adaptable in youth settings requiring a high level of engagement that can lead to positive contributions from youths now, and in the future. Within the book there is encouragement to love the youth we work with, to provide safe environments for their development, as well as challenge them to stretch themselves to reach higher levels of achievement.

In the closing section, the authors anticipate that each reader is “excited to . . . help bolster youth from their strengths and build their power.” I believe we can achieve that goal by using the core concepts and activities in *The Essential Handbook for Youth Leaders*. It not only inspires youth to be their best, but also inspires adults committed to positive youth development.

—Terry Pickeral, President
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RESOURCES

College on the Brain: When Beating The Odds Isn’t Enough—This 40-minute documentary tells the story of Nashville, TN, students who discover that their dream of attending college is a dream shared by their community. By mobilizing, meeting with city leaders, and challenging stereotypes, they determine to not just beat the odds, but to change them.
<http://vimeo.com/19015935>

Youth Engagement—A guide to engage youth in design and implementation of projects, as co-facilitators of meetings, as active members of boards, and in conducting research.

www.nrcyd.ou.edu/publication-db/documents/youth-leadership-toolkit-youth-engagement.pdf

Youth Organizing for Educational Change—

This report looks at seven robust examples of youth organizing for education change. The cases reflect a range of models of youth organizing for education reform. Rather than describe particular campaigns or victories, the report goes behind the scenes to understand the structure and approach taken by each organization.

www.forumfyi.org/files/Youth_Organizing_for_Education_0.pdf

Building Effective Youth Councils: A Practical Guide to Engaging Youth in Policy Making—A guide to help states and localities create or strengthen their own youth councils, with explanations of the principles for youth action and the importance of youth engagement.

<http://forumfyi.org/files/Building%20Effective%20Youth%20Final.pdf>

School Climate and Youth Development—

Makes the case for why students should be at the forefront of school climate efforts to ensure the school sustains a quality and character leading to student development.
www.schoolclimate.org/publications/documents/sc-brief-youth.pdf

EVENTS

Oct. 22-24, 2015 Fort Lauderdale, FL
Leadership Broward Foundation’s 10th Annual Youth Leadership Summit
www.leadershipbroward.org

Nov. 20-22, 2015 Manhattan, KS
Kansas Youth Leadership Forum
www.kansas4-h.org/p.aspx?tabid=419

Mar. 30-April 2, 2016 Washington, DC
National Youth Leadership Council’s National Service-Learning Conference
<http://nylc.org/national-service-learning-conference/>

The Importance of Youth Voice

by Rob Shumer

Addressing the dropout issues in the U.S. is a challenge. Many have shared their perspectives on causes of the problem and possible solutions. While many suggestions have been made, some of the more important components of effective education address issues of engagement. And the issue of engagement involves a critical component: youth voice. Providing youth with an opportunity to have some say in what goes on in their lives is both a right, and an educationally sound practice.

First, the United Nations Resolution on the Rights of the Child (1990) says all youth have a right to be involved in the actions in society that affect their lives. Youth voice is an important civic right, and we need to give youth the opportunity to be heard. Youth need to be involved in the development of programs that affect them.

Youth voice is an important component of educational theory as well. For constructivist learning theorists (Dewey, Bruner, Vygotsky, Lave, and Wenger, etc.), making meaning from experience requires the learner to create frameworks of knowledge, and then actively to continue to adjust these understandings as new experiences (stimuli) are brought into the picture. Piaget called the process “assimilation and accommodation.” Dewey referred to it as “continuity and integration,” where all learning is based on a continuous process of connecting one experience with another. Experiences affect both the cognitive and affective domains, and individuals react to these experiences based on the continuous totality of their life.

In terms of motivation, Deci and Henri suggest in their studies of intrinsic motivation, that the desire to learn comes from the engagement in the learning process, pure and simple; actions themselves propel the learning and the motivation to continue learning. Their research indicates that “most of the learning of preschool children is done not because it is instrumental for achieving something else, but because the children are curious, because they want to know” (Deci & Flaste 1996, p. 21). People are naturally curious, and this curiosity is the strongest motivator to learn, and to continue learning. Dewey called this motivation an “impulse;” people set the learning process in motion by identifying something they want to learn about, and then pursue the learning plan.

Learning is an active process and the learner needs to have an active role in setting the learning agenda. This, in a nutshell, means youth have to be able to voice their choice in selecting elements to be attended to. One way to do this is to plan and facilitate youth-led evaluation projects. When youth are involved in evaluating their own programs and efforts, remarkable things happen.

A Wingspread symposium on youth-led evaluation produced a declaration of principles related to the impact of youth participation in research and evaluation, including transformation of participants, youth empowerment, equalization of power relationships between youth and adults, recognition of diverse populations and perspectives, involvement of youth in meaningful ways, and increasing understanding that youth participation is an ongoing process (School of Social Work, University of Michigan, 2002).

When youth evaluate their own programs and efforts, it changes the way they function, and enables them to interact with adults based on a wholly new foundation. Additionally, engaging youth in all aspects of their learning produces incredible results both for learning and for social roles of leadership and problem solving.

Developing effective dropout prevention programs in schools and communities involves many components. Youth voice is one of the most important elements necessary to engage young people in learning, in civic activity, and in important youth development roles. Our youth should be involved in the planning, the implementation, and the assessment of any effort that may impact them. Adults too should engage in active youth involvement efforts as this is the best way to listen to what young people want and can do to improve their lives as well as what will increase their likelihood for staying in school.

—Rob Shumer
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References

- Deci, E. L., & Flaste, A. (1996). *Why we do what we do: Understanding self-motivation*. New York, NY: Penguin.
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Special thanks to our Youth Voice “Viewpoint” contributors (from left) Tiffany Abbott, Jade Aeschliman, Zion Creswell, and Jason Price. The four students from Options High School in Bellingham, WA, engaged with guest editor Terry Pickeral to provide their insights in the NDPC/N Newsletter’s first ever “Viewpoint” submitted by student correspondents (see p. 8).

Link to more of their interviews via the QR code at right or at <http://bit.ly/1HHd3bY>



VIEWPOINT

Students share their insights on the importance of being engaged, their individual discoveries, and what they value most about high school (see p. 7 for more information about these authors).

Zion: All my life school was a struggle, but I actually loved to learn. “Cookie-cutter” schools want everyone to fit in. Somewhere along the line there was a disconnect that led me to not graduate on time, which was humiliating and painful, but made me realize that change was needed. Looking back, I wonder if the disconnect was that I could not see how my classes related to my future. The option to attend a smaller school was exciting, though initially a culture shock. Soon I became comfortable and I never had such good grades. I felt confident and happy for the first time in my high school experience. What I found most important were small classes, individualized attention, engaging activities, and trusting relationships.

Jade: During my first years of high school, I was frequently in trouble and failing, but now I’m graduating early. The difference is that our teachers take time to know each student, demonstrate that they care, and are

willing to understand what students experience in and outside of school. Great teachers know where I’m coming from. In class, teachers who engage us in project and group activities are more effective, as they encourage us to learn both about the subject but also build interpersonal skills.

Jason: My first years of high school, I was not doing my best, not applying myself, but I knew I was more than capable of being successful, just not in an environment that did not engage me. What I find most helpful in terms of teacher characteristics is comfort in taking risks and trying new things to make learning relevant, such as using group-based activities so that we work with others and take individual and collective responsibility for learning. What I find most unhelpful are teachers who want every student to learn the way they learned rather than the way we learn. I believe everyone has a unique way of learning, and we’re most successful when teachers focus on assisting us to think, to apply what we learn, and to enjoy the activities.

Tiffany: Most of my school experience involved teachers standing in front

of classrooms sharing information and expecting me to comprehend everything. I am not that type of learner, so this was a big challenge. Later I realized that some teachers do care, and are there to help me, to get to know me, to recognize when I am struggling, and to push me to new heights. I believe that student leadership and engagement is the best mix for success. For me, motivation is critical. If I am disengaged and unmotivated, I will likely not succeed, or eventually not want to succeed. For students to engage, tasks need to be relevant. If I don’t feel like I am contributing to what we’re doing, I am going to zone out and be done.

Summary: Schools need environments that are safe and challenging for every student. Schools need teachers who understand our circumstances and us, engage us, believe in us, and help us focus on knowledge and skill development. We encourage all teachers and schools to focus on youth leadership and engagement. Doing so will motivate students to understand how education is relevant to their lives now, and in the future.