

Listening to student voices

Asking students' opinions about school may be trendy, but integrating their views must be a growing part of education policy development, as well

The latest in a series of reports on the changing face of public education

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STUDENTS AT AVALON HIGH SCHOOL EXAMINE THEIR PEER'S ATTITUDES

Preface

It's trendy to ask students what they think about their schools and education.

In April 2005, for example, Nickelodeon aired a special called "Ten Things I Hate About School." In March, the Star Tribune asked students to submit their thoughts and opinions about high school. In February, the Minnesota House Education Policy and Reform Committee had a hearing featuring testimony from students attending magnet, chartered, and alternative schools to better understand Minnesota's educational options.

Asking students, to these and other groups' credit, is becoming a more common "one time" practice. Too many are still leaving students out of the conversation all together.

Trendy or not, perhaps the most interesting gain for the listening adults is learning that the findings from each are really quite similar.

Students desire personal relationships with, or at least more attention from, teachers; greater control over their curriculum and time (allowing for outside activities and jobs as well as coursework related to personal interests); less bullying, gossiping, teasing, and violence; and less of an emphasis on standards in exchange for a greater emphasis on learning how to learn. Some students say they've left schools that have not tackled these issues.

Some students also say they succeed despite what they don't like; yet they're not necessarily satisfied. Others say they've chosen schools because they address these needs. Adults ought to take note.

When students across the nation are contributing the same ideas for school improvement, and citing them as reasons for changing schools, dropping out, or dissatisfaction, adults are being called to more thoughtfully make changes. We've started asking for students' opinions. Now we ought to start acting on them!

The trouble is, even the adults who are listening to students aren't doing much to regularly *integrate* students' opinions into their discussions, including legislators' education policymaking, journalists' reporting, and educators' and advocates' designing and operating of schools and learning programs.

Lacking the traditional forms of organization that typically move collective voices into action, and the ear of adults who acknowledge their role and potential mobility as consumers, students' opinions rarely drive action. Examples abound.

While students attending Minnesota alternative schools repeatedly say the schools' family-like atmospheres and nontraditional learning environments (which come in many forms) are a necessary prerequisite for their attendance and good academic performance, many district leaders still tend to view

the schools as “dumping grounds” for bad kids. Districts tend to insist that it was the kids’ responsibility to adapt to their traditional environment, rather than reflecting on how the traditional environments could have adapted to better serve these potential top achievers.¹

While legislators are talking about standards—learning profiles, testing, and more—students are saying that many schools’ methods for meeting these standards are wasting students’ time. They’re not opposed to learning; they just want schools to adopt more creative learning models.

Many students emphasize their need for flexible paces, the ability to focus on topics of interest when accomplishing academic goals, and their value for learning how to learn.² Based on their experience of the world, students are predicting that available jobs could be entirely different in ten years, and they want to be able to adapt. But many don’t believe the increasingly standards-oriented schools are preparing them for the real world.

Preliminary results from the 2005 National Governors’ “Rate Your Future” survey of 1,200 high school students found, “Although they are adequately prepared in basic reading, math and science skills, statistics show they are alarmingly unprepared to handle the demands of the 21st century. More than a third of them say their high schools are not properly preparing them in many areas critical for their future success.” Areas include thinking critically, analyzing problems, and communicating effectively.³

The media focuses its coverage of chartered schools on negative outcomes—like the few schools that shut down due to poor financial management. Yet students who attend the large majority of chartered schools stress their high levels of satisfaction, saying many aspects of their chartered school

¹ Farris-Berg, Kim and Jon Schroeder. June 2003. “Alternative-Education Programs: The ‘Quiet Giant’ in Minnesota Public Education.” Saint Paul: Education/Evolving.

² Farris-Berg, Kim, Susan Heegaard, and Jon Schroeder. August 2003. “Positive School Culture: Students and their families help answer the question, ‘How Are Minnesota Chartered Schools Doing?’” Saint Paul: Education/Evolving.

³³ “Governors Seek Input from 10,000 high school students.” April 19, 2005. National Governors Association Press Release. www.nga.org

culture increase their motivation to attend school and learn.⁴ The media largely ignores these ideas, as well as what the fate of these students may have been were they not now attending chartered schools.

In her testimony to the Minnesota House on February 10, 2005, Amalia Amandariz spoke about her experiences attending El Colegio in Minneapolis.

“I get the opportunity to speak both Spanish and English. Most teachers are bilingual. If not, a student will translate. I’m half Mexican, half white. At this school I felt welcome. In [my traditional high school], St. Louis Park, the different races all grouped-up. El Colegio is diverse, but the kids are together. By tenth grade in St. Louis Park I was on my knees pleading with my mother to let me leave. I was doing badly. My mom found this new school. I liked the focus on art. I can do independent work and have flexible school hours, so I can hold a job outside of school. In my family, earning money is important—it’s not an “extra.” El Colegio has changed me. I like school.”

A number of reports studying the experiences of chartered school students cite stories like Amandariz’s. Still, journalists’ approach to reporting on chartered schools does not include, and is often not aware of, these perspectives.

While educators are setting up metal detectors and building better facilities to improve campus safety, students are saying better relationships with teachers and more flexible schools would do the trick. A 2000 FBI study of 18 school shootings shows that students may be on to something. Assaultants’ schools shared seven traits.

Among them “was a ‘detachment’ from school, the school’s tolerance of disrespectful behavior, inequitable discipline, “inflexible culture,” and teachers and staff members giving some students more prestige and respect than other students.”⁵ But adults are still acting on their own hunches. A May 2005 Star Tribune article titled “School disruption

⁴ Farris-Berg, Kim, Susan Heegaard, and Jon Schroeder. August 2003. “Positive School Culture: Students and their families help answer the question, ‘How Are Minnesota Chartered Schools Doing?’” Saint Paul: Education/Evolving.

continues around Minnesota” cites an arrest, threats, school closings, and vandalism around the state.

Dan Wascoe reports as sheriffs, attorneys, and superintendents speculate about what is causing this behavior and propose solutions, including metal detectors. John Sylvester, deputy executive director of the Minnesota School Boards Association said that perhaps students disrupt in order to “get out of school for a day or two.”⁶ But none of the adults, including Wascoe, asked students about causes and potential solutions.

The idea that “adults know what’s best” just doesn’t apply to these examples, nor to the many others that students are so articulately and consistently describing to those asking for student opinions. In adult discussions about improving education, barriers to change are typically a lack of money and a desire not to risk students’ education while adults “experiment” with new models.

Yet the changes that students are suggesting require more of an adjustment to decision-makers attitudes and perspectives, and a willingness to adopt creative solutions, than to schools’ bank accounts. And many students say—even perform as if—the *old* models aren’t working well for them.

A common adult response to the suggestion of incorporating student input is that what students *want* and *enjoy* is not what students *need*. There’s no denying that many students are performing well—academically and socially—in settings emphasizing standards, course and class learning models, and limited access to teachers.

But there’s also no denying many aren’t doing well in these settings. And a significant portion of students who *are* doing well think their time and energy might be put to better use if adults were to change some aspects of school. How can we expect to give students what adults think they need if we can’t always get them to attend and learn, and if they don’t sense their time is valued? Would we be erring too much toward students’ “wants” if we responded to their articulated needs that seem to

⁵ Hanners, David. “School Shooters’ Traits Often Similar.” *Saint Paul Pioneer Press*. 23 March 2005: Main, A8.

be a prerequisite for attending and learning? Surely students stating their need for more attention isn’t the equivalent of saying, “we are looking for ways to slack off.” Yet adults are quick to think acts of student rebellion are all about the latter.

Where new opportunities/schools—some of which are incorporating students’ suggestions—are available, some students remain loyal to the “brand” of school they know. Others have found what they believe are more suitable brands, whether they move to another district school via open enrollment, attend a specialized district-run magnet school or an alternative school, or choose a chartered or home school.

But even where choices exist, too many students have stopped seeking the product—a high school education—all together. As adults take note of students’ choices in the education market and make efforts to redesign K-12 education and K-12 schools, will they increasingly seek and integrate the consumers’ input?

K-12 “manufacturers” are not meeting consumers’ needs

Failing to integrate consumer opinions and desires is nothing new, in K-12 or in other industries. In fact, manufacturers’ design discussions and processes have often centered on their own needs and experiences. Resulting products lack the usefulness and relevance to consumers that more democratic decision-making might allow. But a new emphasis on outflanking competitors by heavily relying on consumer opinions is changing the way product designers work—at least in the business world.

In his *Democratizing Innovation*, Eric Von Hippel describes how American farmers were asking auto manufacturers as early as 1909 to make cars with detachable back seats so they could carry things. The manufacturers’ theory about consumer needs was different from the farmers’, however.

The primary car consumers, in manufacturers’ opinion, were well-to-do folks who wished to drive around to see and be seen. It took manufacturers more than a decade to produce what

⁶ Wascoe, Dan. “School Disruption Continues Around

farmers' wanted—the “pickup truck.” When manufacturers saw the demand for consumer-driven design, the auto industry took off.⁷

Manufacturers in all industries now increasingly anticipate consumers changing needs and desires. The June 2005 issue of *Fast Company* magazine is entirely dedicated to proving the value of this concept, showing businesses achieving or overcoming the impossible (attracting consumer attention, reviving a written-off business) by rethinking redesign to place more emphasis on consumer input.

One article discusses how four manufacturers of digital-audio players have made a dent in a market that Apple had seemingly cornered with its iPod. All of them focus on a “one design does not fit all” design process where they discovered and improved upon what customers thought could be improved about the iPod.

The Co-director of the Industrial Design and Usability Product Group at Dell said, “Customer input is a huge driver, which is why we talk to our customers directly through our in-house usability lab.

There’s a sign in the lab that says two things: ‘Listen to the customer’ and ‘You’re not the customer.’... It’s hard to do the wrong thing if you’re talking to enough people and listening to what the masses are telling you.”⁸ *Fast Company*’s June issue is full of approaches like this, but the magazine isn’t the alone in promoting the theory.

C.K. Prahalad and Venkhat Ramaswamy, two University of Michigan Business School Professors and authors of *The Future of Competition: Co-Creating Unique Value with Customers*, find that in today’s economy, listening to consumers can make a business model sink or swim.

Consumers have access to a wealth of information at a great speed. Successful manufacturers provide products and services that allow their customers to use this access to co-

create—with the manufacturer—unique, customized experiences with the same product.⁹

Digital-audio players, for example, allow individual customers to download the music they desire from the Internet. Two consumers owning the same type of player can have two different experiences using the product. As Ramaswamy said in the December 2003 issue of *CIO Insight*, “The product is no longer the basis of value; the *experience* is.”

Students have grown very accustomed to this democratic environment where businesses respond to consumers’ desires and provide ways for consumers to co-create their experiences even within structured environments. K-12’s “manufacturers”, on the other hand, are still operating in a non-democratic mode.

Not only do K-12 designers largely ignore consumer input, but designers are also basing their decisions on theories that run counter to their consumers’ needs and desires. The product—an education—may be desirable on its face, but students are increasingly relating their motivation to learn to new methods for improving and co-creating their educational experiences. Students’ experiences outside of school teach them to expect response and change; but they sense that when it comes to their schools, manufacturer response doesn’t seem to be coming anytime soon.

Student researchers call for adult response to student input

Avalon Charter High School students, who conducted research on Twin Cities student opinions for Education/Evolving and presented their findings at a Citizens League Mind Opener in Saint Paul, are very frustrated by students’ lack of influence in education and school redesign efforts.

When Education/Evolving staff approached Avalon students in Fall 2004 to gauge their interest conducting independent research on education, staff provided a list of statistics about Minnesota students. The Avalon students were

Minnesota.” *Star Tribune*. 21 May 2005.

⁷ Von Hippel, Eric. 2005. *Democratizing Innovation*. The MIT Press.

⁸ Vilaga, Jennifer. “Fast Talk.” *Fast Company*. June 2005.

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astounded that less than half the students who enter ninth grade in the Minneapolis public schools graduate within four years.¹⁰ The students immediately decided their research would help adults find out why and create responsive solutions.

The Avalon researchers' first objective (their choice) was to learn about the approaches adults are currently taking to fix the problem. Their findings disappointed them as they found example after example of design-choices that failed to incorporate consumer input.

Students found—and appreciated—a 2001 Citizens League report recommending that St. Paul and Minneapolis school districts make school more flexible as part of a strategy to increase the high school completion rate.¹¹

But they later realized the recommendation was not likely to be implemented when they read in a March 2005 *Star Tribune* article that the Minneapolis superintendent recently renewed her commitment to standardizing curriculum across district schools.¹²

The Avalon students explored federal requirements to use standardized tests to measure student achievement and also found articles describing how groups of students are collectively refusing to take the tests due to schools' focusing too little on what motivates student learning and too much on "teaching the test."¹³ Students sensed there must be other ways to measure student achievement. Adults, however, continue to press on with efforts to use test scores as the primary measurement.

The Avalon student-researchers also learned that Baltimore, Maryland students were setting so many small fires

⁹ Editors. "Expert Voices: C.K. Prahalad & Venkat Ramaswamy on CRM." *CIO Insight*. December 1, 2003.

<http://www.cioinsight.com/article2/0,1397,1437266,00.asp>

¹⁰ "A Failing Grade for School Completion: We Must Increase School Completion in Minneapolis and Saint Paul." August 2001. Saint Paul: Citizens League.

¹¹ "A Failing Grade for School Completion: We Must Increase School Completion in Minneapolis and Saint Paul." August 2001. Saint Paul: Citizens League.

¹² Brandt, Steve. "Minneapolis Schools: A Call for Tighter Control." *Star Tribune*. 21 March 2005.

¹³ Tanzman, Will et. al. "Students Say 'Enough!': Chicago High Schoolers say they will no longer feed the test-taking frenzy." *Rethinking Schools Online*.

http://www.rethinkingschools.org/archive/13_04/enough.shtml
Also,

on their campuses last Fall that firefighters no longer reside in firehouses but in fire trucks parked in school lots.¹⁴

While Baltimore staff and administration said budget cuts left the schools with too few teachers, students thought most of the adults quoted in the *Associated Press* article covering the issue placed too much emphasis on students "being bad" and influencing others because they set the fires rather than on questioning whether the students, who have no real outlets for expressing their opinions, are offering their consumer response to a product that isn't considering their design needs.

They also sensed the state legislature of Maryland didn't seem to care much about really solving the problem. The student-researchers wondered why adults had not come up with creative solutions for the budgeting problems, like arranging ways for students to get more attention from teachers and/or other adults? The student-researchers suggested that perhaps parent volunteers interacting with students in the classrooms and hallways might address students' need for increased levels of adult attention.

Since the adult-created solutions and responses seemed to run counter to the school improvement ideas put forth by students and their advocates, the Avalon student-researchers decided to set a second research objective: seek input from Twin Cities students about what makes a school worth attending, and then get the message to adults in order to influence adult-level conversations. If adults weren't going to seek student opinions, then they would bring the opinions to the adults.

The Avalon students' findings aren't surprising. The themes that emerge are largely comparable to what student input efforts have found. The student-researchers conclude, "We believe that a schools can better meet the needs of most students by encouraging freedom and independence, by being small in size, by creating a sense of community, by encouraging positive student and teacher relationships, and by allowing students to have control over their education and a greater ability to

Lacoste-Caputo, Jenny. "They aren't going to take it anymore." *San Antonio Express-News*. 19 February 2005.

¹⁴ "Burning Questions Trouble Md. Schools: Baltimore Schools Tackle Problem of Small Fires Set By Students, 76 Since School Year Began." *Associated Press*. 13 November 2004.

influence their future.” Their write-up goes on to suggest what the adult-written reports on student opinions don’t: a one size fits all approach to education would prevent at least some students from fully realizing their academic and social potential.

They write that getting a high school education—getting a diploma (their idea of “the product”)—continues to be highly desirable to many students. But their write-up suggests that the product itself does not motivate many student-consumers of K-12 education to learn on a day-to-day basis. Instead, to apply Prahalad and Ramaswamy’s “co-creation of value” theory, motivation seems to be the result of the unique *experience* that each student can create for his or herself within a school structure to achieve learning objectives.

A student’s unique experience might include the ability to adjust learning paces by subject; the ability to customize curriculum according to their interests; the ability to choose a family-like environment or to choose an environment where they

remain anonymous; and the ability to collectively, with other students, teachers, and administrators, influence school policy.

If “what makes school worth attending” is students’ ability to co-create their experiences at school, then adults’ non-democratic approach to redesigning education and schools is off base.

The Avalon student-researchers challenge adult decision-makers to start allowing consumer input to be a driver in the design efforts; to use their modest beginnings to launch bigger conversations. They worry that designers are a long way from Dell’s “in-house usability lab” where customers have direct and ongoing access to designers who are willing to change and adjust product design to their needs.

Yet they’re hopeful, from the recent trends to *seek* student opinions, that sincere efforts to *integrate* student input are not too far off. How will you respond?

What Makes a School Worth Attending?

Avalon Students Examine How to Increase Student Motivation to Attend School, Learn, and Graduate

Introduction

Taking a civics course entitled “Cultivating Civic Leaders” sounded like a prime opportunity to be activists for our community and make a difference. As students at Avalon High School, our job at this time of our lives is to get an education, therefore we feel very strongly about having good schools.

Thirty percent of students are dropping out of high school nationally. In Minneapolis and St. Paul this figure is even higher.

Our course required us to conduct research and present our findings. We decided we would help Minnesota educators, policymakers, and journalists to figure out what makes a school worth attending from the perspective of students. Maybe then we can work together to discover what can be done to make school more appealing to young adults.

Everyone should be interested in making school more

appealing, including parents, school administrators, students, taxpayers, business owners, legislators, and city council members. With high drop out rates and young adults not getting an education, these people are all affected by our education system in Minnesota.

We all benefit from having an educated population that is able to participate in the work force and become civic leaders and positive civic participants. But without a high school diploma, a person’s options are severely limited. Caring about the future starts with caring about education. We hope that our research helps start conversations about creating solutions to address schools’ diminishing appeal.

Methods

After much debate, we decided that the best way to discover “what makes a school worth attending” was to interview other students with the following questions:

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1. Was it your decision to attend your current school? If yes, are you happy with your decision?
2. Did you have other options?
3. What do you like and dislike about the school you are attending?
4. Why do you show up to school?
5. What would your ideal school be like?
6. Is it important to you to feel in control of your education?
7. Do you feel you have a voice in the decisions that are made in your school?
8. Do you think your education is making you a better person? Have you thought about this question before?
9. Do you feel respected by your teachers? By administrators? By other students?
10. Do you feel successful at your school?
11. What do you know about traditional district schools, charter schools, or alternative schools?

Since we had limited time and resources, our plan was to interview students from two charter, two alternative and two traditional district high schools in the area. We successfully interviewed about 10 students from each of the following schools: Loring Nicollet and PEASE Academy (alternative high schools located in Minneapolis), High School for the Recording Arts and Skills for Tomorrow (charter schools located in St. Paul). We interviewed only four students from Sibley High School (a traditional St. Paul district school).

Although we tried repeatedly, we discovered it was very difficult to interview students from the traditional district school students we approached with the support of their administration.

One traditional St. Paul district school we contacted about possibly interviewing students considered our request and met with our advisor about the project, but eventually said that we would first have to go through the district office for them to approve the interviews and questions. Due to our limited timeline we were unable to meet that request.

Another traditional St. Paul district school we contacted seemed scared about the responses we might get

from their students. Our contact at the school, a teacher, told us that after he shared our questions with the principal, the principal decided that he didn't want the students attending his high school to participate in the survey. The principal explained that the school "already had so many things leveled against them" and that the nature of the questions would cause the students to question their school.

The teacher said the principal was "fearful" about students' answers to questions about their relationships with teachers and administrators and questions about whether the school was fulfilling the students' needs as learners. The teacher also said that the principal was concerned that the student interviewers were from Avalon Charter School, which the teacher indicated is "a great school, and we [the traditional district school] aren't."

We thought his refusal to allow us to interview the students was an interesting finding in itself. Despite our best efforts to draft neutral/non-leading questions, it seems that the principal assumed the students' answers to the questions would be negative.

This surprised us, since most students we had already interviewed from charter and alternative schools had positive things to say about their schools. Although the principal feared that students might not speak favorably about the school, we believe he could have learned something from the interviews. Perhaps our findings would help him begin to address the school's problems? Instead he wasn't interested in hearing the students' opinions. We worry that this attitude could be common among those who have the power to make schools more appealing.

Since we were unable to "officially" interview students from traditional district schools, we decided to try and interview students we know. We interviewed just four traditional district school students from Sibley High School.

Therefore, the majority of our research comes from charter and alternative school students. Consequently, our findings about "what makes a school worth attending" may be skewed, perhaps because students attending charter and

alternative schools left traditional district schools for specific reasons.

For example, some have needs that they believe were not being met by traditional education. Their perspective about what makes a school worth attending is probably different from the opinions of the many students who are doing well in traditional district schools. We realize that our research is only a small sample of students from Minneapolis and St. Paul and it does not necessarily represent the entire population of Twin Cities students. Nevertheless, our research begins to address the question, “What makes a school worth going to?”.

Findings

Some common themes emerged from our interview research. We discovered that students believe a school worth attending encourages freedom and independence, is small in size, has a sense of community, involves positive student/teacher relationships, and encourages students to have control over their education and an ability to influence their future.

Freedom and independence

Speaking from personal experience, going to a school where I'm given the freedom and responsibility to be self-motivated and direct my education has greatly increased my willingness to come to school, work, and succeed. I feel other students respond to this positively as well, such as the ones we interviewed (Will Olsen, Avalon Charter School.)

When asked what they liked about their school, 60 percent of students responded saying they liked the freedom. Freedom and independence were defined as different things by different students, but three main definitions emerged.

For many students, this freedom meant being in control of their learning. Eighty-four percent of the students we interviewed said having some “control” is important. One High School for the Recording Arts student said that he didn’t like traditional schools because “The staff are in control of

everyone.” Students felt more successful when *they* were able to direct their education.

One alternative school student described their ideal school as a place “where you could learn about what you want.” Another charter school student explained, “it’s very important for me to feel in control. Cause when you’re in control you feel like you can handle it. And when you feel like you can handle it, it is easier to succeed at things.” Chartered school students, in particular, enjoyed flexible learning paces.

Other students felt freedom because they had a say in how the school was managed. They were able to decide some school policy, and felt more in control because they actually could play a role in the school’s decision-making process.

For example, a student at High School for the Recording Arts, a charter school, commented, “I believe everyone has a voice. We have community meetings every Wednesday, which basically gives us our voice to let people know what’s going on at the school...we get to talk to the teachers and everything else.”

At PEASE Academy, an alternative school, students participate in restorative justice. If a student harms the community in some way, the entire student body participates in a “circle” to help decide how the student will restore the community. A PEASE Academy student explained that she likes her school because they do circles.

Another important factor influencing students’ sense of freedom was an open atmosphere at the school. One alternative school student said she liked “how open it is. You can talk about anything and you don’t have to fear being ostracized for speaking your opinion.” A student at a charter school liked that students are able to leave halfway through the day.

Small size

My personal opinion is that smaller schools are better. I like that there is more respect, and that I seem to have more friends at a smaller school. I went to a large school for two years, so I do have experience with this sort of thing. I also think

that people are much closer to each other at a smaller school because you can't help but get to know everybody. I have to agree with the people we interviewed, I am happier at a smaller school. (Nick Christians, Avalon Charter School)

Size is a big factor for students deciding what makes a school worth attending. Our findings indicate that students generally like smaller schools better than larger schools. They like the fact that everybody seems to know everybody else, and that there seems to be more of a community with less people.

One student said of her small alternative school, "I like that it is a nice community, and I can come here and be myself." The research also implies that there is more respect at smaller schools and less rule-breaking. Another alternative school student said, "I love the teachers here. I love everyone else here...it's really nice."

Strong sense of community

A few years back I attended a traditional district school, and I noticed that students would actually think it was funny when they were failing. At my school, Avalon, students don't compete with each other for who is doing worse in school. Failing is not funny. If I were failing a seminar, it would be unusual if a peer did not offer me encouragement or help. I really love my school. My chartered community makes school worth going to (Tierney Houdek, Avalon Charter School).

Students said that a strong sense of community is an important factor influencing what makes a school worth going to. They believe that having a good feeling about the community at school makes it a better place for students learn.

The students we interviewed said that schools with a good sense of community have one or more of the following: close relationships, acceptance of different lifestyles, support,

and all members having a voice in their school.

Students say that students and staff working together to make decisions in their school brings the two groups closer. As a result, students feel more comfortable encouraging and helping other students and faculty. A student from Pease Academy said that he likes that "Everybody is real close, and chill."

Another Pease Academy student said, "I like the community. It's open-minded. There is a lot of support." When we asked a student from Loring Nicollet alternative school in Minneapolis, "What do you dislike about the school you are attending," the student answered, "I like everything. It's a community. I can't complain."

According to students, what else helps create a school with a strong sense of community? Weekly all-school meetings work well for smaller schools, where students and staff take time to make announcements, share ideas, and talk about their work. It is a good time for everybody to be together.

A student who attends P.E.A.S.E. Academy, an alternative school, explains this very well. "We get to voice our opinion and they [teachers] get to voice their opinions. We learn something new about each other...It becomes very, very clear [that this sort of teacher-student relationship is] rewarding. It helps us become closer to the teachers...and it's just a really good feeling".

Positive teacher-student relationships

As a student myself, I find teachers important parts of my life. They're the guideposts I need to look to if I can't find my way through my education. My teachers are friends, confidants, and the embodiment of what I want to be later in life. All my life, learning has been fun for me. But recently, after looking at how much my teachers have changed my life, I realize how much of an impact I could make on somebody else's life. I want to do that, to make a

difference, and I have my teachers to thank for giving me that drive. (Dan Roller, Avalon Charter School)

According to our study, one of the most important things about making a school worth going to is for students to be able to find trust in a teacher. Ninety-four percent of the students we interviewed said they felt respected by teachers, a positive sign for the Twin Cities education community. Respect is a big issue for students, especially when dealing with teachers.

An alternative school student said that they liked their school because they felt “respected by...the teachers and staff.” Another from the same school said that they liked “the fact that we get one-on-one individual attention from the teachers.” One student from a charter school explained that he is respectful to teachers that are respectful to him.

A student at a charter school explained that he felt respected by his teachers and even by the administrators, “By my administrators, I feel very respected. They’re very nice, and they help you get done what you need to get done. They are there for problems...and they are really cool people.”

We found that in many ways the teachers and administrators are the foundation of their community. Students now at charter and alternative schools sometimes felt this foundation was not there when they once attended traditional district schools.

Students said the district schools are “too big. Teachers don't know students” and “Teachers don't even know half of their students. I guess they're overly stressed.” Another said, “At [traditional district] high schools you can get yourself into a lot of trouble and no one will even notice or care.”

Control of education and ability to influence their future

I know that having the power to determine my path in my education and learning in general is

something that drives me to continue coming to Avalon everyday (Latasha Ejiya, Avalon Charter School).

Like many of the students we interviewed, I come to school to get my diploma and graduate so that I can go to college. I also love the voice that I have to make choices in my education (Molly McGee, Avalon Charter School).

As stated earlier, eighty-four percent of the students we interviewed stated that they felt it is important to be in control of their education. These students believed that it is important to feel in control of their education because a sense of control increases their motivation to learn.

One student from a charter school explained, “If I am in control of my education, I’m going to learn what I want to learn...I...wouldn’t learn anything in a class if I was sitting there in a class I didn’t like.”

Most of the students we interviewed are aware of their academic standing and stay on track in order to graduate. Students said graduation is a major incentive to attend school. Fifty-two percent of the students that we interviewed stated that the incentive that gets them up everyday to go to school is their diploma.

But students had different ideas about the best path toward graduation. The students we interviewed from traditional district high schools only have control over their grades, not their learning program and curriculum, so they are generally less aware of what graduation standards they need to complete to graduate or get into college. Students at traditional high schools told us that just take the required classes and maybe some elective courses. They didn’t mind having the path carved out for them.

In the alternative and charter schools we visited, however, students have control over their learning program and curriculum, so they know what they need to complete to graduate. They liked this greater sense of control. One student from an alternative school commented, “You can learn about

your history, the worker's history, the peoples' history, the real people's history. Instead of some fat cat in a suit. That is BS to me. Here I'm learning about myself and other people; other things that are important to my future that I have never even thought about. It's awesome!"

Sixty-eight percent of the students that we interviewed said that they chose the school that they are currently attending. Of the students who chose what school they attend, most said they chose their school because they think that the school will target their academic needs. Some wanted a clear-cut plan for graduating; others liked creating their own path.

There are many reasons why the students we interviewed switched from a traditional district school to an alternative or charter school, including an increased ability to focus on graduation (rather than social problems) and an ability to build academic learning around an area of interest not typically emphasized in traditional schools.

One of the students from PEASE Academy (a school based on sobriety) said she wanted to attend an alternative school "because instead of me directing all of my energy toward drugs and stuff I can turn it towards school and graduating." A student from High School of Recording Arts said, "Knowing I'm going to get my diploma and my music of course." Many students felt their ability to focus on music (or something else) allowed them more influence over their future. Traditional schools sometimes require students to spend their time on activities that are seemingly unrelated to their future.

Although charter and alternative schools are all very different and unique from one another, many of them have the qualities that students we interviewed look for to help their learning. Many of the students felt that traditional district high schools and traditional learning methods are not fulfilling the needs of some students.

Some of the students we interviewed expressed that they needed to get more out of their education than what they were getting at a traditional district high school. Sixty percent of the students we interviewed said their ideal school would be just

like the one they attend now. None of these students were from traditional schools.

A student from Loring Nicollet, an alternative school, said, "I'm excited about everything I'm going to learn about. I won't miss a day because I'm afraid I'm going to miss something I'm wanting to hear. And I show up everyday, cause at my old school, South High, I could give a shit if I was at school. And anything there didn't really apply to me, so I didn't go."

Other students we interviewed expressed similar feelings. In fact, 32 percent of the students we interviewed said they disliked "nothing" about the school they attend today. In the past, however, they tried big traditional district high schools and found that they were lost in a big crowd. Some felt detached from their learning and homework.

Conclusions

Although our research was limited in scope, we believe that what we learned was valuable. Students' opinions need to be heard. We hope our findings will help decision-makers begin to answer the question, "What makes a school worth attending?" Finding students' opinions about this question may help increase students' motivation to attend school, learn, and graduate.

We also think students opinions may help change perceptions of charter and alternative schools. We've heard Twin Cities talk radio hosts and people from the general public assume charter schools are for "dumbies and drug addicts." This isn't true. Students we interviewed are doing well in school, but needed a different learning environment. In fact, many said they left traditional *district* schools in order to remove themselves from environments where they were tempted to use drugs and not concentrate on learning and graduation.

We were not surprised by what we heard from the students we interviewed because our views were often similar to theirs. We also read similar findings in other reports where the authors interviewed students about school. These common themes should be enough to inspire action and some new and creative ideas for improving school.

We believe that schools can better meet the needs of most students by encouraging freedom and independence, by being small in size, by creating a sense of community, by encouraging positive student and teacher relationships, and by allowing students to have control over their education and a greater ability to influence their future.

About E/E's Student Voices Initiative

Education/Evolving's student voices initiative, "Real Impact: Student Opinions for a Change," integrates diverse student opinions with adult-level discussions that influence decision-making around schools and education. For two years, Education/Evolving has been bringing the voices of charter and alternative school students into adult discussions. In 2005, we are formalizing and expanding our efforts to include student voices from all types of schools (charter, alternative, home, district, magnet) and all achievement levels.

The initiative's Web site may be found at the following address: www.educationevolving.org/studentvoices. It includes Education/Evolving papers that integrate student opinions with education policy and school-design discussions. Additionally, the site features links to other sites highlighting student opinions and a section where students can communicate their opinions on a variety of "hot topics" so journalists, educators, and policymakers can also facilitate the integration of student ideas into education and school redesign efforts.

Education/Evolving also gathers student opinions through interviews and by providing settings for students to design and conduct their own research—their own questions; their own language; their own write-ups of the findings.

About This Report and Its Authors

In this publication, Avalon student-researchers challenge adult decision-makers to start allowing consumer input to be a driver in school and education redesign efforts; to use their modest beginnings to launch bigger conversations about how to increase students' motivation to attend school, learn, and graduate. They're hopeful, from the recent trends to *seek* student opinions, that sincere efforts to *integrate* student input are not too far off. Yet examples of such efforts are so far very few.

Students in the Civic Leadership course at Avalon Charter School in St. Paul designed and carried out the research for this paper, "What makes a school worth attending?" They include: Nick Christians, Latasha Ejiya, Trent Ewing, Tierney Houdek, Callie Jeske, Molly McGee, Will Olsen, and Dan Roller.

They were advised by Carrie Bakken, Avalon teacher-advisor, Walter Enloe, Hamline University Professor and Avalon Board Member, and Kim Farris-Berg. Farris-Berg, coordinator of Education/Evolving's *Real Impact: Student Opinions for a Change* initiative, wrote the introductory piece with guidance from Ted Kolderie, Education/Evolving leader.