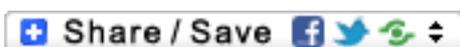


# Youth and Adults Partnering to Improve Schools and Communities

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When spaces are built to support the empowered voices and ideas of young people, a raw brilliance emerges that is grounded in the experiences of our most talked about, but least consulted, constituency.

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For the past two years, AISR has planned a Youth Leadership Institute (YLI) in partnership with the **Nellie Mae Education Foundation** to support foundation grantee efforts to increase youth voice in school reform. The YLI is predicated upon the assumption that young people hold invaluable expertise and knowledge that, if tapped, can teach adults about improving schools.

This past fall, the Boston Public School Committee passed a historic student code of conduct that resulted from three years of advocacy work by student leaders at the **Boston Student Advisory Council**, **Boston Area Youth-Organizing Project**, and **Boston Parent Organizing Network**. Based on a framework of alternatives to the zero-tolerance discipline policy, the new code encourages schools to explore options to suspension and expulsion, thereby reducing the flow of students into the "school-to-prison pipeline."

These are just two examples of sophisticated student engagement, activism, and partnership with adults to effect change in our nation's schools. While powerful and important education reform work is happening all over the country – from work around the Common Core State Standards, extended learning time, early education, school closures, and ESEA reauthorization to addressing discipline disparities, teacher evaluation, charter schools, college and career readiness, and more – much of this work is being led and conceptualized by adults in conversations with each other. Adults working together on systemic change is vitally important, but it too often leaves out authentic participation of the very group of people these efforts are intended to support: students and youth.

“Student voice and leadership can play a powerful role in addressing inequities and advancing positive social change,” states a recent Nellie Mae Education Foundation newsletter. “Students ... are playing a critical role in advocating for change in their schools – and their stories go largely untold.”

“Student voice” is understood and pursued in a number of ways in the field including: surveys, student councils, volunteer opportunities in communities and organizations, advisory panels, co-teaching classes, membership on long-term, districtwide planning committees, and community organizing and advocacy. These approaches provide varying levels of opportunities for either adults to hear from youth about the issues going on in their schools and classrooms, or for youth

and adults to work together to reflect, assess, plan, implement, and evaluate efforts to improve educational systems and communities. Which of these approaches is pursued, for what purposes, which students participate, and the supports and resources schools, communities, and systems provide to youth and adults to meaningfully work together – matters.

Change agents working in school systems and communities have options for how we partner together to understand and positively transform our shared circumstances. There are not only skills and capacities for youth and adults to share and build on, but also the deeper engagement, empowerment, and emancipation that are possible when youth and adults partner together across differences to co-shape our educational future. (Renée 2011)

The degree to which adults see and believe that student voice matters, and the supports we locate and use to learn how to engage authentically with youth, will go a long way to creating time and structures for dialogue, learning, cooperation, and planning together.

For example, ***Oakland Kids First*** – a Northern California-based nonprofit organization that trains high school student leaders in organizing, participatory research, issue analysis, advocacy, and alliance building – provides leadership opportunities for students to co-create and transform their school culture and districts, support each other's success, and create long-term, systemwide change.

Additionally, the ***National Urban Alliance***, a Syosset, New York-based, nonprofit capacity-building organization, devotes a significant portion of its work to authentic student voice, where students partner with teachers in professional development to improve classroom and instructional practice. Each of these paths is a powerful, multifaceted way of engaging and partnering with youth to improve schools and educational systems.

There are several components that make powerful approaches to student voice possible, including: 1) attending to who participates, with specific attention to power, cultural capital, and diversity issues; 2) building the skills and sensibilities for youth and adults to work together effectively; 3) leveraging the experience and expertise of community-based youth development, youth-led organizations, and youth organizing efforts; and 4) developing the infrastructure within schools and school systems to embed such approaches in educational systems for the long haul.

Effective partnering of any kind is challenging; it takes time and skillful facilitation. Building the skills and sensibilities to effectively team across generations, racial lines, income levels, language backgrounds, abilities, and relative success in school are challenging but key to the success of authentic partnership.

What's at stake if youth and adults don't engage together meaningfully in transformation work? We may uncover discoveries about our own beliefs about the capacity of youth to participate in complex discussions, planning, and evaluation of efforts, as well as our ability to be in dialogue together. We may find we have conscious or unconscious assumptions about the capacity or appropriateness of some youth or all youth to be deeply involved in systems change and community improvement work. We may also have perspectives about prerequisite conditions or readiness that might make it appropriate for some youth to be engaged in such work (i.e., relative success in school). We also may not have had experiences with youth who are invested, passionate, dedicated, and supported in partnering with each other and with adults in such work.

As youth themselves and adults who are engaged in partnering effectively with youth know, youth bring a wealth of experiences, capacities, and resources that are too often absent from

adult-led education systems change work. Through authentic, multifaceted partnerships between youth and adults, we have the opportunity to become more effective as a nation and as a world in supporting the development of engaged, compassionate, knowledgeable, global community members. Our ability to innovate for our collective well-being can only be enhanced if those most impacted are meaningfully and authentically at the table – youth and adults – to deliberate and decide our future together.

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## REFERENCE:

Michelle Renée. 2011. “The Growing Field of Youth Organizing for Educational Justice,”  *Voices in Urban Education* 30 (Spring), 2–4.

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