

Students Recommend ...

MAY 2016



Students know best what is needed to make education more engaging, relevant, and challenging for them. After all, they are in school every day, with a front-row seat about what is working and what is not. And they are the ultimate beneficiaries of better teaching and learning, which is our ultimate goal.

To that end, we convened a group of about two dozen Newark Public Schools high school students in early May to share their ideas for what the NPS Strategic Plan: 2016–19 should include. They said:

**We want
teachers
who care**

First things first. Make sure that teachers care about their students, show them respect, and are willing to develop a relationship of trust.

“We want one-one-one relationships with people who care about us. ‘I’m here for you.’ We don’t want social workers. We don’t need more cops. We need someone to listen to us, someone to push us.”

“There should be goals for teachers. Not all of them give 100% effort to interact with students and care about them. A lot of teachers are not on our side.”

“Students come to school with lots of issues. Teachers should deal with the underlying issues — with the students themselves, not just with the grades.”

“We need adults who care. When students feel important and are encouraged, hidden passions emerge.”

“Put new teachers in classrooms before they are hired. That way, we students can help evaluate the relationships they develop.”



Support, not suspensions

The students complain about disruptive students taking over classes, making learning impossible. But they say out-of-school suspensions don't work. Instead, provide more support through programs such as Teen PEP, which has peers teach about sexual health, and Peer Group Connection, where older students mentor freshmen. And for the 50 percent of the students who say they have advisory classes, they strongly support them.

“Suspensions don't work. Sometimes they just give the disruptive students more attention.”

“Have advisory programs for disruptive students be run by other students. Send seniors to freshmen homerooms.”

“The Peer Group Connection program really helped me. It needs to be bigger with more students.”

“Don't just suspend students. Make sure they all have a relationship with an adult. Use it. Build on it.”

“Keep kids in school.”

“The social and emotional aspect of our school is very powerful with a real structure like Morning Meetings.”

“The Top 10 kids are always giving presentations. Why not programs to give the Bottom 10 a chance, too?”

Equal access to facilities

Several students complain about the daily conflicts caused by having to share the same building with one or more programs. They sometimes fear walking down the hallways, and cite regular conflicts over shared spaces such as libraries, gyms, and cafeterias.

“If both programs showed mutual respect, it would be OK. But right now, we don't cooperate well.”

“Every school should have its own facility.”

More parent involvement

Students say they would welcome more parent involvement, complain that parents often don't know about upcoming school events, and urge the district to make greater use of outreach tools such as social media and local cable TV to share information. They add, however, that they could play a greater role themselves in involving their parents.

“Lots of parents just don't have time to come to night-time meetings. And language is a barrier, too.”

“We need to take responsibility for getting our parents involved, too. When we really want something like new sneakers or whatever, we keep bothering them until we get what we want.”

Fair funding, smarter funding

Students raise concerns about the lack of transparency about school budgets. And they wonder if the district is making the right priorities when so much technology sits unused when students still lack textbooks, and new schools are opened when old ones need major repairs.

“We don't know where the money is going. Where did all the Mark Zuckerberg money go? We still don't have enough textbooks or after-school or programs like Boys & Girls Clubs.”

“Don't keep opening new schools when you have leaky roofs in others.”

“Quality over quantity.”

**More
accountability
— from
everyone**

Students want more accountability from everyone in the system — including themselves.

“Teachers shouldn’t be allowed to drop out and leave their job for another district mid-year. We get stranded with substitutes.”

“You’re not going to get more parent involvement until they get faith back in the system. Why bother, when they know nothing will happen?”

“Schools need to do what they promise.”

“Schools need to acknowledge what’s wrong, take responsibility, before anything will change.”

“You can’t just collect data. You need to put it into action. Make sure something actually changes.”

**Relevant
vocational
education**

A few students call for efforts to upgrade and expand career and technical education offerings.

“Not everyone needs college to be successful. Some are good at book learning, but others do better with hands-on learning. Our school offers carpentry and culinary arts, but it should have more.”

**Give us
a voice**

Students appreciate the opportunity to share their views. They enthusiastically welcome a follow-up meeting with Superintendent Cerf. And they unanimously say they would be willing to participate in some ongoing body such as a citywide student council.

“We need more meetings like these.”

Next Steps

In the short term, we will share the students’ perspectives with the Superintendent and senior leadership. And we will schedule a follow-up meeting with the Superintendent.

Longer term, these ideas will be reflected in the strategic plan, which will be released later this summer. One specific recommendation: create a citywide student council and other school-based channels for students to have an ongoing voice in helping shape NPS priorities — now and in the future.



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