

Learning by doing: SSO leaders discover active citizenship

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A collection of student commentary from StudentsSpeakOut.org

Students Speak Out is as much about students developing an understanding of their role as active citizens as it is about bringing new perspectives to a public problem. In addition to affirming their project findings, SSO leaders from alternative-education programs report:

- Investigating a public problem helped them find *common ground* with other students. Understanding others' experiences helped them to better define their environment, and made their own seem less harrowing.
- Being an involved citizen is not only "fun", but makes one feel "responsible and appreciated".
- Skills from SSO, like public speaking, setting and going for goals, and leadership, are good for the road. Ashley, who once said public speaking was not her forte, gave a speech for 150+ at her graduation. Shane says he's more organized for himself, and his peers take heed of his insights.
- Young people's ideas have a place in determining the *common good*.

Shane Saunders, Osseo Area Learning Center in Brooklyn Park

"Through our Students Speak Out research, I learned that kids are serious about getting done with work and trying to finish school. At the Osseo ALC, most of the kids [I interact with] are mature and show a lot of respect. A lot of them have families to take care of and are busting their backs trying to get done and start their lives. I just learned that [at alternative-education programs] people understand more of who you are and respect you more.

I learned that [being an active] citizen is, for one, a lot of fun. It makes you feel really good about yourself and makes you feel responsible and appreciated.

I also learned that [being an active] citizen is, for one, a lot of fun. I learned that being a part of an organization [the Citizens League Students Speak Out project] felt really good and everyone was cool and cooperated and helped each other out. It makes you feel really good about yourself and makes you feel responsible and appreciated. Also, respected for most part. I really think I do have a voice to be heard. I just got chosen student of the month at school yesterday. I know pretty much every single person at our school, and they all know me, and take what I say to the head. They say I'm insightful. [For the Students Speak Out project] I was on time and exceeded the expectations... I feel more organized for myself."

Molly Dietz, RiverBend Area Learning Center in New Ulm

"I talk to my classmates about [the issues] and I learned a lot about my peers. While doing this I have got[ten] closer to my peers. I learned some really want to make a difference and learn about StudentsSpeakOut.org and some don't. But I believe everyone loves the ALC. I learned a lot about how alternative schooling fits in with my life and I love coming to school every day. Without the ALC I didn't

think I would make it. I do think I could make a difference. I think anyone can make a difference if they just try and put their mind to it.”

Ashley Iverson, Spring Lake Park Area Learning Center

“I think Students Speak Out is a great program and I think it (we) did a very good job for getting the message out to kids who don't know about Learning Alternative schools. I have learned so much from meeting legislators who control more things than I ever thought. I learned a lot about myself, too. Hearing other peoples' stories, I realized mine wasn't so bad. But I am also happy that I got the word out about ALCs and how they really do help students.

Students Speak Out has helped me open up and speak out. I never thought I would be able to speak in front of all my teachers and about 150 more.

The teachers in ALCs get to know you personally. You're not just a student that's in one or two classes. No, you're a person they try to make a connection with and push you to try your hardest. I want to go into teaching at an ALC. I have to say, that's probably where students and teachers connect more. I know [becoming a teacher] takes a lot of school, but [I've learned that], no matter what I want to achieve, I can. All I have to do is try my hardest, and I hope to do so.

This year at our ALC graduation and award ceremony, I got up in front of my whole class and gave a speech—something I thought I would never do. But I am happy I did, 'cause it was one of the best things. Before I did terrible in speeches, but this one I was really proud of, and thought I did really well. I have to say I strongly enjoyed Students Speak Out.”

Joseph Otten, Phoenix Learning Center in Buffalo; then Blue Sky Online Charter

“ After working on this project I have learned that people who want to attend alternative schools should not have to be 'at risk' to enroll and that anyone that wants to go to an alternative school should have the option to do so. Being an engaged citizen I believe that we should be able to do the things that we want to do and not have guide lines set for us to tell us whether or not we can or cannot do them.”

ABOUT STUDENTS SPEAK OUT:

StudentsSpeakOut.org is an initiative of the Citizens League Minnesota 150th Anniversary Project (MAP 150). MAP 150's purpose is to find ways of cultivating citizens' ability to participate in designing public solutions by developing new spaces and roles that respect citizens' experiences and ideas as relevant to the policy discussion. People affected by the problem should be included in defining it. StudentsSpeakOut.org is a project whose face is a social networking Web site. We are testing a variety of strategies for involving young people as active citizens by meeting them where they are (on the Web, using technology, and in both school-based and outside-of-school learning environments). The Web site was at first Minneapolis-focused, and has now expanded to all of Minnesota and Milwaukee, with potential for further expansion nationally.

There are forum discussions where students and adults raise questions and discuss ideas for solutions. We've "turned the tables" and asked students to act as commentators on the education-related ideas of high-profile adults in Minnesota. The Web site was also the host of the "I Am Minnesota's Future" Video Contest, a pilot-level contest providing a forum for students to articulate what adults and youth must do to ensure a better future in Minnesota.

There is a lot of behind-the-scenes work, too, that occurs to cultivate active citizenship and bring the site to life. For example: Student leaders from Minneapolis and from Minnesota's alternative-education programs have project coordinators who assist them in investigating topics of their choice on video and in written story, and who connect the students to decision-makers working in their scope of interest.

In Milwaukee, students learn how to use the site to address education matters they care about via workshops, and adults participate in separate workshops to learn how to support the students on the site. The workshop designs and in-person recruiting strategies built on the successes of Minnesota's site, and the strategies are succeeding (as evidenced by rapid growth of site participation—almost 80 new participants since its launch in mid-April 2008.)

There are a number of strategies for facilitating more dialogue amongst students regarding respect, and other issues affecting students, using the site's discussion forums and cultivating student leaders to run the discussion. Most important to the students' willingness to participate is their trusting that there is an audience willing to consider their ideas. If that's you, and you would like to know more about working with Students Speak Out to involve students in your work, contact us: info@studentspeakout.org