

About SSO Issue Briefs

June 12, 2008

Issue briefs connect Students Speak Out social-networking forums with public policy

On StudentsSpeakOut.org, young people report their experiences with school and schooling. But the flow of ideas isn't organized—at least not in a conventional way. Much like a meeting around a conference table, someone throws in a joke here and there. Some participants express ideas more than others. Different people are in different places of understanding.

Unlike a meeting around the table, however, a social-networking discussion thread can take place over many weeks—even months. As one conversation takes off, several more are just beginning in separate threads. Learning and thinking about different topics happens simultaneously. Topics of discussion, and individuals' ideas about them, evolve as people contribute external information from news articles, candid conversations, new experiences, and more. Adults and young people challenge one another to consider different points of view, and moderators provide “just in time” information for students interested in learning more about a subject or about communicating their ideas more publicly.

Often, students start SSO discussions as an emotional response to an experience. Eventually, the emotions give way to identifying, with others, the factors that influenced that experience. From there, young people begin to see what they could do to influence change, and what adults might do as well. Soon longer-term members educate the newbies. Ideas are better informed. The crowd gets wiser.

Understandably, while adults tell the Citizens League they think StudentsSpeakOut.org is a good idea, they have trouble mining the site's large volume of content for specific insights regarding today's current major topics in education policy. Learning the technology is an obstacle for some, but adults also simply don't have the time to sort through the process students are experiencing to find the most profound ideas. Young people, too, have difficulty seeing the “product” their collective thinking can produce.

To make the content more useful for those thinking about education policy and programs, the Citizens League has assembled quotes by topic in Students Speak Out Issue Briefs. On StudentsSpeakOut.org, you may access briefs on the No Child Left Behind Act, suspensions, respect in school, alternative-education programs, bullying, college and career centers, standardized testing, the role of community in education, and more.

Want student input on your policy or program idea? Just ask!

**Log on to StudentsSpeakOut.org. Sign up as a member.
Go to “forums” and start a discussion.**

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 suspensions and expulsions, 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