

How do students learn outside of school?

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A collection of student commentary from StudentsSpeakOut.org

Students learn and outside of school as well as inside classroom walls. The students participating in Students Speak Out discussed ways that they had personally learned outside of school. Many students felt that these experiences not only enhanced what they had learned in school, but in some cases were even more meaningful. Students also discussed the role extracurricular activities play in educating students. Some students expressed frustration that these types of learning experiences were not more prevalent in schools and that often students were denied access to them due to financial concerns or family responsibilities. In this brief, readers will notice that students asked thoughtful questions of each other to bring the dialogue to higher levels.

Annie (Freshman, Southwest HS) "I'm in a social justice filmmaking group called *TVbyGIRLS*, ...where there are girls 12-19 who make films about issues relevant to girls and women. We recently finished a documentary called *Greatest Girls*, a project in which we collaborated with the Minnesota History Center as a part of their *Greatest Generation* project...

I learned so much in this project. I learned tons of history, especially since my class was covering this era simultaneously...Because I was doing this project, the material we covered in class seemed so much more relevant, and I felt like I knew so much more. In fact, I was frustrated in my history class because there were so many interesting things we didn't cover.

I'm not sure if I learned more than in school, necessarily, working on *Greatest Girls*, but I definitely learned with more meaning. It wasn't stray facts floating around about the Depression, it was on a much more personal level. What I learned from my subject, *Bea*, made so much sense to me and was really exciting. It sounds really cliché, but it made history come to life! I wasn't just reading from a textbook, "During the war, soldiers wrote V-letters to their families." I held and read the V-letter. *Bea* told me her personal stories and it was personal to me because of my friendship with *Bea*...by the way, did I mention she's 92?! I think every student should have this opportunity, because it makes learning real and exciting.

What do you think of learning inside of school vs. out? Do you think there are enough resources available to students to do projects such as this? If not, how can more students gain access to projects like this? What about doing something like this inside school?"

Brett (Freshman, Avalon Charter School) "Good question and I don't know why I didn't think about sharing this before, but *Avalon* gives students credit for things they do outside of school if it can qualify for standards or school requirements. When other students have gone on vacations or trips for example they have things they do while they are gone to get certain credits or extra credit. (My friend went on a trip and did a project on what she saw and visited. She learned more about it before, during, and after than she would have if she had not turned it into a project.) You can learn a lot of important lessons outside of school that will help you to become a better person. I was in that musical at YPC and you learn a lot of time management skills and other important things like that during the process. I think people forget you learn outside of school and sometimes those lessons are more important than the couple of days you miss in school."

Annie (Freshman, Southwest HS) "I know what you mean! Like when I went to Washington D.C. with *TVbyGIRLS* this spring--I learned so much from other youth (it was the History Channel's Save Our History youth summit--so there were youth there from all over the country) and we were in amazing buildings like the Capitol (we watched a senate vote which was incredibly fascinating) and the Library of Congress. I learned way, way more than the week's worth of busywork that I had to make up."

Dena (Freshman, Southwest HS) "Also, if teachers did less learning out of text books and worksheets, and more learning from experiences, students would get so much more out of school...I think that you don't need to make a fancy documentary with expensive equipment to have a meaningful, personal learning experience outside of school. I think that any way you make an effort to learn about something that is not out of a textbook or course curriculum is so much more meaningful (and you are way more likely to remember it). If students have the motivation to try and learn something in a 'hands on way' I think it is way better than being forced to complete a worksheet assigned at school."

Annie (Freshman, Southwest HS) "For sure...and I would say that this blog is outside of school learning...I've definitely learned a lot from my time here, even though what we're doing here isn't going to be in any textbook..."

Brett (Freshman, Avalon Charter School) "Why do you think that traditional public schools do not usually have a way of letting students use those type of experiences for the benefit of their school education? There are so many learning opportunities that students could get if the school made some of their trip academic by projects or some else. My friend did not have hardly any work to complete once she got back because she was learning on her adventure."

Annie (Freshman, Southwest HS) "Yep, it (outside of school learning) doesn't fit into the standards or test requirements, which teachers are so frantically trying to meet. Teachers can't find wiggle room in the standards because they are afraid of being punished...they think if they take time away from the standards for things like this, we'll be less prepared for tests and fail...I know a teacher who told me exactly this. It's too high stakes to stray away."

... I think you're right on about the cost...there's no grading rubric set up, or funds to explore projects like this for students. There's not much funds in the schools period...so why would they spend it on something 'extra'? This makes me so sad, because while it costs more, it's so much more meaningful."

Brett (Freshman, Avalon Charter School) "...It's not that we can't learn outside school, it is that once we get inside (especially if we have covered topics previously) there is not credit for that learning and we just have to go over it again in school."

It isn't that they 'dumb it down,' but they don't let us really get anywhere with learning, really reach our full potential in school. We are capable of more, but we are not given the chance to do so."

Annie (Freshman, Southwest HS) "... I think it's also a question of access. Many students would love to be involved in outside-of-school learning, but don't know where to look. I was very lucky to stumble across *TVbyGIRLS*...my neighbor heard about it because her boss's daughters are in it...and she knew I liked film and happened to tell me. I thought it sounded cool and wrote to the mentors. I'm so glad I did! Schools aren't preventing outside-of-school learning, but they're not helping students find opportunities either."

The following comments come from a discussion on extra curricular activities. Students discussed how many students at their high schools participate in after school programs and what keeps some students from being active in these activities.

Brett (Freshman, Avalon Charter School) "Well, I really think it will vary depending on the school that you attend. I go to a public charter, and we do not have that many students involved in the after school activities because you can do the activities during school, (because of how our school works.) So it's kind

of hard to distinguish what students are in after school activities (if it was a traditional school,) because of how we function. If I had to guess, I would say above 50% for sure. If you look at economically how well off your student body is, and the school funding for these programs it can really effect the turn out for the programs.

I do think income and your home life has a lot to do with it... Your family influences so much about your education. Why do you think the white middle class America on average performs the best out of any statistical group? It is because they tend to be the most educated and motivated with a stable support situation at home with less distractions and responsibilities to take away from your education. If I want to do an after school class, and it means my mom has to pick me up later than usual, I pretty much can. For students who have responsibilities at home or parents cannot pick them up will most likely discourage them from participating and make it more difficult to do so."

Annie (Freshman, Southwest HS) "There are many students at my school who participate in some type of after-school activity or sport. However, as Brett was saying, I think finances do have a lot to do with participation...I think it's more than just responsibilities with family, it's the expectations and costs of being a part of an after school program.

I know for sports at my school (possibly district-wide?) there is a fee of \$60-\$90, plus a physical (which costs money, unless you go to the school clinic) and the price of uniforms and team apparel is through the roof! We paid \$30 for tennis skirts alone this year, and opted to tie-dye our own shirts instead of buying the uniform one. (which still ended up costing money) I think most times, you can be accommodated as far as uniforms go if you can't afford it, but I'm not sure about the registration fee.

Even for clubs and other activities. I was in debate this year and you're expected to have nice clothes to wear to tournaments, and bring money for lunch. I'm sure it's like this for other clubs as well. If you can't afford to buy new nice clothing, you can wear what you have...but you will be frowned upon by the people from other schools who are wearing tuxes at the tournament. It's definitely intimidating and discouraging to not have money when you're a part of these things."

Salma (Freshman, University of Minnesota) "It's a little of everything to be honest. For most students, the thought of staying in school a minute longer than they have to just doesn't cut it. Also, I've noticed this need among young teens to go out and get a job. Everybody wants to be independent and seen wearing the latest trends. I feel as though after school programs are failing young inner city kids to a great extent. The reason I say this is because I feel as though there would be a lot of students who would stay after school if there were a way for these students to get back home. Most students can't afford to find money to get home twice a week. Not only is transportation a problem but also we have to keep in mind that different students have different needs. As far as I know, your family doesn't have a role in whether or not you say for after school. I come from a family where family responsibilities come first before anything else, and for a lot of Somali youth that happens to be the case. Most parents feel as though after school is the time most youth get into trouble rather than engaging in useful activities, youth get involved with street folks and pick up bad habits that eventually end up ruining the young person. Although that may not be the case for most young people, but I do buy into that a little. A lot of young people say they are at after school programs when in truth they are getting into trouble, and they end up ruining it for their peers. It really depends on the community, and their culture."

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 143 new participants since its launch in mid-April 2008.)

There are a number of strategies for facilitating more dialogue amongst students regarding outside of school learning, 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