

What is the role of community in education?

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A collection of student commentary from StudentsSpeakOut.org

Community plays an important part in the education system. Students, teachers, and parents agree that community support is vital to the success of schools and individual students. The students participating on Students Speak Out discussed how communities can positively or negatively affect their individual experiences with school and schooling. Many students were encouraged by individual community members, but at the same time felt let down by their elected community leaders. In this brief, readers will notice that students take responsibility for their own education, but recognize their dependence on the community to help them achieve their goals.

Shanaye (recent graduate, North Community HS) “Your community is where your heritage lies. Where you grow up and who you grow up with has a huge influence in the outlook you have on life, how you speak, how you view the people around you, and how you view yourself. I see the influence of my community at work in my life because I always had someone telling me that I could reach my goals if I worked hard enough.

When you have other people telling you that you can do whatever put your mind to, it makes you feel like you don't have to carry everything at once; you know that there is someone willing to help, and thus you want to do your best because you feel those who help and encourage you deserve nothing less.”

Gayle (Senior, Patrick Henry HS) “...The way my dreams can be supported by my schools and communities is if both showed teenagers that anything can be accomplished no matter what type of environment [they are in]. The schools definitely need to nurture the interests of the students rather than constantly shutting them down because eventually the students will begin to give up hope and there are dreams killed. I am not saying that it is the job of the community and the educational system to supply everything the student needs to fulfill their dream because most of that is the parent's responsibility, but the community and the schools have to realize that they are a type of support that the student yearns for. I know that when I was in high school, my dreams were supported. Even if it was just comments from teachers saying, 'good job,' or, 'you're well on your way' and others like that.”

Holly (Freshman, Avalon Charter School) “I believe that politicians, education and community leaders need to emphasize that today's generation is tomorrow's future, and that if we don't increase funding and inspire critical thinking in today's students, what hope is there going to be for the future? Challenging our students should be a priority in public, private, and alternative schools around the country. I was just watching the movie "Pay it Forward" which begins with a teacher who, on the first day of school, emphasizes the responsibility of students to care about their world and to try and do one thing to change the world. Their world. That teacher says, "The realm of possibility is where? In here, in your brain. You can use it, or sit back and let it atrophy. That is, let it wither away" We shouldn't allow this to happen by being okay with budget cuts that are basically taking away our educational opportunities. This may be a rather cynical way of looking at things, but education is very important, and when it is our education that is at risk, I believe we need to take it seriously.”

Shanaye (recent graduate, North Community HS) “...As for the way schools and communities can help

us, all they have to do is give the encouragement when we 'the students' tell them our dreams and aspirations. All they have to do is say, 'You have dreamed the dream, let us help you make the reality.' However, if you want to be specific, schools can give more scholarship opportunities, internship opportunities, and volunteer opportunities. They could also get more mentor programs to give students more one on one attention and cater to the specific needs of each.

Furthermore communities can help by supporting their children—not just each parent's individual child, but the children of every parent in the whole community. It's too often that communities are divided amongst themselves, thus setting the children against each other by the examples of their parents. But if the community truly comes together and helps each other then the students benefit by knowing that they have the love and support of everyone around them. And that makes us feel like the weight of the world isn't on just us anymore, but shared by all who care."

Mai-Eng (Senior, Patrick Henry HS) "...With the competition of many bright students out there I see that it's my own goal to accomplish new experiences and strive to be the best. Therefore, when it comes down to the help and support of teachers and family members, I see that this affects students a lot. I often worry that I won't have enough money to go to college but, at the same time, I get help from my teachers and staff that makes me feel college will be possible. There are just some things that affect the way I view my steps of getting to where I belong. So I strongly say that, to better myself and my dreams, all I need is the support and motivation of my community and school.

Often times I understand that there are so many issues going on at the same time and I feel there should be alternatives of helping our young generation with their education. By this, I mean that at least schools should have the money to support extra tutorials or programs to help students who are struggling academically. School and community are so closely related that I see there are some open options, too, for communities to speak out and bring new changes or ideas to the school ground. I think this would make a big difference in student's life and education. This is because all ideas are good ideas—especially coming from parents and staff of the community in which lots of students reside. Therefore, I strongly believe that as long as parents, teachers, staff, and community members show the support of how important education is to today's society, there will be a change in attitude and motivation of many students."

Students also commented that they are part of the community and have a responsibility to be active participants in it.

Salma (college student) "We all know that young or old we can all make a difference in one form or another. Then what's stopping us? Why are the numbers of high school dropouts in inner city youth increasing, when we are all well aware of the issue? Today each one of us can take it upon oneself to do something as small as tutoring young kids, to removing a harmful object from the street to bring about change. It's time we take a stand and stop blaming others, and take matters into our own hands. We all know that talk is cheap, and that by talking nothing will be resolved...an act of any kind is never too small to contribute to change.

...To tell you a little about myself and what I have done to bettering the situation of young inner city Somali youth in my community. I currently volunteer at Brian Coyle center and serve as a tutor to kids in elementary to middle school during the weekdays. Through this activity I am able to truly interact with the young kids and answer any questions they might have about college. What keeps bringing me back to the center is how I can personally relate to these kids. I too was once a young child new to the states, not knowing the English language and needing help with homework. Unlike my peers my parents weren't really able to help me complete the assignments, although they have always been there for me and encouraging me to aim high in life. With the help of such tutoring programs I was able to get the help I needed to succeed in school, and the best part of it now is that I'm helping someone who's in the situation as I was earlier.

I am also involved in the youth program at my local mosque. We organize activities to get the youth off

the streets during the summer time and out of trouble. I honestly know that young people have a lot of energy and if not put into good use, they will probably get themselves into trouble. We organized trips to the roller garden, swimming and public parks. I have noticed that young people lacking positive role models to look up to, or simply a ear to listen to. By offering these programs we have been able to attract a large number of young teens who are motivated to do something positive..."

The following comments were posted during a discussion regarding elected officials and Minneapolis public schools. The students voiced their disappointment in the way elected leaders were dealing with the public school system, especially with regard to funding for school sites and libraries that students often use.

Brett (Freshman, Avalon Charter School) "It is very unfortunate that I had to leave the Minneapolis Public School system because in its prime I loved to attend schools that were in my area and easy for me to attend. I live in walking distance of at least three Minneapolis Public Schools, yet I do not believe that attending any of them will benefit my learning as much as my current school. I feel that the adults that are on the school board and in the Minnesota state legislature are not protecting and promising education for Minneapolis students. I feel they have forgotten why they were elected in the first place. I feel unsupported along with my parents and friend's parents when elected officials are not doing anything to help enrich the community that it is their responsibility to do by increasing the level of educated people and opportunities for students to learn and grow. If the school board and legislature would listen to the people they represent about the value of education and need to prioritize funding for education then not only would I feel supported, but connected with the people running our democracy and feel less like I am living in a county ruled by a dictator gone out of control.

I don't understand how so many people are supporting the development of the new stadium for the Twins, and able to get this going and on its feet so fast when our school systems in Minneapolis fall between the cracks and go unnoticed by our leaders. It's taking too long for education issues to be addressed. To me this shows that our elected leaders and school board are unable to prioritize the problems in our public education system that they have been elected to address. I feel left behind and unimportant when they are willing to raise the sales tax for a new stadium that in the long run will not benefit our society. Schools have been put on the back burner and left with over fifty-two kids in some classrooms. Why is it not possible for them to increase the sales tax for our education? I do not understand, especially when the people who really deserve the most input is our parents and teachers. These are the people who see me everyday and make the real differences in student's lives and know what we need to succeed. Adults making decisions at policy levels do not know what our schools really need and what the students should have been able to learn in school. I see this everyday when the state standards are not teaching us to increase our global awareness and understand cultures and customs through our education.

...Overcrowding is the kind of issue that should have media attention with the school board and legislature baffled and flabbergasted at their poor funding decisions. This would never have happened if the class sizes were not pushed to their limits due to so many public schools closing from lack of adequate funding. The school I am at now is in a much better situation attitude wise because our teachers are pretty satisfied with the resources they have for their classrooms and the student to teacher ratio does not go above 20. Can no one see that schools like this are what make the leaders and truly intellectual people of tomorrow? No one wants to be in a learning environment like I was in last year at my Minneapolis public school. The sad part is that my school was considered one of the better public schools of Minneapolis. School closings and poor education occur when schools are not well funded. When I am at a place that is well funded and full of resources for parents, students, and teachers, I can feel supported and know that my education is valued and important to the leaders running the democracy of this country..."

Brett (Freshman, Avalon Charter School) "Last Monday I rode the city bus down the central library, (which I LOVE!) and it was closed. =(I was really bummed out...Most people would agree that libraries are very important for people to be able to access and have involved with schools. Why are we so short on funding for our libraries (along with Minneapolis schools) if they are so important for education and if people want to be able to visit?...After reading the hand out and talking to the library, I found out people

are working to keep them open and to get more funding put towards the Minneapolis public libraries which by the way have some of the worst service hours in the country. Since the budget problems in 2003 the libraries suffered along with many other services. Why has this budget crisis happened (I was like 9 then so I didn't know much) and why have we not done anything big enough to get us out of this budget slump, or actions noticeable to students, teachers, parents, library staff, and anyone else affected?"

Holly (Freshman, Avalon Charter School) "It's also in the Ramsey County system. As a homeschooler, I used to visit our local library at least once a week, and I loved it! Over the years, though, I have watched as the open hours for the library have dwindled. Now they are open late only on weekdays, which doesn't make any sense to me. And the simple fact is, it's due to budget cuts. I think it's really sad that this is happening to our libraries, as they help to fuel our communities and ignite a love for learning that I still have today. What a shame."

Brett (Freshman, Avalon Charter School) "I think they for sure can, and you're totally right that the school and teachers need to be backing them all the way. Another important thing is the individual attention (which I know is really hard to get right now), but I tutor at Urban A. for instance, also I am going on a trip to New Orleans to do the same thing, and we work with kids on individual basis to help them improve literacy and in New Orleans work to assist in any educational tutoring and community help we can. If we have those kinds of things provided to students (especially early in the educational process), we can help them out a lot. If we can get them up to their required levels, so they have a chance in school why would they have much more of an issue to perform at an equal level while in school?"

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 the role of community in education 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