## What's alternative about Minnesota's alternative education programs?

### Students share their trials and triumphs at alternative learning center schools

*by Kim Farris-Berg*

Alternative education programs serve an important function in Minnesota K-12 public education, offering flexible, individualized learning environments for 146,000 students. Students are eligible to attend when they are, as defined by Minnesota Statute 124D.68, "at risk" of educational failure. In its handbook for state-approved alternative programs, the Minnesota Department of Education states, "The original mission, as it is now, was to provide viable educational options for students who are experiencing difficulty in the traditional system."

Trouble is, requiring that students be "at risk" in order to attend alternative education programs may place students in the position of having to first fail in traditional schools. This contributes to a widespread perception that alternative programs are not "legitimate" educational options. In early 2008, on the Citizens League's StudentsSpeakOut.org website, students reported that they avoided alternative programs because they believed them to be for "bad" or "stupid" kids. Already facing significant social and academic barriers, they wanted to avoid more problems. Kari, a student from River Bend Area Learning Center (ALC) in New Ulm, Minn. reports that Area Learning Centers, one type of alternative program, are socially known as "Assholes' Last Chance."

The negative stereotypes of these schools are anything but accurate, students report. Once they begin attending, they are relieved to find social and academic environments where on-time graduation seems a real possibility. Yet students indicate that the perceived lack of legitimacy often delays their entrance into these programs, and unnecessarily creates problems, including:

- Students come to see themselves as failures.
- Students get more off-track in their education than need be.
- Conventional schools struggle with the behavioral and academic problems that result when students try unsuccessfully to make things work, frustrating schools' ability to serve well the students for whom conventional schools are a good fit.
- Presumably, some students simply never find their way to alternative programs and instead drop out.

### Students Speak Out's work with young leaders

In January 2008, the Citizens League selected six leaders from alternative education programs who were asked to address a problem. They chose the social stigma surrounding their schools. These students abhor the

# CONNECTIONS
## Building a League of Citizens



Bill Blazar of the Minnesota Chamber of Commerce spoke at a planning meeting for the Regional Policy Conference. The Regional Policy Conference, organized this year by the Citizens League, will be held on September 23 at the Minnesota Landscape Arboretum.

## Policy and a Pint®: The Big Sort

**Thursday, July 31, 2008**
**Doors at 6 p.m. program at 6:30 p.m.**
**$10; $5 for students with valid ID**
**The UBS Forum at Minnesota Public Radio**
**480 Cedar Street, St. Paul**

*Beer and appetizers included!*

Join author Bill Bishop and moderator Steve Seel to talk about Bishop's book, *The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded American Is Tearing Us Apart*. Called "essential reading for activists, poli-sci types, journalists and trend-watchers" by Kirkus Reviews, the book examines how and why Americans are sorting themselves into neighborhoods filled with people just like them—and what it means for politics in this contentious election season.

Register for Policy and a Pint®: The Big Sort at www.citizensleague.org.

The Policy and a Pint Election Year Series is presented by the Citizens League and 89.3 The Current and is sponsored by Best Buy.

## Planning for the Regional Policy Conference

The Citizens League is planning this year's Regional Policy Conference. Want to help focus the conference? We still need your input.
Go to www.citizensleague.org to answer these two questions:

1. Which changing regional pattern has the most profound effect on your work/life?

2. In what areas do you see the strongest need for collaboration to address these challenges, and what's the nature of this collaboration?

## Participate in the Water Policy Study

The Citizens League's study on water policy is getting underway, and we want to make this process as open as possible. Our goal is to allow everyone interested in the project to participate, whether or not they are members of the study committee.

All study committee meetings are open to the public. Everybody is invited to attend the first three meetings, **water use and sustainability (July 15), water quality (July 29),** and **Minnesota's lakes (TBD).**

Join the discussion on our policy blog: www.citizensleague.org/blogs/policy.

For more information on the study, visit www.citizensleague.org/water.

## Your financial support matters

You can see from these pages and from recent Journals that the Citizens League has had a real impact on policy and civic engagement this past year. This summer we are embarking on our most ambitious policy agenda in over a decade, and we are expanding opportunities for civic leadership development and engagement.

You will soon receive our annual summer fundraising-request, **and we urge you to consider a contribution at any leve**l. From $25 to $2500, your financial support helps us to achieve our mission of building civic imagination and capacity in Minnesota on policy issues like poverty, water, transportation and healthcare.

Contact us with questions, or go to our website at www.citizensleague.org/contribute to support this work. Thank you!

Sean Kershaw, Executive Director

## community connections calendar • point • click • engage

### www.pointclickengage.org

Looking for public affairs events from the Citizens League and other local organizations? The Community Connections Calendar is your one-stop shop for public affairs events in the Twin Cities.

## Nominate someone to the Citizens League Board of Directors

The Citizens League Nominations and Leadership Development Committee is taking nominations for service on the Board of Directors. We encourage you to nominate someone to serve—even yourself! It's an invaluable way to serve the Citizens League while working with a terrific group of members.

Find out more by visiting our website at **www.citizensleague.org** or by contacting Deputy Director Ann Kirby McGill at **akirbymcgill@citizensleague.org** or **(651) 293-0575, ext. 15.**

# What students can teach us about fixing schools

Students Speak Out online forum offers students a place to talk about their schools, their problems, and ways they think we can make education better

*by Stacy Becker*

Minnesota and the nation have been debating what to do about education for decades, yet real education outcomes have barely improved. Lost in the shuffle of most education policy debates are the students. Rarely do we talk about what will motivate students to excel. Rarely do we ask students what they think about one of our most critical public systems. The Citizens League thinks that asking this question will bring desperately needed insight and fresh ideas into a stale and unproductive discussion. So as part of our Minnesota Anniversary Project policy agenda, we asked this question: "What can students teach us about how school

needs to change so that we see dramatic improvements in student achievement?"

As a way to answer that question, the Citizens League created Students Speak Out (SSO), an online forum for students to share their views. Working with graduate students at the University of Minnesota's Hubert Humphrey for Public Affairs and the nonprofit education advocacy organization Admission Possible, the Citizens League developed a prototype that would put student voices back into the education debate by giving them a place to talk about what they like and value about their schools, and why they choose the schools that they do. In the spring of 2007, the Citizens League launched the Students Speak Out website (www.StudentsSpeakOut.org) and last summer recruited a panel of student leaders to respond to weekly questions posed by adult decision-makers.

SSO now has more than 200 members and students' comments are being used

in a variety of ways. Minneapolis Mayor R.T. Rybak recently joined to solicit student feedback on his violence prevention plan. Quotes from SSO helped inform the latest book by Harvard Business Professor Clayton Christensen and Curt Johnson, "Disrupting Class." The multitude of pages of discussions on the website are in the process of being "mined" by the Citizens League to provide student perspectives on a variety of education policy topics.

## Students Speak Out Goes Alternative

Last fall, with some experience under our belt, Students Speak Out was expanded in partnership with the Minnesota Association of Alternative programs, a professional organization dedicated to the improvement of alternative education and program options. The students were asked to identify a problem in their schools that they wanted to work on. Alternative school students ("at-risk") chose to address the perceptions that people have of them, as they put it, as "stupid" or "bad." The students gathered information and ideas from other students and met with legislative leaders in mid-June to discuss their findings. (See "What's alternative about Minnesota's alternative education programs?", page 1)

## Students Speak Out Minneapolis

Minneapolis students chose to address bullying in schools and how trust, or the lack of trust, between teachers and students impacts bullying. In addition to gathering stories from other students and adults, they are reviewing research and

engaging in active discussions. They have come to the conclusion that students can play a very important role in helping stop bullying. In early June, they attended a teacher training to discuss their findings with teachers. Their video can be found on www.studentsspeakout.org and at www.map150.org

## I Am Minnesota's Future video contest

In recognition of Minnesota's 150th anniversary as a state, SSO invited students to submit videos describing an issue they believe is important to Minnesota's future. See the winning entries on the SSO website. One of the biggest benefits of the contest for the Citizen League has been the relationships forged with students throughout the state—and especially students of color. One of the winning entries has more than 800 views on YouTube!

## Students Speak Out Milwaukee

The success of Students Speak Out led to the development of a sister site in April 2008, Students Speak Out Milwaukee. Students there are helping to create videos about what works and doesn't in school, and the site already has over 100 members. (Read more about SSO Milwaukee on page 6.)

What's next for Students Speak Out? The Milwaukee site is being treated as a pilot to determine whether and how SSO might be "licensed" around the country as a vehicle for bringing student voices into education policy making. As the students' work gains more and more attention, adults from around the country—educators, policy-makers, and journalists—are discovering the value of hearing what students have to say and engaging them in discussion about the issues that matter to them. In addition, Students Speak Out will be involved in a joint project this summer with Education|Evolving on ethnically homogenous schools. ●

*Stacy Becker is the MAP 150 project director.*

> So as part of our Minnesota Anniversary Project policy agenda, we asked this question: "What can students teach us about how school needs to change so that we see dramatic improvements in student achievement?"

# Alternative Schools

idea that people think of them as "stupid, bad kids" and they want the public to understand alternative schools for what they really are: a valuable means to learning and graduation.

The Citizens League pressed the students to find out if their observations were more widespread. In turn, the student leaders gathered stories from 21 students in 10 schools and six additional individuals about their experiences in alternative programs. Based on those stories, students co-created a survey taken by 60 self-selecting students at a student leadership conference run by the Minnesota Association of Alternative Programs (MAAP) in April 2008. This report conveys their findings.

## A Minnesota success story

Minnesota was an early adapter of alternative education programs, developing one of the first in the nation in 1968, the Wilson Open Campus School in Mankato. The sheer number of Minnesota students who opt for alternative programs at some point during their middle or high school careers gives testimony to the important needs these schools fulfill. According to the Minnesota Department of Education, 146,000 students attended alternative programs during the 2004-2005 school year, including roughly 19 percent of the middle and high school population.

In the Students Speak Out survey, almost 79 percent of the respondents said they were doing better academically at their alternative programs, and 62.5 percent said they were doing better socially. Seventy-three percent agreed or strongly agreed that they are learning more. One hundred percent of the students surveyed said alternative education programs are helping them to attain their educational goals. In story after story, students said the schools weren't academically easier and they consistently pointed out that students must meet Minnesota's standards for graduation.

**Nicole, age 31, Shoreview ALC graduate**: *It was tougher for me to go through mainstream high school. At Shoreview ALC, I was very successful. I could work at my own pace. I didn't feel pressure. ... Instead of failing the normal high school, I was actually getting A's and B's. I graduated from college. I am a marketing coordinator in the promotional products industry. ...I am successful.*

**Molly, River Bend ALC in New Ulm:** *[Going to the ALC after trying to make things work in my traditional school] was the best decision I have ever made. Now I actually pass classes. People don't realize that students have different types of learning and 'alternative' is a different way to learn and a great way to learn.*

## Widespread negative stereotypes

Despite their accomplishments, students attending alternative education programs face persistent and widespread stereotypes. When asked why they didn't enroll in alternative programs sooner, 28 percent of the students surveyed indicated they thought the schools were for "bad kids" and "stupid kids," or had other negative perceptions about the schools. Students describe their own perceptions and fears:

**Joe, Phoenix Learning Center in Buffalo:** *I was thinking to myself that this is going to be a place where there will be fights everyday and hard-ass teachers...[but] right when I stepped in it was entirely different. All of the teachers treated me with respect and there were no students that I didn't get along with.*

**David, Osseo ALC in Brooklyn Park:** *I had doubts about going to an ALC. I never wanted to go. I didn't think it was the place for me. But I really like it there. I thought it was for a bunch of...people that didn't care about school anymore and they just went there because it was easier. It's totally the opposite.*

Students also worry that the success of alternative programs is dismissed. People assume that if "bad" or "stupid" kids who didn't succeed in traditional schools are graduating from the schools, then the schools must be easier.

**Travis, Osseo ALC:** *Since it's 'alternative', they think that means we're stupid. There's a state law that says [all students must learn the same thing in high school.] It's not like we can't understand, it's just how we learn.*

## Three unnecessary problems

The persistent stereotyping of alternative education programs and the students who attend them creates unnecessary problems. The first consequence is that students come to believe that they are the problem; that they are "alternative" from the norm because they don't fit in.

**Ashley, Spring Lake Park ALC:** *No kid likes to be told they are lower than someone else. That makes kids wanna live up to something. Make themselves seem better then the person who lowered them. And if you completely eliminate that then there is no problem.*

Research suggests that "stereotype threat" may impact learning. Joshua Aronson, associate professor of psychology at New York University, writes about the impact of "stereotype threat" on students: "Numerous studies show how stereotype threat depresses the standardized test performance of black, Latino, and female college students. These same studies showed how changing the testing situation (even subtly) so as to reduce stereotype threat, can dramatically improve standardized test scores and motivation.

...We have found that we can do a lot to boost both achievement and the enjoyment of school by understanding and attending to these psychological processes."

Second, the students suggested that these stereotypes delayed their entrance into alternative programs, and blocked their path to educational success. About 83 percent of those surveyed said they would be better off now had they attended an alternative education program sooner.

**Abby, River Bend ALC:** *I have never had good grades. I have... attention deficit disorder. I was struggling my freshman year. I failed American history and physical science. During the summer I went to summer school for my history class, but I missed an opportunity to make up my science class. That wasn't the first time I had been to summer school either. I had gone the summers after my seventh and eighth grade years along with my freshman year.*

**Brian, Osseo ALC:** *When I was still in elementary school my parents never really did help me out with any of my school work and if they did help me out they would make a big deal out of nothing. They would just start yelling and calling me dumb. I never did any homework or any other work in class. There were a lot of deaths going on in my family at the time so I didn't really want to think that much about my education... So [after] 6th grade I started to smoke and drink and started doing things that I am not really proud of to this day... I was in my ninth grade year now and still failing and getting into more fights. My school told me if I would get into one more fight then I would get kicked out of school. I didn't really like that idea. That's when I started to realize that I needed to get my education... Without the ALC I don't think I would be graduating this year.*
Finally, students' most frequently cited reason for delaying attendance (36 percent) was that they wanted to try and make things work in their traditional schools. They tried, unsuccessfully, to "do better" and freely admit the problems they created as a result.

**Joe, Phoenix Learning Center:** *During my first high school years I was not doing so good, I was failing almost every class every quarter. ... Then I talked to one of the assistant principals and he asked me how I was getting along with the teachers and students at the high school and I told him that I only liked one teacher in the entire school and I only had a couple friends. He told me that this was the wrong place for me then and he recommended that I go to Phoenix Learning Center, so I said whatever and I went just because I wanted to get out of the high school.*

**Eric, River Bend ALC:** *I have been attending this school since third quarter of last year. Since I came here I've succeeded... I've changed. My past with school was not the greatest. In the [traditional] high school I didn't get along with others. I had a hard time with teachers. I had no opportunities to work one-on-one with them which was a huge problem. I have ADHD which, I mean, I guess that's just an excuse, some people might say, but here they actually understand that it is harder to pay attention, to get motivated. And here at the River Bend ALC people understand that. And that's what I like. I'm just another kid here. I don't stand out as much.*

# Making the connection

What students have to say on Students Speak Out social networking forums can impact public policy

*By Kim Farris-Berg*

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, along 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 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. ●

Students are ready and willing to answer your questions!

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

Log on to www.StudentsSpeakOut.org. Sign on as a member. Go to "forums" to start a discussion.

## Students Speak Out goes to Milwaukee

*by Danny Goldberg*

Students Speak Out Milwaukee grows and changes every day. The interest and excitement the new network inspires is visible each time a visitor connects to the site. High school students, many of whom have come through challenges the rest of us can barely imagine, if at all, generate the interest, the excitement, the daily growth. They tell the truth about schools; they voice their own determination to learn, to overcome adversity even if, perhaps especially if, the adversity is caused by adults who profess to be acting in their interests.

Not just the words, but the faces and the images on the site, tell different stories than the ones we usually find in newspapers, magazines, or on television. Popular media and conventional political discussions portray these students as "the problem." They do not see themselves as such. They know trouble, they frankly admit that some of their peers cause trouble, but they refuse to allow those troubles to define them, or their ambitions.

When I introduced myself on my page on Students Speak Out Milwaukee, I called the site "a 24/7 public hearing." I explained that I brought it to Milwaukee because I believed it was "time for students to claim their full rights and exercise the power of active citizenship." Even as I wrote it, the language on my own page seemed tired to me. I was hoping the students could wake me up. I was dreaming Students Speak Out could be an antidote to the compulsive repetitive stupefactions of traditional school board meetings.

There's a lot of talk these days about "new politics." Well, here are the citizens who might able to show us for real what that means. Let's see if the grownups who feed themselves off the old politics can deal with them. ●

**Danny Goldberg is a member of the Milwaukee Public School Board.**

# Meet our Students Speak Out STUDENT LEADERS

## MINNEAPOLIS LEADERSHIP TEAM

**Brett** is in the tenth grade at Avalon High School, a charter school in Saint Paul. Before Avalon, Brett attended Marcy Open School in Northeast Minneapolis. He became involved with Students Speak Out because, "I really value social justice, especially from an educational standpoint, and ways that I can be tuned into that aspect of life I find pretty cool and crucial."

**Cori** graduated from Roosevelt High School in June and will attend Lawrence University in Appleton, Wisc. this fall. Before enrolling at Roosevelt, Cori attended Cooper Elementary School and Anne Sullivan Communications Center.

**Mai-Eng** graduated from Patrick Henry High School in June and will attend the University of St. Thomas in the fall.. She intends to study psychology or international relations in college. Mai-Eng says she joined Students Speak Out because "I have attended Minneapolis public schools for 13 years of my life so far and there has never been a time that I feel students or any young adults have taken action to bring out issues that are affecting our student body and our schools."

**Nora** recently completed the eighth grade at Susan B. Anthony Middle School. She will be a freshman at Southwest High School this fall. About Students Speak Out, she says: "I really like going to public school and decided to get involved in something that would help make public schools better."

**Shanaye**, a graduate of North Community High School, is in her second year at the University of Minnesota. She is majoring in French and Italian studies.

## STUDENTS SPEAK OUT GOES ALTERNATIVE LEADERSHIP TEAM

**Ashley** is a senior at Spring Lake Park Learning Alternative. After graduation, she plans to go to college and become a teacher at an Alternative Learning Center.

**Eric** has attended the River Bend Area Learning Center in New Ulm since 2007. He is a state officer of the Minnesota Association of Alternative Programs STARS (Success, Teamwork, Achievement, Recognition and Self-Esteem). He joined Students Speak Out to "encourage students attending alternative programs to go above and beyond with many things such as your schooling, job employment, and personal growth."

**Ilandrea** ("Nuny") attends the High School for Recording Arts in Saint Paul. She joined the Students Speak Out Goes Alternative Leadership Team because "I feel that I can use my experiments in not taking advantage of my education to help others realize what they have before it's too late."

**Joe** graduated from Blue Sky Online Charter School in last spring. Before that, he attended the Phoenix Learning Center in Buffalo. Joe joined the National Guard after graduation and left for basic training in June. He says: "The main reason I applied to be a leader for Students Speak Out is because I needed to find a way to get my voice heard."

**Molly** also attends the River Bend Area Learning Center. She was previously a student at New Ulm Senior High. Molly says switching to the ALC was one of the best decisions she ever made.

**Shane** attends the Area Learning Center in Brooklyn Park. Before going to the ALC, Shane attended Osseo Senior High School. He says: "What I think we students need to figure out is why do so many people have trouble doing their school work? Could we possibly change students' motivation to do their work?"

# Public policy should be more than an antiseptic numbers game

## Life stories can help policy makers ask the right questions and find new answers

*by Stacy Becker*

I am an alumna of the Kennedy School of Government, and believe me, stories and personal observation were nowhere to be found in the policy analysis curriculum. We studied economics, statistics, quantitative analysis, and more economics. The clear message: With enough of the right data and some clever policy analysis, policy solutions will reveal themselves. I believed it, and have devoted most of my career to practicing it.

This approach sends us on a never-ending search for more data. I recently attended a luncheon where a governor from the Federal Reserve Board spoke on the foreclosure crisis. His proposed solution was more data: If more data had been available, investors would not invested so heavily in securities backed by subprime and so called "Alt-A" mortgages, thereby reducing the market for these types of mortgages. Yet there were 31,000 foreclosures in Minnesota in 2007, and another 39,000 are projected over the next two years. To suggest that lenders and mortgage brokers needed more data to understand the nature of the near-fraudulent loans they were peddling is generous indeed!

I am *not* saying that data has no role. I simply want to make the case that good policy is not just an antiseptic numbers game. It resides in the messy worlds of people's experiences, values, biases, expectations, and life stories.

The Minnesota Anniversary Project (MAP 150) and the work of the students in this issue of the *Minnesota Journal* taught me this lesson firsthand. Numerical data show that students are dropping out, but data cannot really explain why. Data can suggest that bullying is a problem, but it doesn't illuminate the solutions very well. The intense personal challenges faced by alternative school students weren't exposed through data, but through the stories they shared.

We typically dismiss stories as irrelevant; they are personal and emotional, not collective and objective, but they add value to policy development in a number of ways. First, stories have great power in framing policy issues. It is impossible to develop good solutions if we ask the wrong questions. Stories can help us get the questions right, and I have come to believe that stories should be a standard first course in any policy-development exercise.

When the Alternative Learning Center (ALC) students decided that the issue they'd like to tackle was "why people see ALC students as stupid," I was perplexed. This is not a policy question! It's an emotional reaction driven by social circumstance. We let the students run with their issue of their choice, however, telling ourselves that we must have faith in the students' intuition in this matter.

The students collected stories, and lo and behold, a pattern started to emerge. Nearly all students described the stigma of being associated with an ALC despite the fact they the ALCs were helping them achieve their educational goals. Many students delayed their entrance to ALCs, dubbed "Assholes Last Chance" by some, a result of the negative perceptions they held about students who attend alternative schools. Unraveling things a bit further, we found the origin of these perceptions hidden in plain sight. State law establishes ALC's as the "fall back" for students who might otherwise fail. By requiring students be at risk of failing before they can enroll in an ALC, the law sets failure as the entrance criterion, clearly implying that the students are the problem, not the educational setting.

Stories also give quantitative data a more meaningful context in problem definition. Alternative education programs served around 146,000 Minnesota students in 2006. Are we as state really prepared to say that almost one in five of our public school students is a "failure"?

A second important purpose of stories is that they bring to the surface and (in the right processes) help clear the emotions and biases that often impede progress toward the common good. The Minneapolis students worked through their perceptions very constructively in their project on bullying. They began with a hypothesis that greater trust between students and teachers could reduce bullying. The unstated implication was that teachers bore the primary responsibility for addressing bullying and because they didn't cultivate trusting relationships with their students, bullying went unchecked. You will find that the students' discussions include a fair degree of emotional content and personal opinions. But through respectful pushback, discussion, and listening to other students' stories, the students came to see that students themselves bear some responsibility, and that they also have the capacity to act to stop bullying: bullying went from a "they" problem to an "all of us" problem. The students were invited by the Minneapolis School District to share and discuss their findings on bullying at a training session for teachers. What stole the show? A five-minute video of students sharing their stories and thoughts on bullying.

Finally, stories have moral potency. It's easy to forget that public policy affects peoples' lives and that policy making is a responsibility we must exercise with great moral sobriety. Often policies are made for people in situations where policy makers have no first-hand knowledge. I have never known the crushing despair of poverty, or what it is like to struggle in school, or be denied health care. How can I presume to know what's "right" for those who have? Their stories are an indispensable tool for helping us make decisions that are just, for honoring the Golden Rule. ●

**Stacy Becker is the MAP 150 project director.**

> We typically dismiss stories as irrelevant; they are personal and emotional, not collective and objective, but they add value to policy development in a number of ways.

# More trust between students and teachers means less bullying in school

## Both students and teachers need to play a role helping to solve this complex problem

*by Victoria Ford*

In January, the Students Speak Out Minneapolis Leadership Team (meet the team members on page 6) set out to test a simple hypothesis: Increasing trust between students and teachers will reduce bullying and harassment in schools.

To test their theory, they produced video interviews with other students, collected stories from students from seventh grade through the first year of college, and engaged in conversations with students, teachers, and other adults from a wide variety of schools around the Twin Cities area. Forum topics on the Students Speak Out website included, "Is bullying normal?" "Bullying: why do we care?" "What have you seen happen when someone observes bullying and speaks up?" and "Can bullying be addressed by curriculum?" In June they presented their findings to a Minneapolis Public Schools teacher training class and used the opportunity to get more input from teachers.

The interviews, stories, and forum conversations revealed some important observations:

- Bullying is a hard problem to solve because there are many types of bullying, and bullying occurs for many different reasons.
- Teachers and students both have roles to play in putting a stop to bullying—and in helping students who are being bullied.
- The more trust there is between students and teachers, the less bullying there is in the school.

## A hard problem to solve

In the interviews and in discussions on the Students Speak Out forums, the leadership team got a sense of why bullying is a difficult problem for schools to solve. Students told stories of being bullied in many different ways—teasing, insults, physical bullying, cyber bullying, even bullying by teachers—and they acknowledged that it is sometimes difficult to know when something crosses the line from "joking around" to real bullying.

"I have been bullied in different non-violent ways, such as name calling, teasing, or even extreme insults. Most of what I get is just PLAYFUL but the question is what draws the line between just a little joke or something that really hurts."

— *Gabe, Susan B. Anthony Middle School*

The students also learned that the people who become bullies usually have a lot of other problems, things that are difficult for schools to solve.

"By attacking one aspect of a problem we attack the symptoms of the disease, not the disease itself. What we need to do is be able to identify the root problem. Maybe it's home matters, maybe it's abusiveness. Whatever it is, they have become bullies due to a basic inability to handle it; they take it out on others."

— *Cori, Roosevelt High School*

"Bullying often happens because of differences. If people are used to those differences then they don't feel uncomfortable and are less likely to bully. Sometimes people bully as a way of preventing themselves from having to stray out of their comfort zone."

— *Nora, Susan B. Anthony Middle School*

## Roles for teachers and students

The students identified roles both teachers and students can play in reducing bullying—and they became convinced that students

and teachers need to work together. Students have the information—who is being bullied, who is doing the bullying—and teachers have the authority to stop it and can be there for students who are bullied.

In interviews and on the website, the students said teachers often don't even realize that bullying is occurring. The two most important things that teachers can do to help students are to enforce rules consistently and simply be there for those students who are bullied.

> "Adults definitely turn a blind eye [to hazing during Spirit Week]...I don't think they see it as threatening. On the first day, all of my teachers said something like "All the upperclassmen just love freshman!" or "They'll embrace you!" ..."Don't worry, no one REALLY throws batteries." And for the most part, nobody's seriously hurt. Freshmen kind of just tolerate because they know that they won't be the picked-on freshman next year...they'll be the picker-oner (for lack of a better term). Adults couldn't seem to care less... they just sort of deny its existence and move on to teaching."
>
> *– Annie, Southwest High School*

> "If you can trust your teacher to be there for you and do the right thing when you are having an issue with someone bullying, then that teacher becomes important to the mix. I don't think we can change all students' ethical behaviors at school all together. Especially right away, but with teachers being there for their students instead of turning the other cheek, showing that someone cares is definitely a strong step forward for those victimized."
>
> *– Brett, Avalon Charter School*

Students have a responsibility to solve bullying problems, too. The students talked about ways that they can help, by standing up for their friends or getting involved when they see bullying happen. They also talked about how creating a supportive community can help prevent bullying in the first place.

> "I've made it part of my life to actually go out and help others. If I see someone getting picked on, I'll say 'Hey, leave him alone.' It feels good to be not on the bullying side but actually helping others who are getting bullied."
>
> *– Kiana, Roosevelt High School*

> "The biggest thing we try and focus on is a positive community with supportive respectful peers. It is kinda based off peer pressure, actually, which can be used to your advantage. When we have a lot of kids who are saying 'Hey that's not how we work at Avalon, you need to change your behavior.' You would be surprised with the results we get."
>
> *– Brett, Avalon Charter School*

## Increasing trust

The students talked about a number of ways that trust between students and teachers can help solve bullying problems. Trust can help prevent bullying by building strong relationships between students and teachers–and without strong relationships with teachers students are more vulnerable to being bullied. Once trust is established, students will be less likely to violate that trust by bullying.

> "I think that the trust bond between teachers and students is very important. It seems like if the teacher does not trust you, then you are more vulnerable to bullying in the classroom. If the teacher does not like you and then you start to get bullied in the classroom, the teacher will be more likely to let it go then if you are one of the kids who has the teacher's trust. I'm not saying that you need to suck up to the teacher, but you should not lose the teacher's trust."
>
> *– Kevin, Susan B. Anthony Middle School*

When bullying happens, students lose trust in their teachers and the school system in general–and that creates more problems.

> "I think another issue that I brought up again is the trust factor, it gets sabotaged when a student gets bullied. It can come to the point where they don't trust the system, they don't trust their teachers, they don't trust the support staff in the school, they don't trust the administration because so often it's happened to them. So many times it's happened to them and so many times they've said stuff, and so many times nothing's happened. It becomes really tough for them to trust the system and so they fall into the cracks and they keep on getting bullied… So I can see why someone who has trouble re-trusting the system and tell the authorities when they do get bullied."
>
> *– Mr. Flanders, teacher, Roosevelt High School*

## Next steps

Over the next several weeks, as the Students Speak Out Minneapolis leadership team wraps up its work, we will be compiling some of what we've learned into policy memos (see "Making the Connection," page 5) and sharing them with policy leaders and the public.

Although the students' study is coming to a close, the conversation–on bullying and a host of other topics–continues online. Students, teachers, parents and anyone interested in the future of education are encouraged to join in at www.studentsspeakout.org. ●

*Victoria Ford is the Citizens League Policy Manager. She can be reached at vford@citizensleague.org.*
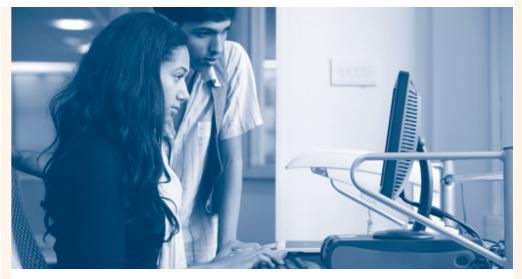
# PERSPECTIVES

## We are more than "just kids"

Students' have valuable insights into the school environment and the ways that we can make the school experience better

*By Nora Kane*

My name is Nora Kane and I'm in eighth grade at Susan B. Anthony Middle School. I'm one of the five student leaders for a program called Students Speak Out. Students Speak Out is a program that was started by the Citizens League that aims to get kids, parents, and teachers involved in what is going on in the city and especially in the schools.

All of the student leaders go to school or live in Minneapolis. What the student leaders do is figure out what can be done to make the Minneapolis Public Schools better. Then we post what we found on the Students Speak Out web site. Almost all of our work is done online and a lot of it is blogging. Our focus this year is on safety in the schools and our thesis statement is that trust between students and teachers can reduce bullying. We are trying to get people's, especially students' opinions on this statement and to hear stories about experiences with bullying to give us a better look at what is going on. To find out what students thought were problems that influenced bullying and to figure out what

on the younger kids and students can even be bullied by teachers. It seems that verbal bullying is most common but it is also the form of harassment that people get punished for the least. Now we are focusing on what can be done to discourage students from bullying and what can be done to stop it when it happens.

really listen to you and think about what you have to say on StudentsSpeakOut.org, which I think is important for students. What seems to happen more often than it should is that a student, or group of students, will have good and interesting ideas about things that could be done to make the school system run smoother but they are not listened to because they're "just kids." The students are the ones who are in school and who know what's going on, so it is important that their opinions be voiced and heard if we want to change things for the better. From my experience with Students Speak Out, I have been listened to and people seem to take me seriously, which I think makes a difference. The discussions are not just about things that are going wrong either, but about things that are going well and should continue.

> It's also a good way to connect with other people who are interested in similar things. Not everyone has the same opinions about issues but that makes it interesting. People really listen to you and think about what you have to say on Studentsspeakout.org.

they thought should be done to change that, we did surveys and interviews.

What the student leaders found out is that there are many different forms of bullying and harassment. First of all, there is verbal bullying and physical bullying. Within those two groups, students can bully other students, older kids can pick

There are many reasons that I am glad to be involved in Students Speak Out. For one, it is a great way to get involved in decisions being made, especially those involving Minneapolis Public Schools. It's also a good way to connect with other people who are interested in similar things. Not everyone has the same opinions about issues but that makes it interesting. People

If you are interested in hearing more about what is going on with the Minneapolis student leaders, or to read more of the discussion on bullying, visit www.StudentsSpeakOut.org and join the Minneapolis Group. ●

**Nora is a member of the Students Speak Out—Minneapolis Leadership Team and the daughter of two Citizens League members.**

## A fourth potential problem: completion rates

The students' work focused on gathering information from students attending alternative education programs, so we can only speculate about the impact of alternative programs lack of legitimacy on completion rates. However, when the survey asked "Why didn't you enroll sooner?" of students who reported they would be better off now had they enrolled earlier, 34 percent said they had not heard about the programs. Others reported they were not yet "at risk" enough to attend.

**Seth, 18, earned a general education diploma:** *I was behind 16 credits, and my counselors told me I wasn't failing enough classes to attend an alternative school.*

## Eliminating stereotypes by focusing on reasons for success

Students want to succeed; and the alternative education programs they attend help them succeed. The students' stories support what the research has found to be at the root of alternative education programs' success:

**A sense of belonging.** This may be difficult for some students to find in large schools fragmented by peer groups and organized in ways that make it difficult for teachers to get to know individual students.

**Relevant, engaging instruction.** One ALC student declared, "It's like life happens to us earlier [than it does for other people]." Students dealing with parenthood, serious illnesses, learning disabilities, uninvolved parents, a death in the family, or supporting their families financially may have a greater demand for learning commensurate with their very adult-like experiences and lessons in the outside world.

**An organization and structure that support the first two factors.** Students appreciate family-like atmospheres that are more emotionally supportive. Students describe a learning environment with flexible pacing and schedules that accommodate their significant responsibilities and issues.

When they began attending their alternative-education programs, these students say they were able to stop focusing on themselves as the problem. Instead, they focused on learning and graduating.

**Kari, River Bend ALC:** *ALC schools have a message that no other schools can deliver to their students. ALC schools make you aware that you are welcome; that you can have trust in them, and that you'll fit in among the other students. They don't judge you even if you came from the streets. They give you the hope and encouragement to graduate and move on to better things in life.*

**Shane, Osseo ALC:** *Some people don't even have time for the 'traditional way' of schooling. [In alternative education programs, students] come in on their time and get it done, because teachers and the school are nice enough TO TRY AND HELP YOU FINISH! THEY CARE.*

**Elizabeth, White Bear Lake ALC:** *I chose to go there because I got pregnant [while attending] my other school and I thought that it would help me with my education. And the other school didn't let me be there. I bring my baby to day care every morning (it's at my school) and they take care of her. I get to take her out for lunch. And then I bring her back, and then they help me with my education.* ●

**Kim Farris-Berg is an independent consultant and Project Coordinator for Students Speak Out.**

## Students' experiences raise questions

- Should alternative education programs be legally acknowledged as something students might want to attend to avoid getting "off track" socially and academically?

- Does the "at-risk" eligibility requirement imply that something must be wrong with students in order for them to want to access something nontraditional?

- Do the eligibility requirements and lack of awareness about the programs create a time delay, especially for those who are not aware of alternative education programs and other schooling options, between when students first know they're struggling to succeed and when they are attending the schools they value as working well for them?

- If the "at-risk" requirement remains in place, is it important to find ways for students and their families to learn about public schooling options available to them at an earlier time?

- After an adult suggests that a student leave a conventional school, do any students quit school, sensing one type of school doesn't want them and another type is for "bad kids"?

- What do the negative stereotypes sensed by students in alternative education programs mean for Minnesota at a time when the state is working to improve school completion and students' adequate yearly progress under the federal No Child Left Behind Act? What might students achieve if the state were able to diminish stereotypes of their schooling environments?

- Does a lack of awareness about alternative education programs, or options for public schooling in general, contribute to the Minnesota's overall school completion rate? If districts were able to refer students into alternative education programs earlier, would enrollment increase? Would quit rates decline?

# 7/31

## New Policy and a Pint®!

### We're loving our Election Year Series so much we decided to add an event…

**Policy and a Pint: The Big Sort**

Join author **Bill Bishop** to talk about his book, **The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded Americans is Tearing Us Apart**. Called "essential reading for activists, poli-sci types, journalists and trend-watchers" by Kirkus Reviews, the book examines how and why Americans are sorting themselves into neighborhoods filled with people just like them—and what it means for politics in this contentious election season.

After the event, join the Emerging Leaders Committee for an after-party at Fuji-Ya (just down the street) to continue the conversation and learn more about the Citizens League.

**For more information and to register, go to www.citizensleague.org**

*The Policy and a Pint® Election Year Series is presented by the Citizens League and 89.3 The Current and is sponsored by Best Buy.*

**MN JOURNAL**

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