

*Youth and Adults Transforming Schools Together*

**Student Interview Summary Report**

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Robert Redford played a presidential hopeful in the almost four decades old movie *The Candidate*. Media savvy promoters transformed the character's good looks, charming manner, and charismatic personality into a popular phenomenon and Redford won the election, despite scant political background and having only spoon-fed knowledge of major issues. (This was a novel story at the time.) After the inauguration, Redford climbs into the back of his limo, headed for the White House. He stares ahead, blankly, and to no one in particular utters the film's final line: "What do I do now?"

The analogy to YATST students is not nearly a perfect one, but they too, almost to a person among the 22 students from four schools who took part in individual interviews, have been caught up in a heady experience, one in which they have played a major and sometimes the primary role in identifying significant school-wide strengths and concerns, in depicting the results of their analyses with peers, in guiding their teachers into discussions about improving instruction and relationships, in meeting and interacting with students from around the state – and beyond – who share a common interest in creating healthy learning environments. Like Redford, very few of them had any idea what they were getting into when they signed on for a YATST-related course, club, or voluntary meeting. Unlike Redford, none of the students became so caught up in the process that they lost track of their ultimate purpose. They fully expect to make a difference. They just do not know exactly how that will happen. They are not anxious about this however because they are filled with hope that their intentions are well-grounded and fully trust that the adults they work with will guide them effectively in how to bring desired changes to fruition. However they too now ask, non-rhetorically, and with an admirable switch to the plural first person, "What do **we** do now?"

Like the movie, this report ends with this question and stresses the challenge for the initiative inherent in it. The sections that precede the ending make clear that the students sincerely seek an answer to the query and feel that they have every reason to assume that one will be forthcoming, given the overwhelmingly positive nature of their experiences so far. The first section identifies students' reasons for becoming involved in YATST-related activities. Not surprisingly these were varied, but by the end of the year the students were almost unanimous in declaring that if they knew then what they knew now, they would still make the same decision to participate. Students said they have greatly benefitted personally and the second section details some of the ways they have done so. Most importantly, they say, they found their own "voices" and described their confidence and comfort with sharing opinions, speaking publicly, and facilitating discussions. The third section contains students' thoughts about how their schools have changed so far. They point to subtle signs they see in teachers and students, and wrap their comments in a cautious optimism that these developments portend more substantive outcomes in the future. In the fourth section, students describe how these changes will be brought to life. They are more general than specific in this regard but express great faith that widespread improved communication is the key. The report's conclusion is relatively straight-forward.

Students have bought into the idea that their opinions are worthy of being heard and that adults in their schools should pay attention. Almost all of their experiences to date suggest that adults are becoming attuned to students' voices and therefore, eventually, classrooms and schools will evolve into student-centered – and co-directed – places to learn and grow up. A danger is intertwined with the program's success, however. Despite their patience, change will have to happen to maintain students' dedicated involvement.

There are probably some issues that program leaders would like to see addressed in the report that are not – mostly those related to the differing arrangements for student involvement from school to school. Two schools use courses, one a designated club, and the fourth voluntary meetings as the participatory vehicles for YATST, and each had dramatic attendant implications for the amount of time available to devote to the school-based efforts. Using individual student interviews as the sole data collection method did not lend itself to making comparisons across the situations however. Students obviously could not make such comparisons themselves and the students' collectively effusive praise of the program obscured discerning any fine-grained differences in their comments about school-by-school differences. Essentially students made do with the circumstances they were presented with and they all managed to end the school year having surveyed teachers and students, reported the results to both groups, experienced an uptick in awareness of the importance of student voice within their buildings, and enjoyed the fruits of interacting with like-minded people from outside their communities. Moreover, certainly program leaders are already keenly aware of the strengths and weaknesses associated with the particular form YATST has taken in their buildings and so this report does not dwell on them further.

### **Becoming Involved**

Students' reasons for taking part in the program ranged from the vague to the noble. Most of them seemed to have been recruited and prefaced their response to the question of why they joined by mentioning the name of an adult who had approached them and said that the course or club or meeting might be of interest and so the student should give it a try. The students then would say that they did not really know what the adult meant but that the brief description "sounded" like the group would be worth investigation, or as one said, "a cool way to get involved in the school." I got the impression that students already respected the adults who spoke to them and therefore would have given YATST a chance for that reason alone.

However the introduction to the program took place, for some students, YATST resonated deeply to a specific need or concern that they had. Several already had a keen interest in leadership but were dissatisfied with students' limited opportunities to display it. One participant, for example, viewed the school's student council as only a "token voice" and explained that "involvement with it shows passion but about things that are inconsequential and ephemeral. I was looking for something meaningful. In a democracy, it makes sense to have students involved. 'Student voice' can be a buzz word but in its fundamental form it's getting all

demographics represented and all learning styles integrated to create change.” Another felt that the adults in the building did not have a particularly high opinion of students’ readiness to step to the forefront: “I wanted to show teachers that students can also be leaders and help the school do what it needs to do to be in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.” Likewise, a third stated: “I’ve always wanted to see our school more student-involved.”

A handful of students described being personally upset with what went on their classrooms, especially with respect to the lack of seriousness with which both teachers and students engaged in teaching and learning. After having been in YATST this year, students now knew that they were experiencing a lack of “rigor” and “relevance” but at the time they only knew that something was not right, as this student described:

“I hated school last year and I didn’t want anyone to have to go through that. There was no point to classes, even though I had mostly all As. We weren’t doing what I thought I should be doing in class. We would have assignments and people wouldn’t finish them or did it just for a grade. It wasn’t helping me for college. It was not the appropriate level of hardness. You should like your classes. And that wasn’t like me. It was uncharacteristic, so I had to make a difference for the better.”

Another said:

“I joined recently because I was frustrated in classes and had tried a few things that didn’t work. I had nowhere else to go and had a couple of friends who were doing YATST and they said it was a good group and so it was the next place I looked [for help]. Too much goofing off was being allowed. I talked to other kids and they were just as frustrated and so I went to the principal [and followed steps the principal suggested] but nothing came of it. I have a better shot at changing things with YATST than by myself.”

And a third added:

“I’ve seen when students are ignored and see a barrier between teachers and students and I thought this would help to dissolve the barrier and make learning more effective.”

Students recognized however that they might not be making a particularly popular point, as one noted: “A lot of kids don’t feel challenged but they aren’t going to say to the teacher to make it harder.” Nevertheless, YATST appealed to these students as a mechanism, perhaps the only one available, to move their education from meaningless to meaningful.

Whether their original perspective on YATST was vague or not, everyone quickly bought into the idea of increasing students’ voice in school life as a compelling cause that deserved their attention. Thus, in response to my asking about the program’s purpose as they came to understand it, students offered several variations on the same theme, like: “Having a chance to give students more voice...,” “At least having opportunities to be heard so that people can see

that students have valid points;” and “Using this idea or tool to bring awareness to teachers and students so we have more say in the classroom.”

While for some heightened student voice may have been a worthy goal in itself, most saw student involvement as the means to a greater end, such as “Everything we do is attempting to make the school better,” and “This is about students and teachers working together to create a better classroom environment.” They expected changes to result. As will be discussed later in this report, students also saw their participation as part of a much larger enterprise, as exemplified by this statement: “Students will have a voice for now *and years to come* (italics added for emphasis) and will have the inspiration to stand up for what they believe in.” That is, the vast majority of the participants viewed their efforts as future-oriented and therefore intended to have enduring effects on their schools.

Importantly, and despite differences in the clarity of students’ understandings about what YATST was, with a rare exception, the students responded to the question “If you knew then what you know now would you still join in” with an enthusiastic “absolutely” or “definitely.”

### **Personal Benefits**

This expression of enthusiasm and commitment is entirely understandable given what students said they had gained from “the work.” And all 22 had something to say. At the risk of redundancy, this section contains comments from nearly all of them in an attempt to convey the overwhelming impact that the year’s activities had had on these young people. Left out below are only the statements that were almost verbatim replicas of how others responded.

Some claimed that they had, finally, had opportunities to exercise leadership and/or to develop new leadership skills:

“In the past I wanted opportunities to lead but didn’t get a chance; teachers mostly did it all. But it has happened this year.”

“I’m getting chances to lead. I have led. I have spoken up in a lot of groups and even the legislature.”

“I have become more of a leader. I’m normally a quiet person and this is giving me some voice. I mean, I’ve been able to say things I think for once and I see that things I say are put into action.”

Students noted proudly that they had been able to successfully learn how to make presentations and speak up in group settings, even in situations that they had been nervous about previously:

“.....speaking in front of other people. I wasn’t big on that before this year.”

“It made me more social and gave me public speaking opportunities.”

“I didn’t talk a lot or use my voice before, but I do now.”

“I’m comfortable discussing issues with peers and YATST forces skill sets on you, such as presenting to the school board and to students and to teachers.”

“It’s a self-confidence thing. My opinion matters. It shows up in little things, like sharing ideas in classroom, talking about ideas.”

Several students specifically referenced the YATST session in which students learned some of the same strategies the educators use to promote more effective discussions about teaching and learning. They noted:

“I learned activities to get ideas going.”

“In YATST, you’re always doing something and they gave you lots of good information about how to run groups which helps. The entire thing is going better because we have simple easy ways to get the results you want in a productive way.”

“I did a debrief at a conference. It was kind of scary. I’d never done that before. I always knew I wanted to be a leader and I learned that I can function in a group.”

Unsolicited (i.e., I did not raise the topic first), several participants brought up “the 4 R’s” as a benefit of being in the program. The concepts provided the students a new way to think about their classroom environments and therefore helped to make explicit and intelligible the nebulous unease and dissatisfaction they had about some of their classes. Said one: “YATST brought in the four R’s and I’d never looked at school as trying to find those key things.” Another offered: “Before hearing about the 4 R’s, school was a place where I had no control. Things just happened and I didn’t know why.” The 4 R’s gave students categories within which to locate experiences they had and were having: “When I understood the framework more, I realized that there were identifiable things about school that I couldn’t articulate but had been conscious of. YATST gave me a language to talk about what I vaguely found wrong – a lack of representation and no use made of student voices.” And apparently the new language prompted students into introspection of their own actions: “Just learning about the four R’s helped me start working harder in classes and got me to talking to teachers more and participating more.”

The students highly valued the chance to meet students from other schools. According to them, it was important to hear that people from outside their community were wrestling with similar matters and to discover what they were doing in response. Not only did the students pick up good ideas but also in the process they felt a reciprocity, that they had something to offer in return. For example:

“I’ve met people I never would have met otherwise and I’m more confident, and got validation for how I feel about school.”

“It’s nice spending time with kids from other YATST schools. They were supportive of us and shared what they are doing with us.”

“Getting together with all the other schools is great. It shows we aren’t the only ones doing this. And they want to hear you. That makes it all the better; your voice will be heard.”

As some of the above quotes hint, each student did not just list one benefit he or she had received from being involved in the program. A majority pointed to several impacts, such as this student did: “I’m better at leadership and I’m a nicer person and more comfortable with public speaking. [Interviewer: Why do you say ‘nicer?’] Because I can make my opinions known more respectfully and I see more sides of an issue other than my own.”

Essentially the young people were saying, they found their “voices.” Each activity or event put them in the position of having to present themselves and their ideas to an atypical audience. Having to connect with strangers was an obvious departure from the norm, but so was co-developing the surveys with each other and broaching instructional topics with teachers and peers. For example, they said they fretted tremendously about how to prevent putting teachers on the defensive and were uniformly pleased at the response they got. They also strived to avoid having their classmates turn the survey feedback session into a “blaming” session and, for the most part, felt they had accomplished that too. Program participation seemed to be giving students a foundation for being effective leaders whatever they might do in the future. Students realized this but they continually turned their focus back to their schools and how these skills might lead to improvements there.

“From this year, I got hope that things can change. YATST gave us the ability to do that.”

### **School Benefits**

Students were somewhat reserved in their claims about changes in their classrooms and schools. This is understandable since it was not until the second half of the year, or even late spring, that teachers and peers heard about the survey results.

YATST participants claimed that they saw “subtle” signs that some of their teachers had begun to look differently at how they taught. In fact, several argued that students not in YATST may not have even noticed these changes, but several pointed to distinct instances in which a teacher had tried to connect course content to “the real world” or had asked how students might want to approach a topic or gave more than one type of explanation of subject matter. For instance, describing the post-feedback era (however long it may have been):

“Some teachers have become more self-aware. They do things differently now. They cater more to helping us know why we’re doing something and give examples more related to life – and explain things to us in different ways.”

“I noticed because I was looking for it but the teacher asked our ideas about the most effective ways for us to study for a test. A lot of students were surprised that the teacher would be open to individual needs in doing a review.”

“Teachers are a little more attuned to what we’re doing; teachers have started to listen to us.”

“A teacher said to me “I thought differently today in class.”

Granted, no student argued that there had been a widespread surge in instructional improvement. Most could offer only a single example. But whatever momentum there was seemed to have been built through the examination of the surveys. In the feedback sessions, the students said they deliberately presented both strengths and “concerns,” with the former being areas of agreement between young people and educators and the latter being those items about which they significantly disagreed. Echoing the consensus of the students about what happened in each of their buildings, a student explained: “We were careful to choose some strengths so that the teachers didn’t feel attacked. It was really successful. For the most part, the teachers were not defensive.” Likewise, another shared: “It was unlike anything I have ever seen in terms of students and teachers holding a discussion about a topic as sensitive as their teaching methods. I heard from a lot of teachers in the ‘go-around’ that they were awestruck about what had just happened.”

But the discrepancies in opinions were the “eye-openers.” Even if interviewees mixed up the statistics some in their responses to me, they had a firm handle on how the teachers reacted upon discovering how many students felt there was no adult in the building they could turn to with personal problems or classroom help or were not engaged in lessons or said that their teachers only taught using one method. In a word, teachers were “shocked,” according to students.

Students, however, readily offered explanations for the disagreements. For example, with respect to not having any adult in the building to turn to for help, students reasoned that the problem stems from teachers always telling students to come to him or her for assistance if they need it. That approach, one student said, only appeals to students who are willing to speak up, “A lot of students don’t want to go up to the teacher. They’d rather the teacher seek them out.” And another refrained: “Some teachers don’t stop to think ‘well, some of these students wouldn’t come to me on their own’.” On engagement, a student claimed: “I heard a teacher say ‘we have seven periods a day, how can you expect them all to be engaging.’ Well, we have seven periods a day too you know so why should the teacher expect us to always be engaged if that’s what they think.” And, in terms of instructional variety, a YATST contended that the difference in opinion was because some teachers did not realize that “the methods they use are not reaching out to everyone.” In other words, the activity in each school caused everyone to have to think about their classrooms and schools from multiple perspectives and to imagine how those differences might affect educational effectiveness, thus prompting reactions like the one

this student described: “The results caught my teacher by surprise. He was only teaching one way – mostly visuals and lectures. Since then we’re doing things in multiple different ways.” Interestingly, students were not shocked at the discrepancies. In explanation, one interviewee replied simply, “Students are a lot more conscious of what is going on in class than teachers know.”

There were a few claims that students “were more focused” and “working harder” following presentation of the survey data but not enough to build an argument that such an effect was real. This limited impact made sense given that students only heard about the results later in the year and typically the YATST participants met with a randomly-selected small subset of the student population. However, what impressed the students involved in the initiative was the relative seriousness with which their peers completed the surveys. They acknowledged instances where this was not the case but most of them felt as this student did: “Yes, I think so. They were really focused and were answering truthfully. They wanted to tell teachers in a way that they would be unknown and to tell them ‘we’d like to have a say’. It touched a nerve – a good one.” Or as another described her opinion on the matter: “For the most part, the kids really raised the bar on the survey. They realized people wanted to hear what they say.”

Significantly, from the students’ point of view, their classmates were beginning to show increased interest in playing a role to better their school environments and thereby represented a ready source of new recruits to the course, club, or meeting in the future. This appeared to be very important to the interviewees, even – and maybe especially – the seniors in the group. They wanted student input to become a sustainable aspect of school decision-making.

### **Making Change Happen**

The phrase “theory of action” was probably foreign to the students and thus was not used in trying to elicit their ideas about how change would happen in their buildings, but that was the intention behind a portion of the interview. Students had several opportunities throughout the conversation to detail their image of change, including describing how they thought instructional improvements could spread beyond just the couple of examples they provided, identifying an aspect of school life that they hoped would change and explaining what would need to happen for that to take place, and responding to the question “What would you like to see happen next and how will that happen?” Students often began their answers with “I don’t know” but no one ended with that statement. Instead, perhaps partially due to their newfound and confident voices, they deigned to elaborate. Their ideas were remarkably consistent. Essentially they collectively argued that better communication among adults and students is the primary force for change and that this process will inevitably take a long time.

Students were not exactly sure about the amount and type of communication that would be needed. They were certain however that adults and students had to interact.

“I’m not sure how actually to transform a school. I think one step at a time and to communicate is the thing. But I’m not sure how to go about it.”

“Eventually students will have more say in what is going on and what’s being taught and will work more with the teachers. I guess maybe we need a big meeting at some point to talk with teachers about what we want to learn and how we learn best.”

They were also in agreement about some of the qualities such conversations would have to exhibit in order to be effective and productive. They already had had experience with avoiding defensiveness and blaming, as this student suggested: “Next year will be more about communicating. Right now, we have raised awareness. But the second we start judging, we will be shut down. The more people talk, the more teachers will incorporate those things in the classroom.” A different student added: “I figure if I’m positive, others will be too.” And they thought teachers would have to also adopt such an attitude: “Basically things will change by teachers being more open-minded and all students realizing that they have a voice.”

The students were remarkably in agreement that the schools might not become different places immediately. “It could take three years, but it will happen,” one confidently asserted. The older students especially exemplified the focus on the future that so many students appeared to have. One said, “Before I didn’t care about what happened to the school after I left, now I’m on top of things. I have a brother in seventh grade and I want it to be better for him.” Another added: “I know it will be a long process. I may or may not see changes, but I have siblings and if the changes happen by the time they are in high school, that will be pretty awesome.” (Actually it was pretty “awesome” to hear a student say that.)

A couple of students ventured to suggest indicators they would use to know whether anything had happened because of YATST.

“But my far away goal for YATST would be being able to ask every student, not just those who participate, ‘What has YATST done for the school’ and getting a response.”

“I want to witness a conversation among students I don’t necessarily talk to about the survey or the program – just a totally random, spur of the moment occurrence that begins to happen more routinely. Everyone gets the fever.”

Again, students may not have had the technical language to discuss change theory but their instincts were every bit as sophisticated as adult experts on the topic. They recognized that the litmus test of the success of the program would reside in the extent to which YATST ideas and ideals were known widely throughout the building AND became embedded in the ordinary daily routines of the schools’ cultures. Or, put more simply, YATST will be successful when student/adult communication – and collaboration – becomes just a part of “the way we do things around here” – to use a well-worn definition of culture.

But as virtuous as patience might be, several students argued that there would have been value – even if only symbolic – in having seen tangible results of their efforts this year. Said three of them: “We’re being too cautious;” “We’re all ready to make a change;” and “I feel like we need more action.” They made these statements they said because of a felt need for affirmation and/or legitimation of the work that had been done, especially in the eyes of their peers. “I think now powering ahead after the forums [the survey feedback sessions] is an opportunity missed. My class would have liked to see some changes.”

## **Conclusion**

And therein lies a major challenge for YATST.

Students were extremely pleased with developments this year, particularly in terms of the skills and information they acquired. However, underlying everything that happened was the promise that the learning environments of their schools would become better. Unlike the Candidate, personal attainment was not the primary motivation behind their efforts. Their eyes were fully focused on “making our school better.” Based on their experiences to date, they believe that increased, non-threatening, and instructionally-oriented communication between themselves and adults will achieve this. Missing in their notions of improvement however are the devilish details that would transform this belief into action. Despite the collaborative underpinnings of the project, students do in fact rely on the adults to prompt them from one phase of the initiative to another. And rightly so. The young people have no prior experiences with reforming schools to draw upon in determining or even brainstorming what the next steps in the process should be. It is a measure of the program’s success that students are ready to move forward; it is the responsibility of program leaders to take advantage of the opportunity the students’ willingness to improve their schools presents.