

Washington's Civic Engagement Forum: Students Participate in State Policy Decisions Affecting Their Health and Learning

Article submitted to CDC, June 2009

Youth in Washington, especially those who are at disproportionate risk for unhealthy behaviors, chronic diseases, and academic failure, face a series of interrelated problems:

- *Health and learning are linked.* A recent Washington State-funded research report finds that students with specific health risks are also more likely to be at-risk academically, and that there are health interventions schools can do that may positively affect factors related to academic success (Dilley, 2009). The same report states that the academic achievement gap may be at least partially attributable to health disparities.
- *Dropping out affects health status, and health is a factor in students dropping out.* Students who dropout tend to experience more frequent occurrences of early pregnancy, substance abuse, mental health issues, and a greater need for publicly funded health and social services (Washington Population Survey, 2004). A state Legislative report pointed out that the health status of youth is an important factor in the ability and willingness of students to complete school (Sullivan, 2009).
- *Challenging health conditions and behaviors are all too common.* According to the 2008 Washington Healthy Youth Survey, 31.7 percent of 10th graders statewide reported using alcohol in the past 30 days. Thirty percent of 10th graders felt so sad or hopeless for 2 weeks or more that they stopped doing their usual activities. Fifteen percent considered suicide, and 12 percent made a plan. Fifty-six percent said they were likely to seek help if they were depressed.
- *Large numbers of students lack opportunities and rewards for pro-social involvement in both school and community.* Fifty-three percent of 10th graders report that they have no decision-making opportunities in their school (i.e., class activities and rules). Fifty-six percent of 10th graders are rewarded for pro-social community involvement, such as neighbors noticing their good work or being proud of them. Sixty-six percent of 10th graders have opportunities for pro-social community involvement such as clubs or community service (Healthy Youth Survey, 2008). Nationally, "a considerable proportion of young Americans are not very engaged, including 17% who have not done any of 19 possible forms of participation within the last 12 months (National Civic and Political Health Survey, CIRCLE, 2006).

School-aged youth are often affected by problems related to their health or learning, but they don't always see (and are not often invited) to participate meaningfully in the decisions that affect them in school and life. "When adults think of students, they think of them as potential beneficiaries of change... they rarely think of students as participants in a process of school change and organizational life (Fullan, 2001).

On February 9th and 10th, 2009, a coalition of state education programs (with project management support from the Washington Service Corps) invited 46 school-aged youth and their advisors to participate in a two-day Civic Engagement Forum. The purpose of the Forum was to help youth to participate in the decisions affecting their health and learning, in their schools, community and at the state level.

Youth from the following programs participated in the Forum:

- Youth at-risk of dropping-out (Building Bridges Dropout Prevention, Intervention, and Retrieval Program; Spokane, Whatcom, & Mason Counties)
- Youth impacted by drugs and alcohol (Student Assistance Prevention Intervention Services Program; Mason & Lewis Counties)
- Youth impacted by mental health (Seattle Youth ‘N’ Action; King County)
- Youth impacted by school and community violence (Seattle Youth Ambassadors; King County)
- Youth enrolled in health professions education programs (New Market Skills Center; Thurston County)
- Youth enrolled in family and consumer science programs (Mary Walker High School; Stevens County)
- Youth participating in a School Health Advisory Committee (Black Hills High School Student Engagement Team, Thurston County)
- Youth on the state Legislative Youth Advisory Council (22 members, statewide)

The Forum had three target audiences:

- youth at disproportionate risk for unhealthy behaviors, chronic diseases, and academic failure, to help them tell their stories and to become empowered to participate in the decisions that affect them;
- youth on the Legislative Youth Advisory Council (LYAC), to help them connect to the needs of youth facing a diverse range of health and educational obstacles; and
- policy-makers, who face huge budget deficits and were preparing to cut budgets affecting health and education programs.

Activities over the two-day forum included:

- a session defining *civic engagement* and showing how to use various tools;
- a LYAC student-run, two-hour hearing on dropout prevention, intervention, and retrieval;
- a presentation by health-affected and health-serving youth on the connections between dropout issues and drug & alcohol, mental health, and violence;
- an exercise to unpack and discuss issues of race and privilege, based on the work of Peggy McIntosh;
- Planning time for discussions and presentations for legislators
- a second day, in which LYAC and Building Bridges students visited legislators for scheduled meetings in their offices on the LYAC “Olympia Day.”

These activities were designed to build a learning community, help students learn about how to tell their stories and engage in decisions across lines of culture and privilege, how to learn from other students, and how to provide compelling information for policy-makers.

In the evaluations, 88.8 percent of participants agreed or strongly agreed that “the Civic Engagement Forum increased my skill and/or expanded my knowledge.” When asked how they will be able to apply what they’ve learned with others, one participant wrote “I can describe my experience and also let kids know what opportunities there are for civic engagement.” Youth appreciated the personal stories, the experiential activities, and the welcoming tone of the event

for students from diverse backgrounds. One youth wrote, “It was really moving hearing the stories of dropout youth; it inspired and motivated me to help them.” Another youth wrote: “I can use the new skills to apply at my home environment.” And another: “Even if you are a student, your voice matters.”

Three programs shared the cost of the two-day forum, the Legislative Youth Advisory Council, the Building Bridges program, and the Coordinated School Health Program. Several actions, outcomes and activities have occurred since the forum.

Two bills related to dropout prevention, intervention, and retrieval, ESSB 5449 and SHB 1418 passed out of their houses of origin: (<http://apps.leg.wa.gov/billinfo/summary.aspx?bill=5449&year=2009> and <http://apps.leg.wa.gov/billinfo/summary.aspx?bill=1418&year=2009>). State funding for dropout prevention was retained, despite budget cuts affecting many education programs.

Although the Legislative Youth Advisory Council lost state funding, a bill related to the Council’s future, SSB 5229, passed and was signed into law. The bill removed the “sunset clause” on the Council, allowing it to continue indefinitely, and granted OSPI authority to solicit private and non-profit funding to support the Council, which is underway: (<http://apps.leg.wa.gov/billinfo/summary.aspx?bill=5229&year=2009>).

The Seattle Youth Ambassadors have been invited to present at this year’s Healthy Schools Summit (<http://depts.washington.edu/waschool/summit/index.html>) about the connections between youth involvement, school and community violence, and health at

The Black Hills High School Student Engagement Team has now established “Healthy Students/Healthy Schools” a school health advisory committee addressing nutrition, physical activity, health, school and community wellness and sustainability, and other issues. (<http://www.nwrel.org/nwedu/13-03/features/signal.php>)

The Forum allowed Washington to bring together a core group of youth for formation of the state Youth School Health Cadre, a key partner in our ongoing strategic plan. We were able to offer and evaluate health-related materials and activities, and, from the infancy of the Cadre, establish a link to policy change and civic engagement. Washington’s two Coordinated School Health leads, Greg Williamson at OSPI (360-725-6251; greg.williamson@k12.wa.us) and Adam Fletcher at DOH (360-236-3740; adam.fletcher@doh.wa.gov) have experience recruiting and supporting youth on other local, regional, for other statewide efforts to improve meaningful student involvement.

The Forum was documented by TVW, Washington State’s public affairs channel, and a short documentary will soon be available at: <http://www.tvw.org/modules/articles/engaged.cfm?bhcp=1>