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YouthTruth helps schools gain input

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Posted: Wednesday, November 16, 2011 11:10 am | Updated: 11:15 am, Wed Nov 16, 2011.

Valerie Threlfall | 0 comments

A recent study from the National Education Policy Center (NEPC) reports that African-American and Hispanic students are often punished more severely, and are more likely to get suspended from school for breaking the rules, than their white peers.

One example in the report might sound familiar because the student was from Greenville. The ninth-grader received a 45-day suspension for reportedly using a cell phone in class, a violation of school policy. The student claimed it was not a phone, but a classmate's iPod. The NEPC study points out that widespread use of suspension does little to improve the education of classmates, and is associated with increased dropout rates for those receiving disciplinary action.

This study and the Greenville student suspension highlight ways in which our schools are frequently failing students by unfairly singling some out, but not others. Fortunately, another example, also here in Greenville, offers hope for the future by revealing what can be learned from talking to students about how to improve the education process.

This week, students at Greenville Weston High School and T.L. Weston High School campus kicked off a student survey program called YouthTruth.

An initiative of the Center for Effective Philanthropy, YouthTruth began gathering perspectives from high school students in 2008. Thus far, the program has surveyed 71,000 students from 164 schools nationwide; by the end of the 2011-2012 school year more than 125,000 student voices and 200 schools will be represented in the YouthTruth dataset.



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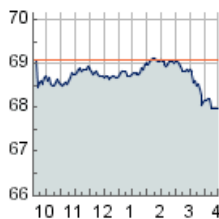
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YouthTruth offers districts, schools, and education funders the opportunity to gather valuable, actionable feedback from high school students about the strengths and weaknesses of their schools and selected reform initiatives. The

concept is based on a simple premise: hearing from students — the ultimate beneficiaries of education reform efforts — can be a powerful driver of change, as students are a valuable, often overlooked resource.

Student survey programs currently exist in many school districts nationwide. However, most lack effective mechanisms for sharing data or enabling educators to incorporate student feedback into strategic planning and school improvement efforts. Furthermore, students are almost never shown the results of their feedback, which makes them skeptical about the value of providing input. YouthTruth offers a fresh approach.

On Nov. 1, Greenville students joined 9,000 of their peers from 10 other rural schools across Mississippi, Louisiana and Arkansas to bring their voices forward through YouthTruth. Their participation is made possible by the support of the Foundation for the Mid South, a prominent regional grant maker located in Jackson,. The Foundation invests in people and strategies that promote racial, social and economic equity across the region. The Foundation is supporting YouthTruth as part of its efforts to help students succeed academically by strengthening education systems and building school capacity to better address student needs.

Participating school leaders have described YouthTruth as, “the single best thing we have done as a school to learn from our students.” Others say, “YouthTruth is a powerful resource to start conversations and motivate change.”

In response to YouthTruth, some schools have created more relevant and rigorous lesson plans. Some have improved mentoring programs or brought greater fairness and equity to the disciplining of their students. In fact, addressing inconsistent or unevenly applied discipline policies was one of the three most frequent areas of changes made by YouthTruth participating schools, according to a third-party evaluation in 2010. Other schools have created stronger advisory programs—an expanded version of the traditional homeroom experience—or created new professional development programs for teachers so they can better support their students.

While not a universal solution for all the problems plaguing our schools, YouthTruth offers a collaborative, targeted approach for improvement that goes straight to the source and gives students a voice in the all-important conversation on education reform. Greater input should lead to greater insights.

That’s something that foundations, school administrators, teachers, students and parents alike, including a certain former ninth-grader, can all get behind.

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