The Architecture of Ownership

Adam Fletcher

How can schools build a climate that takes students beyond mere engagement and into ownership of their learning? Here are four roles for students.

Any conversation about student ownership in education would be incomplete without mention of John Dewey. It was his *Democracy and Education* (1916) that helped me see the connection between student *involvement* and student *ownership.* According to Dewey, the type of activities that stimulate real involvement "give pupils something to do, not something to learn; and the doing is of such a nature as to demand thinking, or the intentional noting of connections; learning naturally results" (p. 181).

Patterns of Involvement

Throughout my career in educational administration in Washington's state government and as a private consultant, I have talked with hundreds of students and educators, learning about how schools have enabled students to get involved in the kinds of activities that Dewey advocates. In these conversations, certain patterns of encouraging true involvement have emerged.

Every time students talk about meaningful activities, they specifically identify either the type of activity they are involved in or the issue they are addressing. Students consistently identify school-focused issues as important, even as their interests in community-based issues wax and wane.

Another consistent theme is relevance: Students feel connected, engaged, and meaningfully involved when they are addressing relevant issues that reflect their interests, their passions, and their identities. Whether they are related to curriculum, leadership activities, or extracurricular programs, roles that students consistently identify as meaningful enable them to participate in design, facilitation, and assessment, with the goal of improving their schools and enhancing learning for all students.

I brought these lessons together as the basis for my Frameworks for Meaningful Student Involvement. Drawing from such pedagogues as Dewey, Myles Horton, and Paulo Freire, I have defined meaningful student involvement as "the process of engaging students as partners in every facet of school change for the purpose of strengthening their commitment to education, community, and democracy" (Fletcher, 2005, p. 5).

The Building Blocks

Activities that fully embody meaningful student involvement are what I like to call the "architecture for ownership." Strong learning is the foundation of the building. Without learning, students who are involved are at best underinformed, naive posers; at worst, they are likely to misrepresent their needs and those of their peers.

The following examples demonstrate how schools can involve students in building an architecture of ownership.

Students as Planners

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In a number of schools, students are involved in selecting textbooks, creating classroom behavior guidelines, and designing new buildings. The individual student who makes the plans may be the only person affected by student planning, or student planning may affect the entire student body. Either can be meaningful; it is the conditions and the applications of the activities are what matter.

Washington's Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) provides a student-driven educational planning program for schools called Navigation 101. In this program, students connect coursework in the school to their life goals. They research "dream" careers, study high school graduation requirements, and select the courses they want to take. Schools may adjust their course offerings to meet the interests of students. Identifying students' lifelong learning goals encourages teachers to meet the learning ambitions of particular students, offering a clear route for academic assistance and giving students the opportunity to share their dreams with supportive adults.

Members of the Student Engagement Team at the Black Hills High School in Tumwater, Washington, have gotten involved by conducting buildingwide surveys and testifying before the Education Committee of the Washington State House of Representatives. They have also planned schoolwide forums for the 2008–09 school year. Team membership is open to all students at the school.

In the 2007–08 school year, the team participated in the hiring of their future principal. Meeting after school, students told district hiring officials exactly what they wanted in their future building leader. They respectfully and deliberately pressed the officials about potential principals' attitudes toward standardized tests, student-principal interactions, and community building within the school.

Toward the end of the school year, final candidates for the principal position answered students' questions directly, and a student from the team was included on the panel that interviewed candidates. Bob Kuehl, the human resource director for the school district, said of the participants in the Student Engagement Team,

They're very insightful of the needs of a school from a student's perspective and they're very candid about their opinions and thoughts. … They have a lot of strong feelings that need to be heard and used.

This type of commitment is exactly what meaningful student involvement can—and should—foster among all partners throughout a school.

Students as Teachers

Several national programs recognize the potential of students as teachers. In the 1990s, Dennis Harper, a longtime proponent of the student-as-teacher model and founder of Generation YES, developed a program for the Olympia School District in Washington State that actively engaged students in teaching teachers how to use technology in their classrooms. According to Harper, 40,000 teachers have benefited from technology training offered by Generation YES students since 1995 (Cruickshank, 2008).

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Through the GenYES curriculum, students have participated in a sort of learning exchange. While they help teachers understand Web page development, Internet search tools, or how to scan pictures and create PowerPoint presentations, students learn about every topic in the school curriculum.

As Harper describes it, engaging students' innate interest in technology enables teachers to contextualize technology. In turn, this encourages students to become literate in areas they are interested in, as well as the subject areas they study. Combining student ownership and literacy leads directly to meaningful student involvement.

Students as Professional Development Partners

P.S. 205, a K-5 school in the Bronx, New York, has sought to develop new approaches to school improvement. Working with Communities for Learning in Floral Park, New York, students became meaningfully involved in a learning community that included multiple students, teachers, parents, and administrators.

Through a series of guided critical reflection and development sessions for all team members, including students as partners, the team transformed its own expectations and those of the school at large. Students took part in the data collection and analysis that led the learning community to identify differentiation as a focus for the 2007–08 school year. Together, team members are developing an understanding of how differentiation may be used to promote learning.

According to Martin-Kniep (2007), such research projects can be a core of learning communities, ultimately influencing practice throughout the learning environment. She writes,

Students possess tremendous experience and expertise in the areas of teaching and learning. Their experiences as learners in schools are far more grounded in reality than are those of most adults. … They live teaching and learning every day. (p. 88)

At P.S. 205, students were full members of the learning community focused on school improvement. The group prepared for student participation with the careful leadership of Communities for Learning staff members, each of whom are trained in how to meaningfully involve students. Guided deliberation, constant check-ins, and reflection during and after their involvement allowed students and educators on the team to consider the effects of student ownership in the learning community. The students' insights were incorporated into school improvement plans along with those of other team members.

Students as Decision Makers

Pushing paper across tables and going through the motions of decision making without practical, meaningful applications is no one's idea of a good time—or good learning. Yet many schools actively promote this approach in their student governments, allowing students to choose the themes for school dances year or the colors on this year's yearbook cover, but not giving them any say in decisions that have more serious implications. School curriculum, policy, and climate are more meaningful leadership areas for students. In addition to making decisions that affect themselves and their immediate peers,

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students can participate in boards of education, grant making, and school assessment at the district and state levels.

Massachusetts and California are the vanguard of state school boards in terms of providing full student membership, and dozens of districts and state agencies across the United States are increasing student involvement in a variety of ways.

The Boston Student Advisory Council has engaged students in effective efforts to help develop, form, and implement districtwide policies in Boston Public Schools. A Boston-based national nonprofit organization called Youth On Board helped the district redesign the program, creating new mechanisms that actively engage students in decision making. Since the 2006–07 school year, the council has met twice monthly, regularly shared its perspectives on high school renewal efforts with the superintendent and members of the school committee, and informed its schools about issues affecting the entire city. The recent addition of a student representative on the Boston School Committee has increased the group's profile as well. The Advisory Council's decision making has led to a variety of policy changes affecting schools across the city. Its leadership guided a new cell phone policy and a "lockout policy" affecting truancy, and their newest efforts have focused further on school attendance.

Working *With*, Not *For*

These activities represent the cusp of what meaningful student involvement truly looks like. Students advocating for educational improvement, researching classroom climate, and leading new approaches to learning and teaching stand together in the architecture of involvement, effectively demonstrating what school change looks like when the hearts, heads, and hands of students are infused throughout the process. But just as in building houses, no one builder works alone: Adults, including teachers, administrators, counselors, and support staff, must join students on the building crew.

In 1995, Dick Corbett and Bruce Wilson wrote an article titled "Make a Difference With, Not For, Students" in which they offered this sage warning:

Our proposition is that student role redefinition is a critical linchpin between adult reform and student success, and that failing to acknowledge this connection is a potentially fatal flaw in promoting our understanding of reform and in creating effective change initiatives. (p. 17)

Corbett and Wilson rang the alarm that we would fail miserably if we did not seriously consider the very people who are most affected. Now, 13 years after their warning, we sit in the ruins of many failed attempts at improving schools, blaming others without often considering our own complicity. Corbett and Wilson's ongoing studies about the perspectives and roles of students in school improvement were perhaps best elaborated on in the findings from their comprehensive study of Philadelphia schools, published in *Listening to Urban Kids: School Reform and the Teachers They Want* (2001).

There are many reasons schools must live up to the challenge that students present, not the least of which being that students are more than the future: They are the present, urgently pressing teachers,

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administrators, and school leaders to respond to the challenges in our schools right now. Let's make meaningful student involvement a reality for every student in every school *today*.

References

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KEYWORDS