

# NYSCSS

## New York State Center for School Safety

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### RESEARCH BRIEF

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## Student Voices

*A five-year study of student ideas on improving learning, school safety, risk-prevention, and relationships.*

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### Introduction and Overview

One of our greatest under utilized sources of fresh ideas about school improvement are students. Like the customers of a business, students are the front-line users in schools and have unique perspectives that are invaluable in guiding evaluation of current strategies and planning for the future. Dissatisfied customers walk away. Disengaged students often withdraw, act out, or drop out. A genuine invitation to students to participate in the process of improvement planning is a key foundation to this project.

To this end, Future Leaders Network has developed and refined a model of Youth Leadership Team and Community Service Training addressing vital school safety needs. The design grew out of comprehensive Safe School Team Planning in several districts between 1997 - 2001. In this model, student training sessions are held during the school year, with one day per month (or its equivalent) of training for teams of 15 diverse students per school, and focus on developing 3 core competencies: Leadership, Teamwork, and School-Community Action Projects. Training is interactive, experiential, and driven by essential leadership tools, including personal development, teambuilding, communication skills, adventure learning challenges, group facilitation, process-debriefing, data-driven project planning, community networking, and the opportunity for ropes course or wilderness retreats. Student-collected data, described further below, is analyzed in partnership with professional support and indicate that gaps exist in school improvement efforts that could be filled with creative solutions which we call "Action Projects," generated by students collaborating with school faculty and administration.

*Action Projects* are shaped by practical application of the USDOE Principles of Effectiveness (POE). Opportunities for staff, parents and additional student groups to attend training sessions and participate in Action Project design are offered, co-facilitated by student leaders. The teams

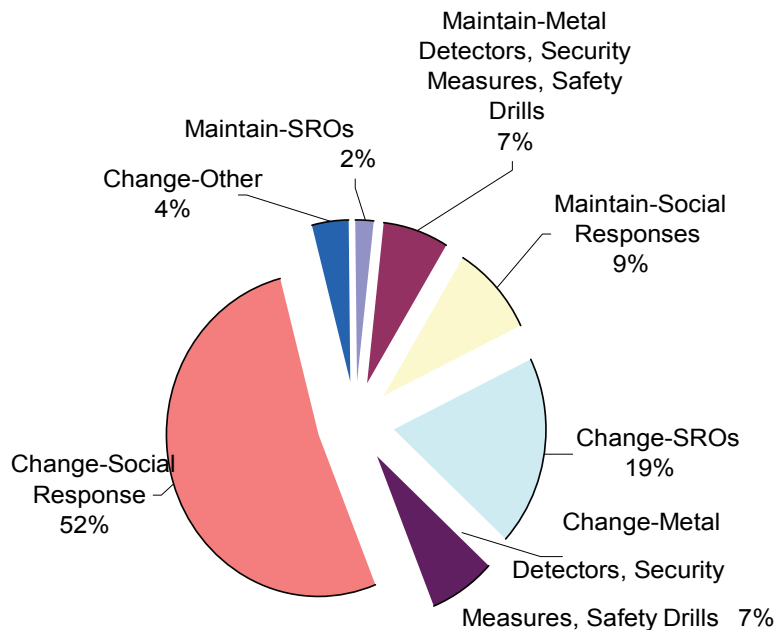
help uncover the "pulse of the school climate" through student-led focus groups where findings launch the data-driven Action Projects, serving proven school-community needs. The training's core competencies feed the inner desire for achievement that increase assets and build capacity for creative solutions both locally and globally.

Findings also show that the several types of programs missing from current educational budgets are the same ones that need expansion, namely those that promote social skills, or what community development refers to as "social capital." The goal of the project and this article is to help improve schools. The authors and the students invite others to listen to their findings, engage in dialog and assist in delivering the discoveries to the table where decisions are being made.

### Design/Methodology

This model for team planning and data collection is based on a systems approach to continuous improvement or innovation. The questions used during the student-led focus groups evolved over five years, expanding topically beyond initial inquiries into school safety concerns. Beginning with core inquiries about school safety, student responses opened a more systemic conversation about learning, relationships, risk prevention and family and community concerns. We drafted and tested additional questions to cover these topics. Student facilitators were trained to follow established guidelines and methodologically appropriate methods for focus group facilitation and management. Students engaged in pilot focus groups several times with their own student leadership groups prior to engaging in actual live focus group facilitation with heterogeneous student groups. Two to three focus groups consisting of 12-14 students each were conducted at each site. Content analysis was conducted both with the students and by professional evaluators, with results reviewed with students prior to student brain-storming ideas and making plans for Action Projects.

## What Can Schools Do to Make You Feel Safer? Student Voices – School Safety



### Findings

Early data from 1000 participants, during 1997 - 2000 safe school team meetings, utilized a “town meeting” approach, and 86% of the ideas recorded were requests for proactive social skill building programs. The remaining 14% of responses sought reactive responses, including tighter building security, metal detectors and video surveillance systems. More detailed data were collected between 2000 - 2003 by student leadership team student-led focus groups, and was from large and small city school districts, along with a suburban school. The focus groups were taped and transcribed, preserving student anonymity. Student responses to each question during the focus groups are categorized according to type of response, and then coded as either: “Maintain as is,” or “Voiced ideas for change.” “Maintain as is” shows support for the status quo. “Voiced ideas for change” represent students’ favoring changes from the schools’ status quo, which included student suggested constructive responses. The data served as a base for teams to design, propose and deliver Action Projects in partnership with school administrators as creative solutions to the data-based and content rich needs assessment provided through the focus groups. The responses to the four primary areas of inquiry are described here :

### School Safety

The primary question used was:

- **“What can schools do to make you feel safer?”**  
We found out that students believed that social responses were the key: Over half of the responses (52%) indicated students felt a social response would make them feel

safer, including the following elements:

- Talk with students; programs that allow students to express themselves (social workers, peer mediation, etc.).
- More positive and relaxed environment. Note: more enthusiastic teachers, principal, fun lessons/activities.
- Students taking self-responsibility (motivation, control, studying).
- Increase attention of student rights/property (response from teachers/office towards illegal actions students do to other students).
- Learn to respect each other (everyone).

Trustworthiness, improved social dynamics and appropriate confidentiality are critical to the foundation of connections and communication between students and teachers. Metal detectors have minimal impact, and students sometimes see them as a challenge to be beaten.

The data emphasize a variety of reordered priorities, including more opportunities to talk, listen and dialog on social-emotional concerns; increased consistency in rule enforcement; protection of rights and property; less pressure; open communication; and respect. Specific to confidentiality and trust, students told many detailed stories of incidents when trust and caring was a significant contribution and where broken confidentiality weakened

trust and widened divisions. School Resource Officers (SROs) with relationship skills are seen as helpful when they are specially trained police, not security officers from a security firm. Metal detectors have minimal impact, and students sometimes see them as a challenge to be beaten. Disconnects between different student groups need to be bridged: real gaps exist between social, ethnic groups, cliques and school roles due to misunderstanding and unfamiliarity. We found that students also want intervention and prevention skills to help classmates directly, inside the school without requiring adult intervention.

### Learning

The primary question used was:

**• “What would help all students be better students and pass finals and Regents?”**

Responses to this question revealed that students believed that student-centered responses were critical: Approximately 53% indicated students felt a student centered response would improve their ability to be better students, including the following elements:

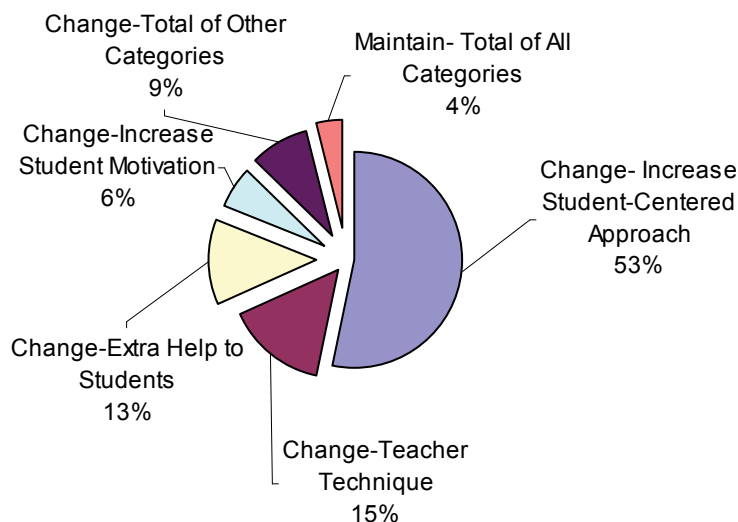
- More hands-on activities – more exciting class: experiments, interactive work on chalkboard, talking, hands-on, engaged, more enthusiastic as teachers, not boring.
- "Some teachers make you laugh and want to learn and some make you bored and sleepy."

- Teachers need to expand their teaching techniques - make learning fun, not boring.
- Updated books; creative materials; interactive projects, use games to study for exams, fun lessons.
- Teachers need to improve their attitudes as a whole - should enjoy teaching.
- Have students learning from students; "Let student teach lesson they understand."
- Show respect

We found that a student’s desire to achieve academically is often driven more by the student-teacher relationship than by a fundamental interest in the class subject. A sense of “connection” between teachers and students is an often missing link to improved learning. Students see a positive relationship with teachers as the pillars that come before learning: Over half of all responses called for more student-centered teaching. Many stories demonstrated that students’ evaluation of teachers as good or bad is based on their capacity to vary their teaching styles. We also found that action learning is important for the students: Students frequently stressed the shortcomings of lecture teaching and asked for more experiential education, project- centered work and interactive learning in the classroom. Mutual respect was an area in need of improvement: Many quotes showed that students experienced trust and respect with certain teachers. However, we heard frequent stories about a lack of respect where students were “put-down” in front of the class or in the hallways.

## **What Would Help All Students Be Better Students and Pass Finals and Regents?**

### **Student Voices – Learning**



## Reducing Risky Behaviors

The primary question used was:

- ***“Why do students choose to engage in risky behaviors like drugs, alcohol and fighting?”***

When discussing risky behaviors, students indicated that peer pressure was the overwhelming reason students engage in the risky behaviors. Approximately 60% indicated peer pressure as the key reason. Students saw peer pressure containing the following elements:

- Fit in with crowd/they want to (engage in risky behaviors).
- Excitement (young, curious, to be cool, "I like it").
- Engaging in risky behaviors impresses people - to be cool.
- To get attention
- Status

We found that youth at these ages have a basic need to belong and to build and maintain an “image”, which, in our current culture, promotes choosing drugs, alcohol and physical aggression. Students told us that fights often arise from playing to an audience, plus the need to “not back down.” “He said, she said” instigators were mentioned often as reasons for teen fighting. Peer pressure is the driving force leading students to make risky choices. The data reminded us to recognize that image building and peer pressure drive choices toward risky behaviors. Successful prevention programs must address reshaping the school’s social culture.

Boredom is risky: We all know that many school-communities have lost resources for developmental youth programs while others lacked programs that “speak to the student’s real needs. Fresh ideas are needed about improving prevention programs’ capacity to attract and engage students. We also found what we consider important for planning purposes: prevention programs are off the students’ radar: “Prevention programs” are mostly adult concepts and are clearly not part of the students’ school-community reality.

## Relationships

The primary question used was:

- ***“Do all students have an adult they can go to in school if they needed help?”***

From our investigation we found that bridges need to be built to connect with all students. Despite some variance in degree, consensus was that all schools had large numbers of students who were not connected to any teachers or adults, and that the largest category of responses (55%) was in the need to change the level of “trustworthiness” of the student-teacher relationship. The need to build trusted communication and improve confidentiality was shared by nearly all participants. Key elements of this relationship include the following:

- Teachers, guidance counselors not trustworthy/gossip/no confidentiality/don’t care about students.
- Students afraid of betrayal/criticism (need more respect/encouragement). Note: “There’s a lot of criticism from teachers of students.”
- Improve student-teacher relationship - increase comfort level.
- Improve interpersonal skills of adults in school.
- Teachers lack confidentiality.
- Teachers, guidance counselors not trustworthy, gossip/no confidentiality/don’t care about student

We also found that trust and relationship building requires an investment of time and opportunity. Trust, respect for privacy, and better practicing of confidentiality for everyone, would improve relationships. Deeper bonds between students and teachers could begin by reducing criticism and gossip. Many students witnessed staff openly discussing details shared in confidence by other students in shared spaces, (e.g. hallways). Despite staff’s best intentions, students do not view this breach of trust as therapeutic.

## Unexpected Findings

There were unexpected findings that cut across the four primary areas, that reminded us that school-communities are complex systems of interdependent dynamics. The relationship theme was present everywhere. Students see academic learning as secondary in importance to peer socialization and are more aware of the student-staff-administration dynamics in and around the school than most staff know. Students know things that staff don’t think they know. Since our feedback indicates that learning is secondary to socialization, school improvement advocates must also address the social functioning needs of the adults as well as students. There are many unique age, race, role, gender, and clique cultural gaps within schools. If we can understand these different worldviews as a new mode of diversity to be appreciated, we may be able to build school cultures of improved understanding, tolerance and excellence.

Unfortunately, where we initially met strong support for a student leadership team, and expected a general openness to the organization of student ideas and voices around school improvement needs, we were sometimes met with various degrees of resistance. This reminds us that organizations naturally protect their existing system. For these schools, student empowerment seems more popular in conversation than in practice. Nonetheless, schools and districts which embraced the concept of student participation in school improvement have benefited greatly, including several districts with newly designed and innovative student, parent, and teacher involvement programs, large amounts of new grant funding, preparation for continued increased funding, and increased student participation in all school issues. As school organizations grow, the practice of student empowerment and shared ownership holds great potential, as evidenced by the following titles of several Action Projects:

- Student Center (Center in a school where students can receive counseling, attend Peer Mediations, and participate in specialized groups such as Anger Management and substance abuse related groups)
- Project Prep (Preparing 8<sup>th</sup> grade students for life in high school)
- Project Get Ready/Summer Academy (Preparing high risk 8<sup>th</sup> grade students for high school socially and academically with booster sessions prior to beginning of 9<sup>th</sup> grade)
- Parent-student Teambuilding night (Student-led training for parents to inform them of student leadership skills learned in training sessions)
- Project Interact (2 hour student-led in-service training sessions for school teachers designed to review focus group findings, introduce teachers to leadership challenges and new approaches to teaching.
- Buddy Day (Students bring a friend to student leadership training for 1 day)

The variety of these projects is balanced by a common, state-wide campaign, shared by all teams, called Student Voices ([www.studentVoices.org](http://www.studentVoices.org)), intent on increasing student-school partnerships in improvement efforts.

## Summary

School improvement efforts will most likely have substantial gaps unless student voices are heard. These gaps can be bridged by engaging students as active owners in the process of school improvement. Students are telling us that learning, safety and avoiding risky situations will all improve by prioritizing social responses and building trusting relationships with teachers. Over 50% of responses in all categories support this. We heard, time and time again, that learning and teacher-student relationships would be enhanced by breaking the mold of lecture-based teaching and the test-driven approach to education. Replacing one-dimensional pedagogy and socially disengaged teachers with mutually respectful, trusting, engaging, interactive, hands-on and project-based, student-centered learning will make major contributions to all school improvement efforts.

*Student Voices and [www.studentVoices.org](http://www.studentVoices.org) is a shared project of several Future Leaders Network teams. Bob James is Project Director and co-authored this article with the project evaluator, Dr. Gary Ciurczak. Director of Training for Future Leaders Network teams is Denise Ashman. Future Leaders network has recently applied for Promising Practice status.*