

*Empowering* **YOUTH**  
*for School and Community*  
*Change*

*Written by*  
*Members of the Harmony VISTA Service*  
*Learning Demonstration Project in Indiana*

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# Forward

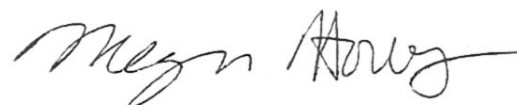
The power of youth voice has inspired me every day since I began my work with the Harmony VISTA Service Learning Demonstration Project in 2002. I have witnessed young people achieve extraordinary things for their schools and communities when they use their voice to take action on something they care about.

The Harmony VISTA Project began as a way to connect Indiana teachers and students to the practice of service learning. During the five years that it existed, the Harmony VISTA Project became one of the major catalysts for youth voice in school reform in Indianapolis. The project also focused a great deal of time and energy on parent and community engagement.

When I started working with high school students in Indianapolis Public Schools (IPS), I noticed right away that many kids were chomping at the bit to be engaged and to contribute to their school and community. In order to engage students over time, I realized the importance of first developing a relationship—many of them wanted to know that I cared or that I was “for real”. Then, it was important to tap into what really mattered to them—what challenges did students see facing their schools and communities? What did they want to do about it? It was also crucial to support them in their learning without asking (or telling) them to do it “my way”.

As a result of the impassioned work of the Harmony VISTA members, hundreds of IPS high school students have written grants, organized service clubs and events, mentored fellow students, advocated for minority and immigrant rights, contributed their ideas to school reform initiatives, researched student engagement, raised awareness about high school drop-out rates, and educated teachers about how they learn and what is important to them. I hope to impart some of the wisdom Harmony VISTA members gained along the way through this guidebook.

Reader, thank you for taking an interest in the best practices of the Harmony VISTA Project. Thank you most of all for taking an interest in how to make schools different places for young people—places where they are heard and respected for who they are and are motivated to achieve their very best.



Megan E. Howey  
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Harmony VISTA Member, 2002-2003