

Empowering **YOUTH**
for School and Community
Change

Written by
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Learning Demonstration Project in Indiana

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Preface

It is the youth of the Indianapolis Public Schools (IPS) who are the inspiration for not only this gem of a student voice resource, but for the whole Small Schools reform project in Indianapolis. Since before the official launch of the Small Schools project on October 30, 2003, IPS students have been in the lead. It is their will, skill, capacity, and knowledge that give the adult leaders strength and direction. I will never forget that first night of the launch when IPS under-classmen facilitated tabletop conversations among some of the most powerful leaders in the state of Indiana. On that night, they proved to the world that they are up to any challenge.

I have been involved in school reform for over 30 years. Over that time, it became clear to me that parents and children living in poverty often feel as though they have absolutely no control or even influence over their own destiny. Too many parents and students feel that the odds are so stacked against them that they cannot possibly change the course of daily events. Unfortunately, far too many teachers of children in poverty develop the same belief; that they also have no power to influence their own future at school.

The work of the Harmony VISTA is grounded in a belief that these assumptions held by some youth, teachers and parents can and should be challenged – openly and explicitly. The Harmony VISTA project has proven that when students are partners in educational decision making, they gain control and influence over their own educational destiny. Teachers can facilitate this with the right tools and resources. This project has taken youth voice to a level that I have not seen previously. The youth of IPS have planned and facilitated programs for incoming freshman, written and performed plays directly connected to school reform, studied and taught their peers about why they should support small schools, done research on teacher and student attitudes that has been invaluable to our work, and now sit on the governing bodies of their small schools. Many teachers in IPS have now experienced the power of tapping the extraordinary energy and joy that comes with freeing the voice of students to speak of their dreams, realities, and thoughts about contributing to our collective future.

Those of us in the small schools movement know that in order to engage students in learning, the school must provide rigorous and relevant curriculum, facilitated by caring teachers who are committed to supportive relationships with their students. Empowering Young People for School and Community Change will provide the reader invaluable resources to create the engaging school experience that our students so richly deserve.



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