

## The Harmony/VISTA Project Helps Indianapolis Students Research Student Engagement in Their Schools

Megan Howey, Indiana

The Harmony/VISTA Service Learning Demonstration Project, an NSRF brainchild, works with educators, students, parents and community members to create sustainable opportunities for youth voice and leadership, service learning, and parent engagement. In Indiana, most of this work takes place in Indianapolis Public Schools (IPS), Indianapolis' urban school district.

With funding from the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) and What Kids Can Do, the Harmony/VISTA Project coordinates a student-led research project in five IPS high schools.

The purpose of this research is for high school students to examine the beliefs, attitudes, and feelings of their peers related to school. Ten-member research teams were created at IPS' five large high schools in the fall of 2004. Students applied to be on these teams, and created contracts to hold themselves accountable for their attendance and participation. Students who participate fully receive a \$150 stipend. The Harmony/VISTA members serve as adult sponsors for each team.

Indianapolis Public Schools is currently transitioning their five large, comprehensive high schools into small schools through funding from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. This offers a powerful backdrop for students to research exactly what their peers believe about school currently, and how they think school needs to change in order for every student to graduate ready for college or a challenging career. The data they collect is used to inform the school change process in their schools.

The student researchers began their year by distributing a survey at each

high school campus to assess students' beliefs and opinions about their relationships with teachers, school climate and safety, academic engagement and aspirations, and perceptions about small schools. This survey was adapted from one used by the Gates Foundation in other school districts.

Over 4,100 students were surveyed district-wide. Some of the findings included:

- 53% of students felt that their teachers had given up on some students
- 75% of students said their schoolwork was really interesting only half of the time or less
- 80% reported that many students at their school do not respect one another
- 71% believe that they will graduate from high school and will complete a 2-year, 4-year, or graduate degree program. (Reality check: only 27% of IPS' 2003-2004 class graduated in four years.)

Each research team analyzed their school's data and compared it to the district data. With the support of Harmony/VISTA Volunteers, two students from each school prepared a synopsis of what their team thought to be the most pertinent data for their school and presented this data to members of the district administration, principals, teachers, parents, and community partners at a district reform meeting, helping these adults understand the real issues their students face. They were given 90 minutes to present their synopsis and lead a data-driven discussion with their school's teachers and administrators in attendance. Many educators reported this meeting as being their most productive discussion to date because they were able to hear what students needed directly from the source.



At each school, the researchers have also planned and implemented "informal data collection activities." These activities include Chalk Talks during lunch periods and "Poll Boxes" for students to address issues in their school by writing anonymous answers to questions posed to them. These questions include:

- "In your opinion, what does it take for you to be successful in school?"
- "What does a good student-teacher relationship look like?"
- "What questions do you have about small schools?"

The final component of this research project is a documentary that is currently being created in partnership between the students, Harmony/VISTAs and the district's television station. This documentary will include interviews with teachers and students and an explanation of how this research project came about.

### Student Researchers Speak about Their Experience:

Rather than go on describing the students' work to you, I thought you would like to hear it directly from them. Here's what eight student researchers from four schools had to say recently when I asked them about the powerful work that they are doing:

# the Center

*Why did you choose to be a student researcher?*

“I thought no students had a voice and everyone needs to be heard.”

– Alex Edmondson, freshman, Arsenal Technical HS

“Because it gives me the opportunity to do what I’ve wanted to since I was little – to make a difference for others. I’m stepping up to the plate for students who don’t feel like going to school or staying in school. I’m showing them that there is a point and teachers do care if you get an education.” – Ronald Craig, junior, Broad Ripple HS

“At first I thought it would just be fun. Now I realize I am doing something productive, learning about research, and earning some money while I help others.” – Todd Willis, sophomore, Broad Ripple HS

“To learn more for myself about what is going on [with small school reform] and tell others what I learn.” – Shentoia McGowan, sophomore, Arlington HS

*How has this project made an impact on you?*

“It’s helped me learn to cooperate with people better and to listen to what they have to say.” – Erica Shovan, junior, Northwest HS

“I didn’t know about small schools until I became a researcher. Now I feel like I know most of the stuff that’s happening.” – Janessa Goodman, sophomore, Northwest HS

“It helped me a whole lot to get to know people. Now I have confidence to talk to people I don’t know. I can get my opinion out and voice it.” – Isaiah Owensby, sophomore, Northwest HS

“I’ve become more of a leader in school, and have become much more involved.” – Mersedees Calloway, sophomore, Arlington HS

“I can express myself. I feel like I am a part of the school, not

just going there. I need to have a reason to be there besides just learning. It helps me see that not only do students struggle but teachers struggle as well.”

– Shentoia

*How has this project made an impact at your school?*

“It’s helped a lot. Students are getting more involved in school and learning about small schools. It has helped us become leaders in our schools – I think that is really important.” – Mersedees

“[Teachers] are becoming more

*“Research is nothing but numbers and words unless you put it to good use and manifest something good.*

*– Ronald Craig, junior at Broad Ripple High School*

aware that students can be involved. Before, teachers were not interested in what students had to say and now they are more apt to listen to us.” – Erica

*Why is it important to have student voice in school?*

“Because most things in school affect students. If students don’t have a voice they won’t be interested. If they are not involved, it increases the drop out rate. If the students feel that people are listening to them, they’ll feel like people care about them. I mean teachers, principals, and the superintendent.” – Alex

“A lot of students have great opinions. [Because they’re] students, many teachers think they’re young and don’t have things to say. But they do have great ideas that can help the school.” – Isaiah

“Education should be symbiotic. If teachers and students were working together we would both benefit. School should be like a family.” – Ronald

“A lot of students don’t get to say how they feel right now. If they

did we’d have a better school.”

– Mersedees

“A lot of us are overlooked very easily. We need to have a common voice respected by students and faculty equally.” – Todd

“Teachers don’t always understand why students act a certain way. Not only will it benefit us by telling them what we think, but it will benefit them by knowing what they need to do to teach us.” – Shentoia

*If you were to advise other educators about how to support a student-led research project, what would you tell them?*

“Let students say what’s on their mind.” – Erica

“Help students put their ideas into effect.” – Alex

“Always listen to students if they have something to say. If you disagree, say you disagree but understand where [the student] is coming from.” – Isaiah

“It is not going to be easy. You have to put a lot of effort and time into it. Be willing to have an open ear and a heart that’s willing to learn.”

– Shentoia

“This [research project] takes a lot of time, work and commitment. It is fun and a great experience. I’ve gotten so focused on helping that I forget about the money.” – Todd

“Communication is the main key. If you don’t communicate (student to teacher) then nothing will work.” – Alex

A final message to fellow students (and teachers): “If you really try hard to get your voice out, keep trying until your voice is heard. If you give up, your opinion will never be heard regardless.” – Isaiah

I couldn’t have said it better myself. ■

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