

# Communicating School Redesign

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## YEAR II EVALUATION

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## **Executive Summary**

In the Fall of 2014, the Communicating School Redesign (CSR) initiative began its second year as a dual-enrollment course aimed at training youth and adult teams from Vermont high schools to lead the way in building public understanding of 21<sup>st</sup> century teaching and learning and the education policies that support it. Building on a pilot of the Communicating School Redesign Using a Youth-Adult Partnership Lens course taught by Jane Feinberg of Full Frame Communications and Helen Beattie of UP for Learning, the second year of the Communicating School Redesign course also included Daniel Baron of the School Project as a co-instructor.

As part of the course, teams of high school students and educators from five high schools (Harwood Union, Hazen Union, Otter Valley, Twinfield Union, and Colchester) engaged in a year-long process of action research, first collecting baseline data on stakeholder groups' (students, educators, parents and community members) understanding of Vermont's flexible pathways legislation, Act 77, and current beliefs about education reform more generally through the administration of a survey and interviews with key informants. Teams then analyzed this data and from it created a communication action plan designed to target specific stakeholder groups' understanding of both the legislation and school reform. Through their communication action plans, teams employed a variety of methods of engaging stakeholder groups in dialogue about education reform (or "school redesign" in the language of the course). These strategies ranged from all-school dialogue to op-eds in the local paper about school redesign to the creation of informative and interactive websites that provide information about alternative pathways, personalized learning plans, and Act 77.

### **Guiding questions:**

Two questions guided this evaluation of the CSR initiative, developed by the researcher in consultation with the CSR faculty. These guiding questions were:

1. What factors enabled and constrained the CSR teams' ability to communicate successfully with stakeholder groups (students, educators, parents/community members)?
2. What were the strengths and challenges of the process of implementing this work (course structure, youth-adult partnership model, resources, etc.) from participant perspectives that can inform subsequent efforts?

### **Methods:**

Three sources of data were used to understand the work of the Communicating School Redesign teams in the second year of the initiative. Interviews with adult team members and two focus groups with youth team members conducted at the end of the year gave course participants an opportunity to reflect on what they had accomplished for the year, as well as the strengths and challenges of the course design and support they received. In addition to these interviews and focus groups, course participants' course assignments and final course reflections were reviewed, and one on-site observation was conducted of the group's final meeting at the end of the year and subsequent presentation at the Vermont Statehouse.

## **Key Findings:**

- CSR teams overall felt well supported by faculty in both understanding the key concepts of the course and in the process of implementing their communication action plans in their schools. Faculty expertise in the areas of strategic framing and dialogue for change were perceived as particularly helpful in translating theory to action.
- Youth-adult partnership was central to this work and students and adults enjoyed learning alongside each other in class as peers. However, in implementing their communication action plans, youth and adults sometimes felt they were being pushed into roles or responsibilities that were too rigid (e.g. students as presenters, adults as organizers).
- The multi-school structure of the course was perceived to be a huge support and resource to CSR team's individual work; however, some expressed a tension between cross-school team-building and the high value of uninterrupted out of school work time.
- Small group dialogues with non-CSR student stakeholders was found to be an effective strategy for reaching this group. Major challenges in communicating effectively with students were perceived apathy, the stigma associated with flexible pathways, and a fear of being different.
- CSR teams adapted to educators unique needs as a stakeholder group by providing implementation information and updates, as well as inviting teachers into dialogue about the deeper pedagogical meaning of Act 77 and flexible pathways.
- Having students serve as messengers to community members and parents of information about school redesign was found to be key to engaging this group on topics of school reform. Challenges to successfully communicating with this group was uneven access to the community as a whole, as well as having these conversations about school redesign within the context of larger discussions about schools, community support and fiscal constraint.
- Major accomplishments of teams this year in terms of the long-term sustainability of communication for school redesign including building a communication infrastructure within their individual schools through which to continue these conversations, as well as concrete plans to deepen and expand the work of this year using the comfort that they have developed with the key concepts from the course.

## **Conclusions and recommendations:**

This report concludes with a discussion of the strengths of the course and how CSR teams might continue to build on these strengths in the coming year, including the deepening of the infrastructure built through their communication action plans in school, and the expansion of their efforts with out-of-school populations.

## **Introduction**

In the Fall of 2014, the Communicating School Redesign (CSR) initiative began its second year as a dual-enrollment course (college level for youth, masters level for adults) aimed at training youth and adult teams from Vermont high schools to lead the way in building public understanding of 21<sup>st</sup> century teaching and learning and the education policies that support it. Building on a pilot of the Communicating School Redesign Using a Youth-Adult Partnership Lens course taught by Jane Feinberg of Full Frame Communications and Helen Beattie of UP for Learning, the second year of the Communicating School Redesign course also included Daniel Baron of the School Project as a co-instructor.

As part of the course, teams of high school students and educators from five high schools (Harwood Union, Hazen Union, Otter Valley, Twinfield Union, and Colchester) engaged in a year-long process of action research, first collecting baseline data on stakeholder groups' (students, educators, parents and community members) understanding of Vermont's flexible pathways legislation, Act 77, and current beliefs about education reform more generally through the administration of a survey and interviews with key informants. Teams then analyzed this data and from it created a communication action plan designed to target specific stakeholder groups' understanding of both the legislation and school reform. Through their communication action plans, teams employed a variety of methods of engaging stakeholder groups in dialogue about education reform (or "school redesign" in the language of the course). These strategies ranged from all-school dialogue to op-eds in the local paper about school redesign to the creation of informative and interactive websites that provide information about alternative pathways, personalized learning plans, and Act 77.

The communication efforts of school-based teams form one of the three supporting pieces of the larger "Shaping Our Future Together" campaign, supported by the Vermont Agency of Education, the Bay and Paul Foundation, and the Vermont School Boards Association. In addition to the efforts of school-based teams in their local communities and schools, the Shaping Our Future Together campaign also incorporates strategies to support communicating school redesign statewide and regionally in New England, both online and through traditional print media. One of the goals of the Shaping Our Future Together campaign is to ensure that legislation and other initiatives meant to support school redesign are understood as one integrated effort, rather than separate, individual efforts. Therefore, in addition to local work around building public understanding, at the conclusion of their year-long course, all five teams also presented their work to Vermont state legislators and the Vermont Secretary of Education, Rebecca Holcombe.

## **Theory of action**

The CSR initiative relies on three central concepts to inform the work of participating schools: strategic framing, dialogue for change, and youth-adult partnership. Referred to as the "three-legged stool" that supports the work of communicating school redesign, the training and coaching provided by the CSR faculty is drawn from peer-reviewed research and field-tested protocols to support the implementation of school team's communication plans.

*Strategic framing:* Strategic framing is a concept that derives from the literature on communication for social change, and specifically draws on research conducted by the Framework Institute and subsequent work by Full Frame Communications on the communication strategies that shift public understanding away from individualistic and deficit thinking about education, teaching and learning. Strategic framing seeks to reframe stakeholder's mental models of education, teaching and learning by telling a compelling public story starting from a clear statement of values. This story focuses on education as a collective good that builds strong communities and serves to build public understanding of research on cognitive development, positive youth development, and progressive teaching and learning practices that support both of these.

*Youth-adult partnership:* Youth-adult partnership is the process of youth and adults working together as equal partners towards a common goal (Wheeler, 2000). Youth participation in youth-adult partnerships in school has been linked to increased engagement in school, civic responsibility, as well as positive youth development and well-being (Mager & Nowak, 2012). For adults, youth-adult partnerships can provide renewed energy for their work as educators and administrators (Mittra, 2005). UP for Learning's training, site-based coaching, and dual-enrollment course work consciously draw from the research base supporting the power of youth-adult partnership to support student engagement. Youth and adult contributions to the process of strategic framing and dialogue for change are valued equally and seen as important for creating a plan of action for school reform that includes the input of youth and adult stakeholders.

*Dialogue for change:* The Communicating School Redesign process sees dialogue as being at the center of meaningful change. Dialogue, rather than discussion or debate, is seen as essential to shifting public understanding. The CSR approach positions students and teachers in a role of leadership for this dialogue, training school-based teams in facilitative leadership and supporting their training of additional youth and adults in facilitation at their schools. The CSR approach relies on field-tested protocols, many from the School Reform Initiative, to focus dialogic encounters in ways that preserve the values of trust, asset-based thinking, and a focus on equity and justice.

An additional tool that was key to the CSR teams' work was the "Public Understanding and Support Assessment Rubric". Developed by the CSR faculty, the rubric is meant to "chart changes in the public's mental models over time." The rubric describes five levels of awareness around school redesign. These levels range from pre-awareness, in which "stakeholders have little sense that there is a need for change" to support/advocacy, in which "the community develops a shared set of values that support school redesign." Teams were introduced to this rubric as a tool for tuning the survey and interview protocols created by CSR faculty to collect baseline data on public understanding and support for Act 77 and school redesign in their communities. The rubric was then used as the framework for analyzing both the survey and interview data that teams used to craft their communication plans.

## **Guiding Questions**

The questions guiding this evaluation of the CSR initiative were developed by the researcher in consultation with the CSR faculty. These guiding questions were:

1. What factors enabled and constrained the CSR teams' ability to communicate successfully with these stakeholder groups?
2. What were the strengths and challenges of the process of implementing this work (course structure, youth-adult partnership model, resources, etc.) from participant perspectives that can inform subsequent efforts?

## **Methods**

Three sources of data were used to understand the work of the Communicating School Redesign teams in the second year of the initiative. Interviews with adult team members and two focus groups with youth team members conducted at the end of the year gave course participants an opportunity to reflect on what they had accomplished for the year, as well as the strengths and challenges of the course design and support they received. In addition to these interviews and focus groups, course participant's course assignments and final course reflections were reviewed, and one on-site observation was conducted of the group's final meeting at the end of the year and subsequent presentation at the Vermont Statehouse. Each of these sources of data is described in more detail in the following sections.

*Interviews and focus groups:* In the spring and summer of 2015, adult course participants were interviewed about their participation in the dual-enrollment course and their experience implementing CSR as part of their school-based youth-adult teams. All 16 adults in the course were contacted to participate in the study. Two adults declined to participate in the evaluation, while two adults declined to participate specifically in an interview. Of the 12 remaining adults, two did not respond to successive attempts to contact them. Therefore, ten adults representing four of the five CSR schools participated in interviews that ranged from 30 to 45 minutes in length. In addition to these interviews with adults, 15 students in the course participated in two focus groups, each of seven or eight students. Interviews and focus group discussions were guided by a semi-structured interview protocol which covered topics related to the experience of youth and adults as peers in the dual-enrollment classroom, planning and implementation of team's communication action plans, most meaningful moments and challenges throughout the year, as well as specific questions around communication with target stakeholder groups and opportunities and challenges associated with communicating with each.

*Document analysis:* Documents from several sources were used to supplement and triangulate interview and focus group data. First, participants in the CSR course created a series of graded and ungraded planning documents throughout the year that reflected their process in the data collection, data analysis and the crafting of their communication strategy long reflective pieces at different stages of the year-long peer review process. Additionally, all course participants enrolled for college or graduate credit produced an end-of-the-year reflection in response to questions about the course's most memorable moments, most frustrating moments,

the content of the course that participants considered the most valuable, how the course changed them, and what the course could do better in the future.

*Observations:* One on-site observation was conducted at the end of the year in order to observe team dynamics and better understand the communication action plans produced by CSR school-based teams during the year. The end-of-year session that was observed included a final meeting and debriefing of the course, as well as a presentation to Vermont state legislators and the Vermont Secretary of Education at the State House. Detailed field notes captured the conversations and interactions between facilitators and team members, as well as the presentations done by CSR school teams. The researcher sat apart during these interactions and did not participate in the activities or offer her own observations.

The data was analyzed using the computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software NVivo. A preliminary set of codes was developed using the guiding questions for the evaluation prior to data analysis. These codes included broad top-level categories with codes for each stakeholder group (students, educators, parents/community members), as well as codes for course challenges and course strengths. Other top-level codes included program implementation (challenges/opportunities), team roles (student/teacher/administrator), and tools (youth-adult partnership, 4Rs, strength-based approach, and dialogue for change).

A constant comparative method was used as the researcher coded data from all three sources (interviews, reflections, and observations) to expand and differentiate additional codes (Saldana, 2013). As a result of this process, codes were created for team dynamics (youth participation, adult dynamics), course strengths (basis in data, faculty support, learning core concepts, learning as part of a network) and course challenges (managing scope, fit with school culture, course pacing, course expectations), and stakeholder communication (apathy, passivity, stigma, survey, educational leadership, time restrictions, dialogue) as well as other concepts that emerged (balancing the collective with the individual, overlap with PLP implementation, and long-term sustainability). Codes were grouped according to the guiding questions and used to construct narratives for participant experience with the core concepts and tools of the course, as well as the challenges they encountered and adaptations or strategies they employed to further their communication action plan (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

## Findings

### **SECTION 1: Communicating school redesign course and planning process**

The CSR course met in-person seven times in the 2014-2015 school year, with two additional webinars. This section explores the strengths and challenges of the course, both with reference to the participant's perceptions of the factors that contributed to their building of enduring understandings around the course's key concepts (strategic framing, youth-adult partnership and dialogue for change), as well as the support for participants' translation of the course concepts into action in the form of their communication action plans.



*Working as part of a multi-school network*

**One of the aspects that participants mostly clearly appreciated in the course structure was the opportunity to have contact with other schools engaged in the same work of shifting stakeholder perceptions.** As one adult CSR team member said,

I think that was really powerful for me ...new ways of looking at communicating for social change through the lens of the other schools, through the materials and resources that they were putting together. I think it opened up my horizon on how this could be done and the multitudes of ways that it could be done. That was really valuable, to be learning from my colleagues... That collective brain is pretty amazing, when you get all those folks in a room, especially the youth who are so un-tethered.

In the words of a CSR student,

It was nice coming to these every couple of months, or so, and seeing how each of our teams [are]really like a unit, and can work with each other and we grew as we kept going, as individual groups, and as a whole and coming up with solutions for things.

These sentiments were echoed in many of the participants' final reflection papers for the course. The majority of course participants felt that the multi-school experience had allowed them to make new connections with peers at other institutions, as well as given them new ideas for their own work. As one student wrote,

Ultimately, every time we came together to meet, I encountered a flood of new ideas from the reservoir of shared understandings and new insights which propelled my school's project forward.

Some participants felt strongly that they would have liked even more time with other schools, in particular to get feedback on their communication strategies. In the final meeting of the year, course participants gave feedback to each other's teams as they practiced their presentations for Vermont state legislators that were to be given later that afternoon. Some participants expressed in their final reflections that opportunities to do so earlier in the course would have been beneficial as they developed their communication strategies and refined their chosen metaphors for personalized learning.

**However, it was clear that for some members of the course, the inspiration which came from being connected to other schools came at the cost of potentially valuable work time.** As one adult CSR team member put it,

I felt like the community building and the cross-school sharing was really drawn out at the expense of some pretty valuable work time at times. The times that I went to the class, ... I was away from my classroom for the day... an entire day away from work. To spend a lot of time playing games was really frustrating because we had a lot of work to do.

It was clear from the focus groups and interviews that some CSR groups felt tremendous pressure to find enough time to move their work forward and within this context, they perceived

workdays with time spent on team-building between schools to be a missed opportunity. Even for CSR participants who felt positively about the multi-school experience and the class time that was given over to supporting building those connections, team time during these days was described as invaluable. In one adult's words,

The time we have as a team during the retreat days is so priceless. Even though we did a great job at meeting on a regular basis...we needed the separation from routine and distraction which was afforded to us during these retreats.

Participants were divided over how they would ideally divide this time in the future. One participant pointed out the irony of feeling as if their team needed to advocate for more personalization of the experience for each team in a class that was dedicated to educating people about the power of personalized learning. Some reflected that while feedback from other teams on their individual action plans and the products of their communication strategies was clearly valuable, would this have been as valuable without a foundation of trust between members of the class? While participant perceptions alone cannot answer this critical question, it is clear that one tension of the course was balancing the inspiration provided by other schools with individuation, or time for teams to pursue their own work.

### *Strategic framing*

For many of the participants, the concepts surrounding strategic framing were the least familiar and as a result, were perceived as the most transformative or powerful. **Students and adults from every CSR school team mentioned the way in which engagement with the concepts of strategic framing had changed their perception of what a communication strategy actually is and how complicated the process of framing can be.** A CSR student wrote in his final reflection,

Learning about strategic framing and effective communications skills was both interesting and rewarding. Learning how to take such a complex matter such as Act 77 and turn it into a simple, well-articulated metaphor/message was in my mind the most valuable skill that we learned. Not only was it essential for spreading the message of school redesign in a way that would generate understanding and support, but it is essential for trying to further any movement. I learned to never underestimate the value of a well created metaphor.

Similarly, an adult observed,

The whole framing discussion ...was very effective with me because my intuition would not have taken me to the same place as far as framing a message or campaign, I guess they were calling it, so that was huge. I think that that was a struggle for everybody. I think there was a lot of learning that happened with that. Just being very aware of the ...more efficient message that you needed to carry. Certainly all of that sparked a tremendous amount of dialogue in our group.

Some adults felt that although they had a great deal of experience with communication, both in the community and the school, the learning they did in the class introduced them to

additional concepts that enhanced and deepened that experience and understanding. In the words of one CSR adult,

I knew [the] basics of strategizing and communication, however what Jane did for me is put it in another language. She gave me the communication language of things like value statements.

**Many class participants mentioned the utility of having a CSR faculty member who was an expert in communications and how useful her feedback had been in scaffolding their engagement with these concepts as they put together their communication action plan.** As one adult said, “Having Jane speak about this, and serve as a consultant --who knew when to push back -- was key. I mean, if you get this part wrong, you're literally off in the wrong direction.” Another group recounted their experience of pushing forward with a metaphor that they then had to revise because it did not really communicate the values and information that they wanted. In the words of one group member,

At first we decided to use a metaphor that was untested, we thought our metaphor was great. This caused us to not fully think about how our metaphor would be perceived. We were blinded by the thought that our new metaphor was fantastic, so we went right on ahead with it. Luckily Jane was willing to look over our script and show us how we could more effectively communicate our message. She encouraged us to use a tested metaphor and we decided on the cooking one. Because of her help we were able to ensure more success in our school and I truly appreciate that.

Another group member talked about the difference between the untested metaphor that the group had chosen and the tested one that they ended up adopting after CSR faculty feedback:

One of the key steps that we missed was making sure that we used the collective wisdom of our facilitators. When we finally slowed down enough to speak with Jane it was clear that we had many hidden messages in our metaphor. The very metaphor that we thought was so brilliant; the one that we were so quick to run with had many unintended messages in it. Quite frankly some of the messages actually were potentially pretty damaging to what we were trying to accomplish. One of the hidden messages was that the idea of a buffet can communicate to people waste. As soon as we had this feedback we realized our mistake and were very humble in that experience and feedback. This learning though was so important.

Other group members also mentioned how valuable this experience of changing their metaphor had been for their learning about strategic framing. Although it was clear from some participants' reflections in their interviews and final course assignments that they may have felt frustrated in the beginning of the course with the lack of action, there was strong agreement amongst members of the course that this information laid an important foundation for their subsequent work.

## *Dialogue for change*

The facilitation of open dialogue amongst stakeholder groups and between stakeholder groups was ultimately an important feature of most teams' communication action plans. Teams chose to lead chalk talks [facilitated silent dialogue] with students in their advisories, lead teacher-student dialogues that were inclusive of the whole school, facilitate in-services or faculty meetings with teachers, present to and lead reflection with board members, as well as countless other print and online strategies to introduce their value statements into the collective conversation. The scale of these activities and the organization and planning that went into planning them cannot be understated: given that all of the groups were completing this work in addition to their participation in normal school activities, the ability to implement dialogue for change with stakeholder groups is impressive.

**For many of the schools, sufficient planning time was a critical factor in supporting these dialogue for change activities.** School teams had to find consistent or semi-consistent times to meet and plan these activities. One group opted for a meeting every Friday afternoon after school; another group had to find spare half hours before school throughout the school year. Although as noted above, the retreat days provided additional opportunities to plan, these times alone were insufficient to support teams' project work. Teams that struggled to find regular times to meet struggled to move forward with their communication action plans. As one CSR participant noted:

Time can be our challenge here. I felt like more time to practice crafting messages and tools together would have been valuable. I often found myself somewhat disconnected from the work we would do in a meeting by the time we could work together as a team. Our time as a school team together was often pressed as all members had so many other responsibilities to draw our concentration and time.

Another CSR adult noted,

There were times when we had to put our project on hold or there was very little progress because we could not find time that worked for everyone. That was also frustrating for our group because we felt like we were behind.

Additionally, while many of the youth and adult participants in the class suggested that they had entered the class with a certain level of comfort with facilitative leadership, both from other youth-adult partnership experiences and their own life experiences, **some school teams found that in order to support the scale of dialogue that they wanted, they needed to draw on CSR faculty support to train additional school-based facilitators, including both youth and adults.** Daniel and Helen were able to provide resources or on-site support to several teams to assist in this effort. In the words of one CSR participant:

Once we had developed and determined what the protocols would be, we worked with Daniel and Helen to create the training for the facilitators and then created the training that was very specific to the protocols that were going to be used so that we could teach and train people, in an efficient way, how to administer those particular facilitation

techniques and those particular protocols. We weren't able to do a broad based facilitation training because that takes days, but we were able to be really efficient and do it in an afternoon. We trained about 35 facilitators, many of them youth. They were youth and adult facilitators in the training, which was great.

In addition to site-based support, teams received help providing training to additional facilitators in the form of resources or consultation on their training plan. The effect of this support on creating a communication infrastructure in CSR schools is discussed later in this report.

### *Youth-adult partnership*

Youth-adult partnership was central to both the course's design and the teams' communication work in their schools and communities. It was clear from the interviews and focus groups that school teams entered this communications work with differing expectations about the needs of maintaining healthy youth-adult partnerships, as well as levels of experience in working in youth-adult partnerships. Therefore, both youth and adults learned a great deal about working in partnership with each other as a result of participating in the course, finding that **this aspect was both a central strength of the work while also remaining challenging to authentically enact throughout the year.**

For many students, the opportunity to simply learn in the same classrooms as peers with their teachers and administrators was a powerful experience. One student shared,

I like that you were on the same level as other adults... It's nice to know that officially you're all students. I think you learn so much more working with people who- it's really hard to put yourself in their shoes sometimes. The teachers have been formally trained in education and all the new things like that. It's cool to work with them.

A student in another focus group shared,

I thought it was cool, that we see a whole different side of my principal and teachers, seeing a different perspective, and understanding more of why they do the things they do, and stuff, and working with them -- I felt more like an equal. I think that's really important. They tried really hard to make sure that we all participated and stuff, and that we all share our ideas, and they really wanted the student voice.

Additionally, a CSR student wrote in his final reflection for the course,

I think that my team had a very strong youth-adult partnership. We were always able to have authentic dialogue and create new roles to figure out what was best for our school. At first I was skeptical, but almost immediately I felt like an equal. Being equal with teachers was really key to our success. They took the time to understand the student perspective, while the students took the time to understand things from the adult point of view. By the end of this class we are almost like a family; we have mutual respect for each other and because of that we aren't afraid to speak our truths.

Truly feeling respected set up a dynamic amongst the group where students felt comfortable sharing their unique perspective. In the words of one CSR student,

One thing I found, and I continue to find, is that I'm a little insecure about them [adults] knowing so much about the education system, and they bring a lot of expertise and they have so much more ability to do things, sometimes, and it feels like "...and, I'm just a student." But that didn't happen often, and I addressed it in a manner that was productive in the fact that I was able to be like 'well, this is hard for me', and to tell that to adults, it was amazing.

It was clear that one strength of the course was that students felt a sense of safety to share their opinions. As a result, the foundation was laid for school teams to continue building on this dynamic within their own schools with educators committed to listening to student voice. Many of the adults in their interviews expressed a strong commitment to working in partnership with students. As one adult said,

Educator: I would say absolutely, that the groups, the other schools, it was really clear to me that there was equal voice, that youth and adults were on equal ground and that those teams functioned as partnerships. There was no doubt in my mind.

Interviewer: That's fantastic. That's great.

Educator: Yeah. It wasn't explicitly taught. I think it was just part of the understanding. Who knows? Maybe it was the nature of the ... I think that's led by adults. I think adults have to walk into the room with that philosophy in their mind so it could be that the people who chose to do this, that's the philosophy they walk with and then they demonstrate it in their partnership in working with students and not taking charge.

As school teams continued to do their independent work, **students reported that "having a common goal" was important in supporting the equal relationship between youth and adults in this process.** This finding is in keeping with much of the existing research on effective youth-adult partnership, which suggests that a common goal is key (Mitra, 2005; Wheeler, 2000; Zeldin, Camino, & Mook, 2005). The clarity around that goal provided by the course instructors was useful for helping teams to maintain healthy team dynamics and momentum. As one student said,

You didn't have any reservations just because someone's job title was principle or professor or something. You were comfortable enough to express how you felt and say respectfully I disagree or something or offer your input. It really didn't matter because everybody was in the same boat, we're all trying to accomplish the same thing. We realized that everybody is needed to get to where we want to go.

Another student talked about how the focus on a clear objective was really important for her team which sometimes had very tricky, difficult interpersonal dynamics. In her words,

I'm just glad we didn't kill each other. There were some days where for two-hour stretches, the tension was high, and lots of conflicting energies. Then, it's like we would come here every couple of months, and execute everything perfectly, and be like "Whoa, go team. How did we even manage this?" Yeah, there were some times when things were pretty rocky, but ultimately we always pulled together and had a good strong sense of teamwork.

However, **one of the on-going complexities of the partnership relationship was around leadership over tasks which were necessary for the implementation of the communication strategy.** Both students and educators expressed some dissatisfaction with the division of roles and the norms of their participation as team members. For example, in both youth focus groups, students mentioned the pressure to always be the messengers to stakeholder groups, to be the mouthpiece of the movement. While students recognized that when they spoke, generally, adults listened, students did not feel that the responsibility for communicating their core message was really "equal":

I really liked the idea of youth-adult partnership, because I think it's really valuable to get both sides of the information, but just one criticism I had was ... what didn't happen that often, but it did, sometimes, where a lot of the focus was pushed towards the kids, because that doesn't usually happen-- it's usually the adults leading.

One thing I'd be wary of next time is to really focus on not even trying to get the kids to lead conversations, and stuff like that, but trying to have a youth and adult partnership, like it's supposed to be. Instead of being like "Okay, usually teachers teach. Now, we want the students to teach," it should be like "Okay, let's both teach together." That did happen a lot, but sometimes it was too focused on the kids. Just like with this presenting [to the Statehouse], too. Our group decided that just the students would present. I thought, "It's youth/adult partnership, so maybe we should have all presented."

Given this emphasis, it is perhaps unsurprising that one youth concluded that, to be successful in this communication work as a young person, one has to be willing to be vocal.

I think that to be a part of this, you have to be willing to speak up. This isn't just about you or the four or how many other people are in your group, this is about your school. This is what's going to eventually affect your entire high school and if you have something that you need to say then you need to speak. I think that if people that were generally quiet, if they came into this kind of environment I think the activities that we're given in this they help open that door to speak up more. I think you also have to have that in yourself, that want to speak up and have to actually do it.

In fact, many of the young people who participated in the CSR course self-described as feeling comfortable enough with adults that they had this willingness to speak up. Despite this willingness, however, **some youth felt that adults had a hard time learning how to listen in the youth-adult group process, learning how to let go and let youth take charge.** In the words of one CSR student:

When we have meetings it's sometimes hard to get stuff done because there's a lot of talking involved. It's good to work with other adults and teachers but sometimes they're doing a lot of talking and we sit around looking at each other, "When are you guys going to stop?"... There were instances where we said, "We are not getting anything done because the adults keep talking." We finally sorted that out where they said, "Okay we're going to shut up now and let you guys take charge."

An adult in another CSR school noticed a similar tendency of their group. This person noted,

One frustration for me was that we sometimes struggled as a team to wait for the student voice. A member of our team is very action-oriented and sometimes moved us forward before the youth were completely with us. This was never intentional on this person's part. However, I was sensitive to the students' silence or limited participation at times. This certainly was not happening every day or at all times during our work but I did notice it. The equal youth adult partnership cannot be underestimated. I hope that, moving forward, we can remember the power of the youth voice as the messenger, both with their peers and with adults.

Youth-adult partnerships thrive when youth and adults can embrace the unique strengths that each group brings to the partnership. In focus groups, one activity which youth mentioned they found helpful as a touchstone for deciphering youth-adult dynamics and dividing responsibility was the "Compass Point" activity. In this activity, course participants were given the four compass point directions, each of which had different qualities assigned to it. Norths, for example, were go-getters and doers, the type of leaders who like jumping in and rapid prototyping. Easts were visionaries, the big picture people, while Wests were the detailed oriented planners, anticipating challenges. Each CSR course participant had to identify their primary direction. Several youth mentioned that this activity became a point of reference in their group discussions throughout the year. In the words of one CSR student,

That compass point activity, we still refer to it in our meetings because for whatever reason that activity really stuck with my team. We were all pretty much in a different place or there was two of us here, two of us there and we've relied on that to balance out the team. To know that, okay, he's the one that's going to think more clearly about this and say, okay, hold on. We'll give him this to do. It's been helpful to know where everyone's at like that because then you can know to say, okay, you're not right, you're rushing. Let's take a step back and look or someone else can jump in and say, all right, we need to look at how this is going to affect people. That activity was super helpful.

By focusing on compass point qualities that youth and adults found meaningful, it is possible that youth and adults may be able to find ways for both groups to assume a broader diversity of roles on the team. One way to accomplish this might be to have groups self-facilitate periodic reflection to ensure that youth do not become the default 'presenters' and adults the default 'organizers'.



### *Basing communications work in data*

While implementing the survey in the fall was a challenge for school teams, particularly with regard to gathering data from community members and parents, several participants in the course felt that **working from data led to stronger, more targeted communication action plans through the establishment of a baseline for various stakeholder groups** around their understanding of teaching and learning, as well as Act 77. As one adult wrote in his final reflection,

The data we collected was very helpful in directing the focus of our efforts, it really made our work more efficient and valuable, we were not spinning our wheels as may have been the case if we had just pushed forwards and not followed the framework model. We were able to narrow in on who to target for our message, the best method of media to use and the most successful modes of communication to reach a larger audience.

One adult reflected on the utility of the data for reminding the team that information about new initiatives was unevenly distributed even within the school. While many of the team members were very familiar with both Act 77 as well as the opportunities and initiatives that their school had been rolling out over the last several years, the survey demonstrated that some groups were not, despite previous communication efforts. In her words,

I appreciated the work we did to deliver surveys in order to gauge the current level of understanding of Act 77 and Flexible Pathways. Again, this is a step that requires us to slow down and take stock before ever considering crafting a message. This slowing down can be frustrating when you have a strong desire to get the word out and begin moving forward with updating and creating systems to support the personalization of learning. I became acutely aware of how little our community knew of the work we have been doing for many years at [our school] building flexible pathways.

Finally, one CSR student reflected on how useful the establishment of a baseline was for charting the team's own progress throughout the year. In her final reflection, she wrote, "It was really helpful for us to see that because it was the starting point of our final project that has come to an end."

### *Authentic high-stakes presentation of progress and learning*

While all of the communication activities facilitated by CSR teams were authentic presentations of learning, the final presentation made by four schools to Vermont state legislators at the Vermont statehouse was an exciting and high-stakes opportunity to share their efforts and learning with some of the architects of the state's push towards personalized learning. As one student wrote in her final reflection, "It was also good to feel like my small school could make a difference statewide. To be a leader of change, was a feeling that is indescribable." Another student reflected on this moment as well, calling it his most memorable moment of the year:

While my team and I were presenting, I remember standing there watching as the room lit up with understanding and agreement. At the beginning of the course I struggled to visualize what the end would look like, but when we got there, everything came together.

As I watched [other students] present alongside myself, I felt a wave of emotion pass over me, realizing that the work we did this year matters and will affect a whole generation of learners in Vermont. At first, I honestly thought our impact would be small, but after I realized just how much our work is worth and matters.

Another student talked in the focus group (conducted just prior to the presentation) about how proud he was of the opportunity for students to take leadership in this way. In his own words,

I'm proud that students are leading something that a lot of adults in the community can't do, necessarily...A lot of times, when legislators pass legislation, they do it, and it's mandatory, and we live with it, and we never hear back. The fact that students are leading something for the first time, that bringing back to legislators that this is what's happening in schools is absolutely fantastic.

Adults spoke about the power of this opportunity as a momentum driver, a goal that teams could look towards to keep them focused in the midst of the variety of factors that tend to derail extracurricular initiatives within the context of the daily doing of school. It was clear that this opportunity to come together and share was perceived as having a motivating effect on the work.

## **SECTION 2: Communication with stakeholder groups**

The main goal of all of the CSR teams' work this year was the crafting of communication strategies aimed at key stakeholder groups, including students, educators, parents and community members. As noted in the previous section, both the scope of what teams were able to do as well as the time that they were able to devote to their communication strategies within the context of the daily doing of school varied, and so not all teams were able to roll out every part of their communication strategy to their target stakeholder groups in the context of the work this year. However, several teams were able to pilot several strategies, and therefore, this section is based upon their reflections on those strategies, as well as what they learned about their stakeholder groups throughout both the survey and their communication work this year. These reflections have been divided up into the challenges as youth and adult CSR team members perceived them, as well as their reflections on the relative success or failure of the strategies they used to address these challenges.

### **Communicating with students**

One conclusion that many CSR teams drew from looking at the survey data was that students demonstrated the greatest diversity in their understanding of Act 77, as well as in their beliefs about alternative or flexible pathways as a method of supporting student learning. In focus groups, many CSR students noted their peers' pre-awareness around both Act 77 and flexible pathways. As one student said, "I guess what was surprising to me though was the number of students that weren't aware of all these possibilities that they could do." Other students echoed this sentiment, with one CSR student observing that despite the fact that alternative pathways have existed at his school for years, "not a lot of kids at school knew that we could do all this cool stuff."

*Challenge: Apathy and learned passivity*

**Students as a stakeholder group were not a blank slate waiting to be educated about Act 77 and flexible pathways.** CSR students identified several factors that they felt contributed to the challenge of changing students' level of awareness or beliefs around Act 77 and flexible pathways. Some felt that apathy, or a lack of interest in learning about new possibilities, was a significant challenge. In one exchange, students said:

- Moderator:* What was the most frustrating thing you encountered in trying to put these communication strategies together?
- Student 1:* Probably students. Most of the time when we would talk -- no one was really paying attention and they were like, "Oh, another thing that we don't have to-- you know, something that this random teen is showing us. It's not going to affect us." Trying to get their attention and show them how amazing this work is going to be, how important it is for them to see the options that they already have and could potentially have -- it was really hard when they came in with a negative attitude.
- Student 2:* Yeah, apathy.

In the other focus group, two students discussed this issue amongst themselves:

- Student 1:* I have a question for some of the other students. When you communicated to the students about Act 77, and why it's so important in what's happening, or whatever, did you get some ... not backlash, but a lot of the questions around why is this relevant to me, because it's not going to be me that has to have a personalized learning plan? That was a road bump for us, because we really said to the high school...and then we were like "Oh, none of these people are saying that they really --
- Student 2:* -- care?
- Student 1:* -- like I'm sure they do care about education, but it was they didn't *know* that they cared about their education. (*group laughter*)
- Student 2:* I found that ... it's an assumption, but I found that students that have that kind of reaction are the ones who haven't been encouraged to do what they want in school. They're not used to it, and they've never been sat down and just been like "What do you want to learn? What is your passion?" I think that that idea is really foreign to them, and the natural reaction is to go, "I don't even need to care about that."

This CSR student explained **the apathy that her group member observed as most students' adaptation over time to a school system that is not centered around their personal interests, or a kind of learned passivity.** However, some CSR students explained that it was difficult to understand why this group of students were not more interested in the introduction of personalized learning. As one CSR student observed,

I think it's just so hard because some kids aren't engaged and it's kids I know and I can *see* that they have interests and if they would just invest a little bit, they could be so much

happier with their learning. The stigma's about learning and the apathy is really hard to combat because they could be so much happier.

In addition to these challenges to communicating with students, CSR students observed that in some cases students who have done well in traditional education demonstrated apathy towards these initiatives. As one CSR student said,

I in fact found that the people who were so to speak less successful in school were the ones that -- actually, it spoke to them most. Other students like "Well, I'm getting an education, and I'm successful, so why do I need this?"

In this CSR student's view, the idea of personalized learning plans and flexible pathways was not perceived as relevant by traditionally successful students and, as one adult CSR team member pointed out in their interview, could even be considered threatening to their prior success.

*Challenge: The stigma of "being different"*

Related to the affective apathy demonstrated by some students towards information about PLPs and alternative pathways, one student suggested that this might be related to a fear of "being different" from others, saying,

They-- I don't really think people had an open mind toward it or maybe, stepping outside of their comfort zone and being a little bit different, that's hard for every high school kid.

In keeping with this student's observation about being different, **some students in both focus groups felt that the apathy was, in part, connected to the broader stigma associated with flexible pathways**, particularly with alternative pathways like technical education or other career-focused education that is not currently associated with students' perceptions of what is needed for college. In the words of another CSR student,

I think ... it's going to be really important to bury the stigma that if you're not doing well in a norm -- what people consider a traditional classroom then there's something wrong with you. Actually no, that's not the case and that all these different ways of exploring your interests and showing proficiency are all valid ways to do so.

Similarly, a student who has participated in flexible pathways herself discussed her experience making that decision and the feedback that she received from her peers around that choice:

Picking back up on what [student name] just said about students thinking that doing something different makes that student not achievable for the regular classes, and I noticed before I even went for my technical class that one of my friends were like "You shouldn't go there, because people are going to think you're dumb, and that you don't want to achieve to go to college."

Another CSR student reflected that he himself often unintentionally uses language that reinforces this stigma, saying,

People don't want to say "Oh, I go to the tech center", because then they're like "Oh, you're a tech center student?" I find myself calling them the tech kids, or something. That's not what they are. They're students following their passion and doing what they want to do.

*Strategy: The importance of small group dialogue for engaging students*

To address these challenges, **CSR students talked about the importance of talking to their peers in small groups, with authentic opportunities for dialogue and the free asking of questions.** In many of the participating schools, CSR teams designed such opportunities, either by training students to facilitate dialogue in their teaching advisories (TAs) about Act 77 and flexible pathways, or through blocks of time set aside for whole school dialogue in small groups (including faculty and students). CSR students noted that, in their opinion, these small group strategies had been effective at engaging students in new types of conversations on these topics. In one CSR students' words,

I think small groups are key and that's why we did it in our TA's, which is like a classroom -- a small classroom size of students, and the idea is that they're together for the entire year. It's supposed to be-- and even within that we would do activities in smaller groups, so it's the idea that if there's not so many people you're more willing to speak out. Also because, when you're in a larger group, you often have a few people who fill the silence and there's not a need to -- if you get people in smaller groups, it's a lot more comfortable.

A student from a different CSR team noted that her team had planned their dialogues with students in a similar way, using small groups:

When we chose our chalk talk groups we made sure that people were with their friends. We're a small enough school to know, oh, this person is friends with this person, but we also wanted it to be a different experience where it was very diverse. I think it's having a balance between familiar groups of people and also being in a new place. It's all about the environment, I think.

Similar care was put into the selection of students for groups of faculty and students at another school. A student and a faculty member from this CSR team grouped 700 students into diverse groupings of 16, taking into many different factors to promote student and faculty comfort with the process while also promoting the diversity of these groups.

Overall, CSR students recounted that these small group dialogue strategies had resulted in engaged conversations between students on these topics. As one CSR facilitator shared,

I had a really great chalk talk group. That went super well. It was great to lead an activity, and have people ready and willing and engaged, and even after the activity had ended, still firing on all cylinders, really jazzed about it.

Another student similarly shared,

I think, my proudest moment from this was probably we did the all school dialogue, and it felt really accomplishing and good to be a facilitator and hear all the kids talking about this, and without knowing it, talking about all the ideas of Act 77. It was really cool to be able to walk around the room, and hear all the student's thoughts -- it was really exciting.

There was some disagreement in the focus group and interview data about the importance of the identity of the facilitator for these small group dialogues with students. At one school, the principal played an important role in meeting with small groups of students to address their questions and concerns about PLPs and flexible pathways and in the opinion of CSR students, that strategy was effective for creating student buy-in by elevating student concerns and having those heard by the perceived “school decision-maker.” In other schools where students had been trained as facilitators of small group discussion in their TAs, some adults commented on the importance of having students facilitate these dialogues for their peers because of the authenticity of those interactions and the likelihood of increased buy-in.

### **Communicating with educators**

It was clear from the results of the CSR survey that, of all the target stakeholder groups, teachers had the highest level of understanding around flexible pathways and Act 77. Therefore, **many of the adults and students participating in the CSR initiative saw teachers as not needing the same type or intensity of communication about the legislation as some other stakeholder groups.** As one CSR adult said,

We had already done a significant amount of work here with our faculty. Probably for the whole previous year and a half, we had been spending PD time like that. It's been explicitly explained to them over and over again. Then we did some things at in-services. Faculty really understood what Act 77 was. They knew what the components were.

Another CSR adult expressed similar feelings about the faculty at her school,

There's been changes in terms of faculty, partly because of our work and partly because of other work that's going on right now in terms of professional development that's been all year. Professional development around proficiency based graduation work...I think the teachers at this point are still stakeholder-wise, the most informed.

Another adult noted,

[Faculty] realize that why we're changing is fundamental to this next phase we're going to go into, which is about proficiency and proficiency-based learning. I think they were able to connect, “Okay, Act 77 came about. This is why it came about because we know so much more about teaching and learning and best practices and neuroscience,” and so they were given all of that foundation. I think it has led them to be more receptive to this next phase, which is a major shift for them in developing proficiency-based learning and coming up with a new way of teaching and assessing students.

However, despite the perception that teachers understood Act 77, many groups still worked to engage teachers within their communication plans. Participants perceived these activities as

deepening or extending the work that they were doing with other stakeholder groups, including community members and students.

*Adaptation: CSR groups as information coordinators*

Although this information coordinator role was not necessarily the intended role that CSR teams were designed to take on within their schools, **some teams assumed some responsibility for disseminating information to faculty about implementation, in addition to framing the meaning of Act 77 to their school's overall mission.** Teachers' communication needs, particularly by participating administrators, were perceived as being centered around the implementation details of Act 77 as a legislative mandate, rather than shifting their mental models to accommodate these types of teaching and learning practices. As one administrator noted,

I think that faculty obviously have a lot of questions about, "What does this mean? If we really start to break down the walls and kids can get credit for doing all sorts of things, what's that going to mean and look like? Does that change what a diploma means?"

Therefore, CSR groups were able to position themselves as a source of information for faculty, or coordinators of information across faculty, about Act 77 and flexible pathways. In the words of one adult CSR team member,

Ultimately, what happened with our work at the end was that we led a faculty meeting that brought the faculty up to speed on where we are as a school and as a PLP team. Then we were asking faculty members that are excited about the work that we've done this year to be involved in some summer hours to develop what exactly the PLP will look like at our school.

Individually, some CSR students reported that faculty were asking them about what the PLPs were ultimately going to look like, which students felt was an interesting change of role. In the words of one CSR student, "Actually it kind of surprising to me -- most of them knew about it, but some teachers were asking me, because they knew I was part of this, what are things going to look like."

*Strategy: Dialogue to continue deepening school culture change*

**Some CSR groups saw the security of teachers' understanding of Act 77 as an opportunity to engage in focused dialogue with teachers on other related areas of teaching and learning.** For example, at one CSR school, the group recognized the key role the faculty would play in implementing Act 77 through the teacher advisory system and actively wondered if there was a strong enough shared understanding in their school around key components for Act 77 implementation, such as good relationships with students and core understanding of relevance. In one team member's words,

We started saying that it was going to be really important to work with the faculty because they're really the core of being responsible for much of making sure that the Act 77 goes forward, particularly if we think about personalized learning plans. If we think

about [our school], we're adapting and adjusting [teacher advisory] so that that can happen. There was a lot of thought process in helping the faculty understand that and really thinking about strategies for that, but at the same time, realizing that students weren't aware in that partnership. I think that's when we really started saying, "Boy, this is a place where having a dialogue would be enormously powerful" so that we could talk about the components that are at the heart of this, and we really looked at relevance and relationship because they're really at the heart of the mission of Act 77.

In service of this goal, this team planned and executed an all-school dialogue with all of its faculty and students. Focusing questions for this dialogue were centered around these components that the group felt were key to Act 77 – relevance and relationships. Careful planning went into the framing of the questions themselves. In the words of one adult team member,

I think the most challenging piece about that was deciding on the questions. What were we going to talk about? Framing questions so that students would understand them, or faculty for that matter, in the way that we wanted them to ... I think that's always the challenge, is describing questions so that people will understand how it was ... Keeping them open-ended enough that people could really have a dialogue versus just getting just a one shot answer.

Another concern was having a sufficient number of facilitators. Students were recruited from other leadership groups, including the Youth and Adults Transforming Schools Together (YATST) group (based in another UP for Learning program) and representatives from the student government. All of these students participated in an afternoon of facilitation training with Daniel Baron prior to the day of the school-wide dialogue. Because of the time constraints, the training was focused around the particular protocol that the students would be facilitating.

Many other considerations were discussed and carefully planned, including the make up of the groups themselves, room assignments, supplies and making sure that the dialogues led to actual action steps and suggestions and that there was a way to capture those. "It was a huge undertaking," an adult team member observed,

We used Wagon Wheels and then we used a protocol I'd never used before. It was called the Critical Friends protocol and it was one that Daniel had had from his bag of tricks from many years ago. It was like a cascading dialogue format. It started with looking at the data points that you are discussing and then having everyone have an opportunity to voice. We moved from why is this a problem to what can we do about it and what are the actionable steps that we, as a group, would recommend. Then we did a modified affinity mapping at the end where people then took their solutions that were on Post-Its and we posted them up on a master sheet and then grouped them into categories that made sense. It was pretty cool.

Afterwards, with the help of the school's YATST group and the CSR team members, the group distilled all of the suggestions into "master action steps" that were shared with the whole school. In the words of one team member,



That was made public. They're up on a bulletin board. They were shared in an assembly. We're starting to tick away at many of those actions steps. One of them, teacher feedback, was already underway. We're communicating with people that there's a proposal [for teacher feedback forms] in process and this one's going to come to fruition very quickly. The other piece of our communication strategy now is to make sure that we keep that cycle open, that these are the action steps, this is the plan, this is the strategy, this is how you can get involved if you want to, but making sure we're communicating to people that those things are happening.

In the view of this CSR team, many of the master action steps, such as implementing a teacher feedback form or having regular student-teacher conferences, were directly related to the groundwork necessary for the successful implementation of personalized learning plans. In the words of one adult team member,

Teacher/student conferencing, that came up 71 times in the dialogues. That's pretty significant. Some of the action steps were pretty straightforward like teachers arrange for conferences formally each semester. That really pertains to the personalized learning plan without people really knowing that.

In keeping with the spirit of communication for social change by focusing on community values around relevance and relationships, rather than exclusively on Act 77, this CSR team expanded the scope of their communication strategy to include engaging teachers and students beliefs about teaching and learning more broadly.

### **Communicating with parents and community members**

Both students and faculty participating in the CSR initiative felt strongly that the awareness and support of the community was essential to the long-term success of personalized learning and flexible pathways, as well as broader reforms in education, teaching and learning. As one student noted in the focus group discussion,

Having just the backing of the community really helps assure that it will be accepted by the time personalized learning plans and all that stuff comes into it, they will totally back us up.

However, crafting communication action plans targeted towards community members and parents unearthed several challenges that groups had to navigate, including access to harder to reach sections of this stakeholder group, as well as the structure of existing mental models of education amongst these stakeholders.

#### *Challenge: Uneven connection among community to the school*

Communication with this particular stakeholder group is an on-going struggle for many schools; this was equally true for CSR teams. One CSR student observed that, in her experience with the school board and broader community,

We haven't really received any information like saying that a lot of community members know about this. I mean, some do, just because like, I have a mentor in the community ...who has talked about it, I know I have and my parents are aware, but they are not like – they're not "Oh yeah! I know everything about Act 77, I can just spit it out at you!" It's more – it's just kind of been a slow process and we are still kind of working through it. I mean, it's getting there.

The uneven connection of both parents and community members to CSR schools was additionally demonstrated in the difficulty that CSR team members had in recruiting participants for the CSR survey that was administered in the Fall of 2014. Very few teams were able to get robust participation in the survey, leading to the exclusion of parents and community members from the final analysis of the data. A CSR adult with connections to the school board reflected,

I worry about communication with the community members ...I would like to see us moving forward and [thinking about] how we can really begin to engage our community and having more meaningful conversations about education, even beyond Act 77. I think there's still a lot that people don't know. Even school board members, you say the word proficiencies and they have no idea what it is you're talking about.

Given the difficulties that CSR teams had accessing these populations while simultaneously trying to move their communication action plans forward on several other fronts, the challenge of moving beyond the school board or parent groups is work for CSR teams in the future. Specific plans of CSR teams on this front are discussed later in this report.

*Challenge: Worries about school reform in a context of financial uncertainty*

Although groups were more successful communicating with accessible parts of the community such as school boards and parents, CSR teams encountered specific beliefs about both education and their work that they needed to address. A CSR student recounted her experience in a school board meeting,

I'm on the school board, and we've talked about Act 77 and shown them our value statement and then there's a few parents but especially this one parent who is like, "Why should I even care? How do I know my kid is going to get into college with full scholarship other than doing traditional classes?"

As this CSR student's story demonstrates, for parents interested in assuring that their student will be able to qualify for financial aid, education that strays from their mental model of what colleges are looking for in potential applicants can feel threatening.

Additionally, some of the CSR adults and a few students pointed out the fact that these changes are happening within the context of larger fiscal uncertainty around school budgets and community willingness to fund new initiatives. One CSR student told the following story,

One of the [key informant] interviews that we did early on, I interviewed one of the local legislators for my town and one of the questions that we asked him was about what the community's perception of this was going to be because in [our town], it is sometimes

really hard for that community that doesn't have students to see eye to eye with educators, and we can never pass a budget, and every time we need to pass a budget, it's like we need the budget so we can do more stuff with the kids, and they don't have kids.

A CSR educator said similarly,

I don't think anybody has a beef with personalizing learning. The problem we have [in our community] is we barely have budgets. And it's not that they don't care about kids -- they're just frustrated with their taxes....What's valuable in education and that's a whole different political thing. It has nothing to do with convincing people that what we do in education is appropriate.

In communities where there is difficulty passing budgets and a potentially combative relationship between the school and community around spending, communication about new legislation or programs can be even more challenging than in other contexts.

*Strategy: Youth as messengers*

Based on their experiences from this year, **both youth and adults felt that one of the most effective communication strategies for adults outside of the school was speaking directly with students about issues of education reform.** Student facilitators noted the power that their voices had when facilitating conversations with adults on these topics of school reform. As one CSR student noted,

Something that I found is when any young person speaks from the heart, in any sort of eloquent manner, adults hang on their every word. They care so much, and they're so moved by it, that I think it's a strategy decision on their end when they choose to have students lead things, because they know [adults] are going to pay that much more attention.

A CSR adult shared an example of exactly this kind of careful attention to youth's voices in an experience that the team had presenting to their school board:

[Some of the schoolboard members] are very interested in motivation and engagement and learning but I think the way in which [they sometimes] talk about it ...is a little troublesome. We were doing a matching game -- this is a traditional school and this is a transformed school -- and with the points about shared responsibility, [they] were a little skeptical. "How can a student that's disengaged or not motivated actually take responsibility for their learning?" One of our team members, a freshman, handled it beautifully. She was able to respond to the question beautifully and advocating for shared responsibility of being a way to increase motivation and engagement. It was great. I was so proud.

CSR students and adults were not the only ones that noted the power of student voices to draw attention to educational issues in ways that were meaningful for community members. The legislator that one team interviewed as a key informant also said, according to one CSR student,

The way he put it was that if students are a part of this and they look like they are a big part of this, the community will have no choice but to get behind it because they don't have an excuse. They don't have an excuse to say "Students don't want this."

Another student observed,

I think having students on the board for this change really just kind of signifies to the community how important it is. Because I think that we've definitely gone through a lot of changes in the past few years and they've definitely been big things in our community, and I think this just kind of adds another layer like, how visibly, the community can see that we are invested in this, and I think that really showed them how important it is.

Another student talked about the potential power of having visible youth voice on educational issues within the community for shifting community members' perspectives:

I definitely think there are some people who look back on their experiences and see them as being very beneficial and don't understand the need for change. But I think having students there saying, "We are looking at the world and we can see that this is what we need." I think that is very powerful. And our budget just barely passed, which is really lucky because they were going to have to cut teachers or something. [One of our student team members] actually wrote a letter to the newspaper talking about just how harmful that would be to our school and a lot of students signed that. I'm not sure and I haven't heard about it but I would guess that had a lot of impact, seeing that.

The student author of that editorial shared that writing it was the start of some conversations with people in the community about the issue of Act 77. In this student's words,

It was some community member that is not linked to the school at all. I didn't even know them. Somebody who I hadn't hardly ever interacted with – they came up to me and started asking questions about Act 77, and what is Act 77.

To stimulate more dialogue of this kind and to reach a broad swath of the community, one CSR team created a public service announcement made up of youth voices that worked from a strong value statement to a short explanation of Act 77. The PSA is available on the website that they created for the community to learn more and submit questions, as well as being aired on a local radio station.

#### *A note on the importance of facilitation training*

A CSR adult noted **the importance of the facilitation training** that youth had gone through in preparing them for communicating successfully with community members and dealing with challenging questions and situations in presenting to community audiences. She recounted a situation from a community forum that the group held in their town:

It was, so credible- not only did [the community members] understand Act 77 better but they understood that these students are committed to it and they know what's going to make a difference in their education over time. [The students] were able to answer tough questions like, "You guys are all leaders in the school," and they were like, "No, you

don't know that to be true. Why would you say that? You don't know everybody on this panel and we represent a swath of kids and we're trying to get our other peers who are not engaged in school to start talking to us about what it is that they need and how this act is going to help them.” To hear you say that was just incredible. Again, they just really demonstrated not only the knowledge but the skills. I mean, their facilitation skills, their communication skills really lent a lot of credibility to the work that were doing.

### **Communicating across stakeholder groups**

#### *Challenge: Maintaining a focus on the collective vs. the individual*

A challenge that transcended individual stakeholder groups was maintaining a consistent focus on the idea of education as a collective good within teams’ communication action plans. Several youth and adults mentioned in focus groups or interviews that there was a tension in this work in tracing the path from education a collective good to Act 77 and personalized learning, specifically. Individual team members struggled to make sense of this aspect of the work individually, and also within their teams. In the words of one student,

We [our team] were discussing about how going forward really things are or should be moving from an 'I' viewpoint to a 'We'. For me personally, I fundamentally disagree with that, I think it needs to be balanced, both 'I' and 'We' and when you have people who are invested in their learning as individuals then they are going to be apt to then contribute to all. We are communicating the message that no matter what career path you take or where your interest is, so you can go to technical school or anywhere else, you're still valued and need to be valued in order for society really go well.

In his comments, this student is pointing to the difficulty of contextualizing a collective imperative for education within a society that does not necessarily have a single understanding of what the mission of education is and a reality that education is, in many ways, structured to stratify. Teams foregrounded this message of education as a collective good to varying degrees, and the absence of this message in some of their communication strategies was noted by one CSR student, who suggested:

I think there should be even more emphasis on framing stories on the collective. I sometimes still have to remind myself to think “big picture” rather than individual. But this single piece alone is so critical that it cannot be overlooked.

In support of this, some participants questioned the need for a single metaphor and, like this CSR participant, wondered if more targeted metaphors that were more relatable for different stakeholder groups might be appropriate:

The value of our message was clear – better schools create better communities, although we struggled at times with a ‘story’ that could both highlight the value of community, yet draw on the importance for personalized learning. Our metaphor – remodeling a house, was adopted as a means to save time. It has been received with mixed reviews and as our work moves forward, it is unclear if it will stick, or if another, seemingly more relevant to

the younger members of our community will take hold.

### **SECTION 3: Looking towards the sustainability and expansion of CSR**

Moving forward, CSR teams expressed varied levels of concrete plans for how or if this work would be moving forward at their schools. Several school teams were able to marshal additional financial resources to continue this work over the course of this year, including grants to support the expansion of their communication strategies outwards to reach more of the community, or additional resources to continue to deepen the work by supporting additional skill development to support the pedagogical architecture necessary for Act 77. Adult advisors recognized the need to move some of this communication work outside of the school building and into the community in order to reach those who had not been touched by this work this year. In one CSR participant's words:

Where I think the big work will be next year is we had talked in our team that having formed small, little coffee clutches at people's houses so that we can speak in smaller groups and not have big huge forum that are sort of overwhelming. That was one of our communications strategies [and] designs that we figured out during the class, but we never got to act on. So, we're hoping that will happen next year.

Another CSR team is thinking along similar lines, with plans to create small group dialogue opportunities using existing events in the community:

We are already starting to talk about how we're going to do some of that because we realized you cannot advertise an event and just expect parents to come. We are really looking at for next year, saying, "Okay, how are we going to get out into the community and reach parents and community members?" I'll be going to start going to church suppers, are we going to ask parents to invite people to their home and have dialogue nights. We realized that we have to get out the walls, so to speak instead of just inviting people into the walls. That will be some of the work that has to be done for next year.

For two of the five schools, however, adult advisors showed little interest in continuing with this work. Reasons for their lack of interest ranged from the difficulty of wrangling student participants and finding sufficient time to plan, to questions about the necessity and importance of the work itself. One adult CSR participant suggested that the ultimate scalability of this work felt problematic:

We didn't sign on to a movement. I think that part always frustrated me a little bit. We've been talking about "this movement". And I'm not really sure of anything about the school change movement. We didn't sign on to the school change movement. We signed on because this was essentially an unfunded mandate. So we had to address that.

For this participant, the linking of the CSR work around Act 77 with the broader agenda of school redesign felt like expanding the scope of the work larger than the team or the school was ready to or ultimately needed to support.

## Conclusion and recommendations

As the CSR initiative moves into its third year and continues to be a part of the larger campaign of Shaping Our Future Together, the course has demonstrated several strengths upon which it can build as it continues to deepen and expand its work with youth-adult teams. These strengths include:

- Effective in-class instruction around core strategic framing and dialogue for change concepts, including building youth and adult understanding of value statements, framing, and metaphors, as well as facilitative leadership and a toolbox for supporting the coordination of school and community-based dialogue;
- Useful site-based support through the provision of consulting and text-based resources for teams as they decided on targeted strategies for their school's stakeholder groups;
- A comfortable in-class environment for youth and adults to work together as peers and feel confident in the value of their respective contributions to this work;
- Opportunities for schools to capitalize on the natural network between teams built by the class and receive feedback from each other on their communication action plans and framing strategies;
- The identification of several successful strategies for engaging diverse stakeholders in dialogue for change;
- The establishment of baseline data for stakeholder group's awareness of Act 77, flexible pathways, and mental models of education, teaching and learning.

All of these strengths position the CSR course well for both engaging in and measuring the impact of its work entering its third year. As the course moves forward, however, participants identified several areas that will require thinking strategically and sustainably to maintain the momentum created by CSR teams this year in their communities and to continue engaging with stakeholder groups to move them from pre-awareness or awareness to advocacy for school redesign.

### *Recommendation 1: Deepening the communication infrastructure in schools*

An observation made by one adult was the difficulty of communicating a message to the entire student body in a way that was engaging and authentic. The training in facilitation of student representatives for each Teaching Advisory Group that two schools completed was therefore a move towards the building of an on-going communication structure. **One recommendation for continuing to support communication for social change within the schools walls is to build upon this infrastructure, to have regular in-school dialogues about school redesign and the schools' efforts towards their redesign goals.**

If CSR teams can work with administrators, educators, and students to implement regular school check-ins, using advisory time and potentially transferring responsibility for these activities to existing bodies within the school (such as YATST, student government or other youth-adult groups), there will be more deep and meaningful opportunities for stakeholders to engage in dialogue and to focus on what next steps must be taken to support school redesign goals. A train the trainer module for schools to use to support the training of additional youth

facilitators from TAs as students graduate or turnover would be helpful in supporting teams capitalizing on this built infrastructure. Potential topics for facilitated dialogues might address directly the aspects of youth and adult mental models of teaching and learning that challenge school redesign, including stigma around flexible pathways, fears of being different, or motivation and expectations.

#### *Recommendation 2: Expanding successful strategies from this year outside of the school*

One CSR team member talked about the hope that they can expand their reach to the community in the following year, using dialogue strategies that were successful with student and faculty stakeholder groups. It is clear that some CSR teams see the need to continue to expand this work in their communities in the coming year. The opportunity for teams to practice their communication skills and strategies with those connected to the school, as well as to allow these experiences to help deepen and mature their own understanding of school redesign, seems to have prepared them well for the task of communicating with harder to reach sections of the community.

There is an expansive literature on community engagement within the field of educational research, as well as best practices for engaging community members in non-traditional ways, that might inform team's efforts as they work to expand their reach. **One potential challenge, however, as indicated by team's experiences this year, is the time that it takes to both design non-traditional strategies, as well as coordinating the logistics of such efforts.** One CSR school has been successful in securing funding for a communications consultant in the coming year who will be able to handle some of the logistical aspects of this complex work, freeing a youth-adult CSR team to focus on leveraging their expertise around strategic framing and dialogue for change to engage this population. CSR teams might benefit from additional support from CSR faculty around securing similar support or coordinating with district, state or professional organization communications coordinators in this work.

#### *Limitations of this evaluation*

As with any study, this evaluation has several limitations. First, although the researcher was able to speak with students in all five CSR schools through the two student focus groups, adult advisors for one CSR school opted not to participate in the evaluation and therefore their perspective could not be included. Additionally, no baseline for team dynamics was able to be established through observation at early classes at the beginning of the year, and therefore triangulating data on the development of youth-adult partnership over the course of the year was challenging. The data presented here on this topic is largely reliant on participants own reflections as solicited in interviews and focus groups. Finally, some of the data for this evaluation was culled from participants' final reflections for the course, which asked participants to reflect on their learning with a bias towards its inherent value, such as "What aspects of strategic framing and communication skill development felt most valuable?" Perspectives solicited in these final course reflections have been cross-matched with participant reflections in interviews and focus groups. Divergence between these two sources, if present, was noted in the data analysis.



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