

**Year 1 Interim Evaluation of  
Youth and Adults Transforming Schools Together**

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Building on an extensive history of promoting and supporting the work of student councils around Vermont, the Vermont Principal's Association (VPA) leadership found little evidence of progress in students' sense of partnership in their learning in Vermont high schools. The leadership did, however, hear from principals, teachers, and students, significant interest in engaging students in decision-making, and a need for systemic changes to make it possible. The leadership noted that the "forces have never been better aligned to successfully orchestrate a plan to transform Vermont schools through the development of authentic youth-adult school partnerships and collaborative decision-making - Student Voice." In consultation with the Vermont Department of Education and the Vermont Rural Partnership, each with their own interests in student voice and youth engagement in high school learning, the VPA developed the Youth and Adults Transforming Schools Together (YATST) project, the focus of this evaluation. As outlined in the project overview, the mission, goals, and desired outcomes of the project are as follows:

### **The Mission**

Increase student engagement in learning and desire and capacity for civic engagement, by shifting the culture of Vermont schools from one dominated by rules and adult control, to a culture of joint ownership of learning through collaborative decision making.

### **The Goal:**

To expand and deepen student voice in school decision making by:

- 1) changing fundamental attitudes, behaviors and structures which currently impede students' partnership in their school experience, and
- 2) empowering and supporting youth-adult teams to begin a change process based on an "action research" model, which is replicable in subsequent years as an established operating norm.

### **Desired Outcomes:**

1. Definitive changes in the school culture regarding attitudes, behaviors and structures which currently limit youth voice, including evidence of authentic youth adult collaboration impacting curriculum design, school structures, policy development, and civic engagement opportunities.
2. A steady increase in the numbers of students who report having a say in their educational experience, based on actual involvement in increased opportunities for youth voice created through this project work.
3. Increase student engagement in learning as evidenced by reported improved school climate, a decrease in the incidence of discipline problems, and an increase in student academic performance.
4. Institutionalize youth-adult ownership of learning as evidenced by established collaborative opportunities for youth involvement in decision making which are sustainable and based on an authentic (versus token) youth-adult partnership norms

- (i.e. student membership in core committee work impacting curriculum, structures, policy development and broader civic engagement).
5. Increase in student team members' demonstrated capacity for problem solving, critical thinking and communication [appeared in later project description].

## **Findings**

The VPA funded an external evaluator to examine the interim progress and experience of participants as they approached the conclusion of year one or their 3 year commitment to the YATST initiative. The following findings are guided by the VPA's evaluation guidelines and drawn from data collected over four months, including interviews and focus groups with all active participants, review of project documents and curriculum materials, and observation of meetings and retreats conducted during April and June of 2009.

### **Description of Work.** Project planners envisioned:

- Development of a school transformation action plan based on action research and best practices, which includes voices of school population including staff, students and parents.
- Implementation of school transformation plan that incorporates changes recommended in research.
- Established collaborative opportunities for youth involvement in decision-making which are sustainable (i.e. student membership in core committee work impacting curriculum, structures, policy development and broader civic engagement).

All sites established and sustained youth-adult partnership teams dedicated to the YATST initiative. Teams developed among themselves youth-adult relationships reflecting the projects ideals of equity and shared power and responsibility. All sites initiated an action research process by designing and conducting surveys – and in some cases focus groups – to inform a plan for change in their schools. Two sites implemented small change projects meant to enhance their recognition and legitimacy, but acknowledged that these projects were stepping stones to more ambitious change initiatives. Teams finished year one with data on the needs and concerns of their school community to apply to developing and implementing change projects in year two.

### **Impact on School-Wide Student Engagement in Learning and Decision-Making.**

*What evidence exists to suggest changes in attitudes, behaviors and structures which currently limit youth voice and engagement in learning?* Evidence from interviews in particular suggests important changes in attitudes, behaviors, and structures, opening the way for greater student voice and engagement. YATST students described an important change in their relationship with teachers, marked by a sense of equality, openness, and shared commitment to expanding student voice. Participating students also took the lead to address impediments to voice in their schools, including designing and implementing strategies to include marginalized students, such as ELL students, and those not represented by existing student leadership. Students and teachers alike found it difficult to engage the interest of the broader student body but developed a variety of strategies that increased their YATST team's recognition and legitimacy.

YATST adults noted important changes in their own attitudes and behaviors as a result of participating in the project, including a growing awareness of behaviors that support or inhibit student voice, a newfound appreciation for students' insight into education and their leadership potential, and a deepened understanding of the nature and implications of youth-adult partnership. Adults described themselves as advocating for greater student involvement in decision making among their colleagues, which coupled with faculty hearing from YATST students directly, has contributed to a growing openness to student participation in school decisions.

***Has the action research process & committee work impacted student perceptions of their having a say in their educational experience?*** Although their adult partners sometimes questioned whether students valued the action research process, students spoke as if they were ready and willing to adopt a researcher's mindset, in spite of the challenging work research entailed. Students accepted the challenge of the action research, appreciated its impact on their schools, and noted that their research helped uncover novel insights into possible obstacles to student engagement in learning.

***What are teacher perceptions of the work and goals of this committee?*** As a result of working on their respective YATST committees, each participating adult, in their written reflections and interviews, appreciated how their own behaviors may support or undermine student voice and participation. They noted the significance of attending to the relationships and interactions with students as well as the collaborative tasks of the committee. Adults routinely applied conceptions of student voice and partnership consistent with the high standard set by project designers. They found the work rewarding, remained optimistic about future work, and expressed a growing commitment cultivating student voice and youth-adult partnership.

Participating adults and students expressed concern about their teams' varying momentum throughout the year and attributed productive and engaging periods to regular meetings, tangible progress on research and implementation, and YATST retreats.

**Impact on Student Team Members' Vital Results and 21st Century Skill Set.** Interviews, reflective essays, and observations provided ample evidence of student growth, but documentation and assessment schemes were inadequate to capture, and more important, to honor the nature and extent of student growth.

***Civic and Social Responsibility.*** Students frequently emphasized their commitment to gather data that reflected the opinions of all students, even those whose voices may typically be underrepresented. This sentiment extended to broader involvement in school by some YATST students. Adults sometimes understated students' level of commitment to the project; as they discussed specific students with their colleagues, interpretations shifted, leading most adults to identify significant student commitment to the project and school improvement. One adult highlighted the easily overlooked "civic" dimension to student involvement in school improvement, and cited the deep, collaborative commitment evident in YATST student participation.

***Communication.*** Students spoke persuasively of an equal and democratic communication dynamic with teachers and their team, usually attributed to their retreat experiences. They cited the importance of open communication for their committee work and collaborative problem solving in spite of the tensions it sometimes created. Adults emphasized growth in individual

students' communication skills including their ability to contribute to team discussions, lead team meetings, and address larger audiences.

***Personal Development.*** Adults observed substantial personal growth among most of the participating students, particularly in leadership ability, commitment to the project, perseverance, and a sense of empowerment.

***Problem Solving.*** Adults acknowledged the problem solving nature of the YATST work and students' willingness to engage it. Adults recalled the critical thinking students displayed during data analysis amidst their action research. Students spoke eloquently of how action research gives voice to YATST students while also incorporating all student voices into plans for school improvement.

### **Lessons Learned: What Have Been The Challenges and Opportunities Throughout the First Year from Student, Teacher, and Principal Perspectives?**

***Committee Process.*** Students stated clearly that they enjoyed working with their YATST team. Some regarded it as the most rewarding part of the work. They appreciated in particular their groups' shared purpose around voice and the equality of the student-teacher relationship, both of which provided inspiration for more work.

Students and adults alike noted that site YATST committees may have been more effective if better teaming strategies had been implemented, including: explicit, rotating roles and responsibilities; more careful note taking and documentation; more thoughtful integration of committee work and course work; and ongoing team building activities to nurture the team. Finding time to meet was a challenge all teams faced. Participants recommended integrating YATST meeting time into school schedules, such as making it scheduled course for students or determining meeting times far in advance. All participants emphasized that their teams were most effective when they enjoyed regularly scheduled meetings.

***Shared Training Experience.*** Students and adults emphasized the critical role YATST retreats played in recharging YATST teams. They consistently noted the importance of the retreats for establishing new, more equal relationships between students and adults, identifying team members' strengths and how those may relate to effective teaming, sharing ideas and experiences across schools, and having fun together. Adults spoke of how retreats provided an opportunity to sharpen their team's focus, clarify its vision, plan next steps, and escape the hectic life of school to "get our work done." Others credited retreat content with building a shared and transformative understanding of student voice and partnership among teammates and other participants.

Participants had a number of recommendations for improving the retreats and other shared training experiences. Some suggested more student-led activities through which students can develop and demonstrated their leadership and other abilities. Many called for devoting more retreat time to site teams and their specific agendas, perhaps modeling a process of learning by doing, including a thorough and well-supported opportunity to reflect on the team's performance. While participants had varying views on the ideal curriculum – balancing team-building, training in action research, and team work time, for instance – recommendations added to rather than trimmed down the learning goals of retreats and site-based support.

## Considerations for Improvement and Sustainability

**Enhance Ongoing Learning for Students and Adults.** Adult participants clearly called for more support in providing students with the skills necessary to fulfill their potential as change partners. Recommendations pointed to developing a more rigorous course for students, particularly to promote skill development and reflection. Adults were reluctant to assume traditional teaching roles in order to support student learning. Some adults suggested more transparent teacher modeling of facilitation and research strategies, perhaps in conjunction with appropriate adult-only inquiries into problems of interest to the team.

Adults faced their own challenges. Teachers wanted to know how to expose and address teachers' personal biases that may impede equitably engaging all students' voices in an equitable manner. Others worried about how to prepare for honest feedback from students about teaching and learning. Nearly all struggled with their interactions with student partners, such as, "When do we bite our tongue? When do we speak up?" And participants wondered how to prepare their colleagues for engaging students as partners in school improvement.

**Celebrate and Disseminate Small Successes.** Intentionally celebrating and disseminating even small achievements may help to build and sustain enthusiasm in the long process of school change. Noteworthy successes in year 1 include establishing equitable, trusting relationships among site team members; successfully organizing and implementing initial research; taking the YATST agenda into the work of student council or school committees; and achieving student-initiated changes such as revising the dress code or creating a much desired student lounge. Collaborative reflection about how these achievements relate to the goals and vision of the project is essential to monitoring progress.

**Engage Parent and Community Participation.** Students and adults argued for broader involvement of parents and community. As a starting point, several students and adults suggested regular reporting to all stakeholders about the project and its progress. Expressions of interest in the YATST initiative – from faculty, students, and other organizations – should be thoughtfully tracked, considered, and developed as part of site planning and implementation.

## Design Implications

Based upon the information garnered from year one of the YATST project, experience from other school improvement initiatives, and related research, the following design possibilities are worth considering as the YATST project moves forward.

### *Advocate for Systemic Alignment with Student Voice*

- Advocate for YATST priorities in DOE transformation planning.
- Advocate for YATST priorities with the Vermont Superintendents' Association, the Vermont School Boards Association.

### *Reduce Reliance on VPA Funding*

- Incorporate youth-adult partnership goals and strategies into teachers' individual professional development plans, re-licensure preparation, and building and district improvement planning (including curriculum reform), and thereby capture professional development and reform dollars for work related to student voice and engagement.

- Include student voice goals and training into other professional development agendas and curricula.

### *Improve Marketing*

- Make student-led public presentations about the project – within the school and beyond – a core component of each YATST team’s action plan.
- Integrate YATST presentations and curriculum into VPA’s summer Leadership Academy.
- Integrate youth-adult partnership training into principal mentoring programs.
- Require dissemination planning, including appropriate public sharing of work, as part of each YATST team’s action plan

### *Diversify Delivery*

- Emphasize documentation of YATST team actions plans, activities, and accomplishments to demonstrate team success, document student growth, and share learning with current and prospective YATST teams
- Co-construct with students a curriculum for YATST-related skill development based on participant feedback.
- Design after school workshops for faculty interested in learning more about student voice and youth-adult partnership.
- Consider student involvement in professional learning communities, such as critical friends groups.
- Establish a regular course offering to students related to youth-adult partnership for school change and aligned with existing learning expectations, such as civic and social engagement.
- Make available to participating teams resources they need to conduct their own team-building activities, research trainings, videos and other materials with which they could continue reflecting on their growth with student voice and partnerships.
- Explore train-the-trainer models applied to successful voice and partnership projects.
- Consider a leadership academy for students and adults experienced with student voice and partnership in order to cultivate future trainers and facilitators. Design the use of these leaders into future YATST planning.
- Consider expanding YATST team membership for schools entering year two in order to broaden the pool of trained teachers and students at each site.

The project is already heading in a promising direction with its increased emphasis on online tools for reflection and sharing among the project participants. Readily and freely available online technologies can be further exploited to support the following:

- Scheduling of YATST team meetings, activities, and events
- Posting of YATST team meeting minutes

- Electronic newsletters to share YATST information with other students, faculty and parents, administration, school boards, other educators and schools, and the broader community
- Electronic portfolios to chart student growth in Vital Results, 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills, and other outcomes targeted in their YATST-related independent studies or coursework
- Electronic portfolios of teacher growth resulting from YATST participation and applicable to individual professional development plans and re-licensure
- Appropriate integration of documentation into evaluation, project improvement, advocacy, marketing, and efforts to cultivate allies and partnerships.



## **PROJECT OVERVIEW**

### **History**

Founded in 1962, the VPA provides professional development opportunities for its 600 members and 371 schools (out of a total of 391 schools statewide); develops a strong networking system for members; and sponsors 29 co-curricular activities that support academics and cultivates the high ideals of good citizenship and sportsmanship. Individual members include 335 principals, 96 Assistant Principals, 67 Athletic Directors and 82 other school personnel.

The mission of the Vermont Principal's Association (VPA) is to coordinate the collective interests and needs of school leaders and to enhance their professional growth and competency for the purpose of improving the quality of educational opportunities of the youth of Vermont. Principals turn to the VPA for leadership, resources, and training to support school transformation efforts in collaboration with the Vermont Department of Education.

Building on an extensive history of promoting and supporting the work of student councils around Vermont, VPA leadership nonetheless found little evidence of progress in students' sense of partnership in their learning in Vermont high schools. The leadership did, however, hear from principals, teachers, and students, significant interest in engaging students in decision-making, and a need for systemic changes to make it possible. The VPA leaders noted, the “forces have never been better aligned to successfully orchestrate a plan to transform Vermont schools through the development of authentic youth-adult school partnerships and collaborative decision-making - Student Voice.” In consultation with the Vermont Department of Education and the Vermont Rural Partnership, each with their own interests in student voice and youth engagement in high school learning, the VPA developed the Youth and Adults Transforming Schools Together (YATST) project, the focus of this evaluation.

As outlined in the project overview (Appendix A), the mission, goals, and desired outcomes of the project are as follows:

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5. Increase in student team members' demonstrated capacity for problem solving, critical thinking and communication [appeared in later project description].

### **Conceptions of Voice**

In a comprehensive review of research into student voice, Thiessen (2007) describes three bodies of work on student involvement in school improvement that have emerged in recent decades: students participating in and making sense of life in classrooms and schools; understanding students and their development in school; and how students are actively involved in shaping their own learning opportunities and in the improvement of what happens in schools (p. 8). The first strand examines students' thoughts and feelings (Davies, 1982; Phelan, Davidson, & Yu, 1998), their relations with teachers (Apple & Beane, 1995; Cothran & Ennis, 1997; Lampert, 2001), and how they contribute to a social world and academic success (McCadden, 1998; Woods, 1990). The second strand focuses on how the dynamics of classrooms and schools influence students' identities (Diaz-Greenberg, 2003; Nagle, 2001) and how students adapt to different classroom and schooling structures, expectations, and work (McLaren, 1999; Nieto, 1994; Willis, 1977). The third strand examines how involving students as consultants and decision makers shape classroom management and curriculum design (Boomer, 1982; Brodhagen, 1995; Lee, 1999) and school rules, leadership, and governance (Kaba, 2000; SooHoo, 1993). Such student "engagement" appears to have benefits beyond informing reforms, but also in the development of students themselves, including their sense of agency, belonging, and competence (Jackson & Davis, 2000; Mitra, 2004; Stephenson, 1998). And in recent years authors have focused on "democratic" forms of student engagement in classrooms and schools (Apple & Beane, 1995; Beane, 1993, 1997; Flutter, 2007; Whitehead & Clough, 2004).

The YATST project is situated in this third strand of student voice and educational improvement. As the project overview states:

Empowering student voices in educational reform has been identified as critically important to the successful implementation of academic programs and projects (Beresford, 2000; Cook-Sather, 2002; Ericson & Ellett, 2002; Evans, 2007; Fletcher, 2003; Wilson & Corbett, 2001).

In particular, the project seizes on the work of Adam Fletcher, who is cited frequently in the project documents, curriculum, and in the words of participants.

Meaningful Student Involvement challenges schools to transform learning activities by fostering accountability, transparency and interdependence between students and

educators. The prospect of accountability between students and educators shifts the burden of school change from sitting solely upon educators' shoulders, and shares the responsibility of school improvement with students. Meaningful Student Involvement is the process of engaging students in every facet of the educational process for the purpose of strengthening their commitment to education, community and democracy (2004, p. 6).

Further, the project designers challenged themselves to engage the “whisperers” in this project, the students who “passively do the ‘school game’ until they ‘get out’, or worse yet, drop out.” The project description notes, “School transformation efforts must seek out the ‘whisperers,’ listen particularly hard to their stories, and engage their help to change those things which silenced them.” This commitment sets a high standard at which students should be involved in the project. Citing Adam Fletcher (2004), “Traditional ‘student leadership’ has long been seen as a representative form of school governance. This approach can be alienating to students by promoting divisive perceptions of leadership and empowerment. Meaningful Student Involvement takes form in sustainable, broad-based and purposeful roles for *all* students in every school, compelling every young person to have voice” (p. 6).

Driven by this history and these principles, YATST planners imagined a variety of forms of student voice:

- Regular student input into the classroom experience, such as mid-semester written feedback, followed by dialogue and goal setting by both students and teachers regarding desired changes.
- Student involvement on standing committees: curriculum development, school climate, hiring committees, school board, etc.
- Student generated courses, with students as teachers and facilitators, mentored by classroom teachers and administrators.
- Multiple opportunities to be civically engaged through courses such as “Rights in Action” or service learning programs.
- Regular seminars and/or school forums to discuss school, local or world issues of concern
- Students joining adults in analyzing school academic and climate data and developing plans to address findings.
- Quarterly dialogue nights to involve parents in meaningful discussion about student issues.
- Students regularly providing information and direction to the school board, and school boards deferring decisions until adequate student input is obtained.

In the words of one of the principals on the VPA committee that helped develop the project, “We have many seeds to sow to develop youth voice, given excellent models and prototypes for school transformation in Vermont’s ‘pockets of excellence’ and beyond. What each school ‘plants’ will vary, but we first need to better prepare the soil, assuring that these seeds will thrive and be viable over time.”

The conceptions and visions of student voice, and the forms in which they may be manifested, remained remarkably stable throughout the first year of the project and across participants. When asked in interviews to define student voice, a typical response included:

Students feeling free to voice their ideas and opinions and concerns and to have them become part of the dialogue that goes on in the school around decision making. It wouldn't be something that was separate but it'd be integral to all the other conversations that occur between board members, between community members, between teachers and teachers and administrators and teachers and parents that the students would be a part of that.

## **Project Design**

As outlined in overview documents, the key design elements of the YATST project are as follows:

- Forming school-based teams of a principal, one or two teachers, and a diverse group of six to eight students, guided by a memorandum of understanding, for a 3-year commitment to “1) assess the strengths and challenges of building youth voice in their school, using an action research model 2) design and implement a plan to expand and deepen student voice in school decision making 3) engage in on-going assessment and fine-tuning of this plan.”
- Training and support in the form of a three-credit graduate course/high school course combination conducted through the first year of the project, in which students and teachers “sit side-by-side” to “assess, design, and implement student voice efforts.” Year 2 will offer a graduate seminar for teachers and seek opportunities for students to extend independent study options at their schools.
- Ongoing consultation on- and off-site supported by the project director, a variety of outside consultants, and peer consultation strategies, such as the National School Reform Faculty's Critical Friends model.
- Networking among project participants supported by technology, such as an online forum or blog.
- Careful documentation and evaluation of process and outcomes in order to capture changes in school culture related to student voice; evidence of authentic youth-adult collaboration and its impact on curriculum design, school structures, policy development, and school-community partnership; tracking existing data about students “having a say” in their education; school climate data; and changes in the incidence of discipline problems and academic performance.
- All project participants meet for a 3-day summer residential institute, a 2-day residential retreat in November, and a 1 day retreat in the spring.
- Staffing includes a Project Director, VPA Administrator, VPA Secretarial Support.

## **Evaluation Design**

This study was guided by the evaluation design developed by the YATST project leadership. The design requested: (1) a description of the work carried out by participants at their respective school sites; (2) an analysis of the impact on school-wide student engagement in learning and decision making; (3) an analysis of the impact on student team members' Vital Results and 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills; (4) and an elaboration of lessons learned.

The evaluation drew primarily on interviews and focus groups with project participants and leadership; project documents and curriculum materials; participants' written reflections and documented feedback; and observation of one retreat day for all participants and one data analysis session at one site. The project director provided access to hundreds of pages of agendas, program materials, and related literature, and engaged in extensive and reflective email correspondence throughout the evaluation period. The evaluation design called for a quantitative analysis of site climate data, and while baseline data from year one is available and should be thoughtfully tracked through subsequent evaluations, post data were not available. Therefore, quantitative data were not incorporated into this evaluation. The study took the form of a qualitative process evaluation, an approach highly appropriate when: "(1) depicting process requires detailed descriptions of how people engage with each other, (2) the experience of process typically varies for different people so their experiences need to be captured in their own words, (3) process is fluid and dynamic so it can't be fairly summarized on a single rating scale at one point in time, and (4) participants perceptions are a key process consideration" (Patton, 2002, p. 159).

Eight interviews and 4 focus groups with participants and leadership totaling more than 13 hours yielded 225 transcribed pages of conversation about the YATST projects' first year. These data, along with available electronic documents and images, were categorized according to key questions and concepts established in the evaluation design using NVivo qualitative analysis software. The sorted data were then coded according to subcategories outlined in the design as well as emergent themes relevant to participants' and the evaluator's observations and recommendations. Categories, subcategories, and themes were then re-examined to identify representative examples, descriptions, and insights, preserving the actual voices of participants whenever possible. Instances of negative cases, rival conclusions, and variation across sites were given additional attention in the analysis and reporting.

Limited access to student-generated data is an important limitation to the evaluation. There is no reason to suspect that students were not forthcoming in the verbal or written comments they provided, but their input was limited to two 45-55 minute focus groups and brief comments captured in several group activities throughout the year. Student-generated data related to their own personal growth is particularly scarce, as is written or visual documentation of site teams' planning, implementation, and meeting minutes. Future evaluations will benefit from more comprehensive and organized collection of student- and team-generated work and reflection.

### **DESCRIPTION OF WORK AT EACH SITE**

Project planners envisioned the following at each participating site:

- Development of a school transformation action plan based on action research and best practices, which includes voices of school population including staff, students and parents.
- Implementation of school transformation plan that incorporates changes recommended in research.
- Established collaborative opportunities for youth involvement in decision-making which are sustainable (i.e. student membership in core committee work impacting curriculum, structures, policy development and broader civic engagement).

Each site conducted research in year one that can inform action planning for year two. Implementation of plans will necessarily follow. In addition to successfully collecting and analyzing relevant data, each site took steps to enhance the visibility and legitimacy of student voice and youth-adult partnership in their schools. The data from each site provided ample evidence that YATST youth and adults shared the ideals of youth-adult partnership envisioned by the project and were committed to developing the skills and dispositions to sustain an authentic partnership to improve their schools. Their achievements in year one are compared favorably with the year one achievements of successful youth-adult partnerships in other settings (e.g., Fielding, 2001a; Fielding, 2001b; Mitra, 2008).

### **Description of Work at Site 1: Winooski**

**Site Goals.** The goals of site one, as described by participants, were consistent with the goals of the project. As one teacher described, “I think the ultimate goal of the entire project is to increase student engagement in the learning that’s going on here at school by increasing their voice and involvement with the decisions and the processes that go on in school.” While participants readily acknowledged that only modest steps toward this goal have been made in year 1, they sounded confident that the steps they have taken bode well for continuing progress in year 2.

**Research Methods.** Students and adults at Site 1 chose to examine transcripts from student focus group conducted by teachers in the 2007-2008 school year. In addition, the team developed and implemented a survey of students and teachers. Survey analysis took place in May, facilitated by the project director. Survey findings identified a number of issues that interested committee members, which they say will inform action plans for year 2.

**Actions Planned.** In lieu of formal action planning, Site 1 participants identified 3 areas of focus for increasing student voice in decision making:

- Look for opportunities for involving students in other committees
- Examine how other schools are using voice
- Revamp the student council to increase the number of students involved and redefine roles and responsibilities to increase student voice.

**Actions Implemented.** The actions of YATST participants reflected a blend of new, YATST-inspired agendas and older agendas adopted as part of a multi-year effort by the school to improve student voice. Participants attributed progress on all of the following to their YATST learning and work:

- The creation of the [Site 1] Voice Committee and consideration of merging with the larger “Student Voice Committee,” a faculty group committed to increasing student voice but which had no student representation.
- Placing students on school committees, for example, student participation in a committee to improve the Teacher Advisory program. As one teacher described it, “Rather than just going about making the change, we polled the students on how they felt TA should look and feel. Students were then invited to share their opinions with the entire student body and faculty during a Community Meeting. Students were then welcomed to share more opinions with the faculty in a small group setting. In the end, the students got to vote for the schedule they liked best. This was a huge step for us at our school.”

- Placing students on the school board
- Students recreating student council to include more student voice, “so that it is more inclusive of all students who want to make a difference.” There are now 40 students involved in student council and two YATST students, in collaboration with a YATST adult, helping to press the conduct of student council to be driven by students rather than teachers.
- Creating a school “voice box,” “so that when students have any questions or problems, they can get their voices heard.”
- Developing, designing, and administering a survey to elicit input from students & teachers about the climate of Site 1.
- Implementing bi-monthly, student run community meetings, a gathering of the whole school.
- “Revamping aspects” of the whole school community meeting format.
- Integrating YATST (and other club time) into the master schedule: 20 minutes every other day, leaving open the possibility of YATST representatives in other meetings.

**Conclusions.** Subtle achievements are worth acknowledging in year 1. One teacher summarized the progress of her team, “we have set goals, realized those goals weren’t realistic goals and changed them over and over.” Another teacher added, “What we found is that teachers and students both need a lot of practice and training to do [YATST work]. And that students haven’t [previously] been given the kind of responsibility and the tools to participate with adults in a collaborative process around things of governance and engagement, how curriculum is developed and implemented.” But during year 1, “the students ran their own meetings, kept their own agendas, kept the minutes, and came to conclusions that really supported what they want. When we allowed them to do that and bring their findings or whatever back to us and kind of act as coaches and guides, I think that things went in a very different direction than we would have pushed them.” One teacher concluded, “I think they’re demonstrating that they’re engaged in this process.”

Participants also noted that they have become advocates for student voice and engagement among their peers. Of his work with students on previously adult-only committee, one teacher observed, “I found myself speaking out kind of just advocating for listening to what the students were saying, just supporting the fact that they were there with their opinions and these ought to be considered. And that’s not something that I would have been found doing before.” As a result of YATST work in the school, this teacher found some of his colleagues more receptive to student representation on committees, noting, “I don’t think we would have been able to get that to happen, because it really took more than just a couple of adults to kind of convince or demand the rest of the adults to acknowledge this.”

### **Description of Work at Site 2 (Montpelier)**

**Site Goals.** The sole adult participant at Site 2 described the goal for year 1 as “reestablishing some understanding about what was possible” with student voice. He sought to cultivate the relationships, the dynamic, and the structure, to sustain this student engagement in decision making, that “we would have this core group, that because they were diverse, they

would be able to relate well to various [constituencies] within our population and that they would be able to begin this idea of Student Voice and be able to articulate it and explain it.”

**Research Methods.** The participants at Site 2 conducted a survey, developed at the summer and fall retreats, to discover what the “whole student body felt the key issues were in the school that needed more student voice, more involvement of students.” They conducted two rounds of surveys: the first prompted very open-ended responses about how the school could be improved; drawing 6 or 7 issues that emerged from that survey, they conducted a second survey to prioritize that list. They also conducted a couple of focus group meetings with students after school. Issues that emerged from the research included looking at the weighting system for classes and grading, how much say students had in what was taught, whether or not workers in the cafeteria should wear hair nets, improving the cafeteria, and designing a student lounge in order to make the cafeteria more welcoming. It was this last item that spurred the action plan for the year. It was important to the students and connected well with other cafeteria initiatives such as composting, sustainability, and growing greens in the school’s greenhouse. “But in terms of really looking at what it is that’s underlying obstacles to them having a say in the school and a voice in the school, we haven’t gotten to that.”

**Actions Planned.** The YATST team at Site 2 planned the design and implementation of a new student lounge.

**Actions Implemented.** Participants at Site 2 implemented the following:

- Beginning the year with two student-led presentations about the YATST project, first with the freshman class, then with the rest of the student body.
- Presenting student-led sessions at school faculty meetings.
- Meeting regularly, perhaps 20 times throughout the year, in spite of the fact that the adult member could attend only one-half to three-quarters of the meetings.
- Designing and conducting two rounds of surveys and a round of focus groups.
- Designing and planning the new student lounge.

**Conclusions.** The achievements of the YATST team at Site 2 are notable, particularly given the limited adult support in the partnership. Nonetheless, the adult team member acknowledged, “I haven’t seen the overall impact on the school much at all. I think the population of kids knows that there’s this YATST group called SCT – Students Coming Together -- and there’s some interest in doing some things. But I haven’t seen a whole lot of change in terms of the school culture.” Students perceived the student lounge initiative as a step toward recognition and legitimacy, laying the foundation for more ambitious YATST work in the future.

### **Description of Work at Site 3 (Windsor)**

**Site Goals.** The YATST group at Site 3 adopted several goals:

- Revise the school’s dress code for students as a high-impact, short-term action to increase recognitions and legitimacy of the group.
- Examine and improve climate in classrooms and common spaces.
- Change the annual student questionnaire.



**Research Methods.** The YATST team collected data by recruiting and training facilitators to conduct focus groups in each of the school's 27 advisories, paving the way for future data collection and ongoing solicitation of student voice. Students also revised and implemented the school's annual climate survey and conducted focus group data gathering at a faculty inservice.

**Actions Planned.** The Site 3 team identified two change agendas: changing the dress code policy and starting to examine teaching strategies being used in block schedule classes, an interest shared with the school's Improvement Committee. The latter issue shifted to a shorter term focus on examining the climate in classrooms and common spaces.

**Actions Implemented.** Participants at Site 3 implemented the following:

- Students investigated, revised, and finalized the school's dress code.
- Students led an inservice session with faculty soliciting input from teachers about school climate
- Identified and trained focus group facilitators in each of the school's 27 advisories.
- Students revised and implemented the school's annual climate survey, a stepping stone to action planning for year 2.

**Conclusions.** Similar to students at Site 2, the YATST students at Site 3 felt strongly about immediately addressing a common concern, in their case, to revise the school's dress code. Identifying and training advisory facilitators to help conduct research and solicit student voice has the potential to rapidly expand the capacity of the YATST initiative, and could serve as a model for other sites. As the school's only YATST adult acknowledged, however, "We need to think of ways to kind of mobilize and keep advisory facilitators up and going and trained and into it."

As with the other sites, the first year accomplishments of Site 3 will ultimately be measured by their follow-up work in year 2. The site's team plans to look at the climate survey data over the summer, collect additional information from advisories in the fall, and develop action plans for two change projects, one to be executed in the fall and the other in the spring. The team is hoping for better relations with and integration into the existing Student Council as juniors on the YATST team assume more senior positions in that organization.

#### **Description of Work at Site 4 (Peoples Academy)**

**Site Goals.** The participating principal at Site 4 summarized the YATST team's goals as "developing that youth-adult partnership with the group of students that we're working with" and "to develop systems or a culture where students are involved in decision making that impacts their curriculum and their learning, not just food in the cafeteria or the color of your walls."

**Research Methods.** With training from an outside expert, students learned to conduct focus group interviews and worked with peers to lead focus groups with the broader student body. Findings from the focus groups led to a more refined survey of students and faculty the strengths and concerns of the school community. They analyzed their "Engagement in Learning" survey data with the help of the project director, narrowing students' concerns to: increasing opportunities to link learning to real life; improving student preparation to be successful after high school; and decreasing the number of students considering dropping out.

**Actions Planned.** In addition to planning their research, Site 4 participants planned a range of activities to increase the recognition of their group among the larger student body.

**Actions Implemented.** Participants at Site 4 implemented the following:

- Students led focus groups with their peers.
- Students partnered with adults to refine, implement, and analyze a survey of students and teachers.
- The YATST team met regularly, generally for 30 minutes each week, with periodic 2 hour meetings. They established a more regular meeting schedule for year 2.
- Students conducted a fishbowl activity at a faculty meeting.
- Students developed and performed a skit about their team's research and findings as a whole-school assembly.
- Students and adults solicited interest and input from students during a lunch session, including offering snacks and a chance to win a prize.

**Conclusions.** The team at Site 4 acknowledged a slow start, particularly implementing their research agenda, but as one participant noted, "We finally I think got some traction once we did the survey." Indeed, while some adult participants were disappointed with the quality of the data from the focus groups, which students insisted on conducting without adult help, one adult later concluded that "the focus groups helped us all understand together that if we were too broad in what we asked, what we were going to get was, change lunch." This lesson led them to be particularly thoughtful about their survey design, "to ask the right questions to elicit the kinds of responses we were really looking for about learning, engagement and motivation." Based on the year's work, in particular the survey data, the site's participating principal stated, "We're going into the summer retreat now in a place where we're really ready to launch into taking some serious action steps to have an impact."

Student leadership throughout the year, including the focus groups, the fishbowl activity, and the skit for the assembly, bolstered the team's confidence in what students can do. As a teacher explained regarding the lunch activity, "I just thought they did such a good job. And I felt like we did a good job with that particular part of the year, in everybody taking a part and everybody holding up their end of the bargain and that was awesome." The principal appreciated the change in the YATST teachers: "They definitely had a huge transformation, I think, in how they are going to use Student Voice. So even if nothing else happens, I've got 4 teachers who have changed. But we're obviously shooting for much, much bigger changes. But there's at least that."

## **Impact on School-Wide Student Engagement in Learning And Decision-Making**

### **What evidence exists to suggest changes in attitudes, behaviors and structures which currently limit youth voice and engagement in learning?**

**YATST Students.** Evidence from interviews in particular suggests important changes in attitudes, behaviors, and structures, opening the way for greater student voice and engagement. YATST students described an important change in their relationship with teachers. As one student noted, “Like now I know that teachers are actually interested in the students’ opinion and that we can make changes. It feels a lot better.” When asked about the most rewarding aspect of the YATST experience throughout the year, another student added, “I’d say the satisfaction of knowing that I can go to my teachers if I have a suggestion. I definitely feel that’s really great.” The new relationship with teachers has spurred students to stick with the project: “[I]t kind of inspires you to do more and so it makes me want to take a bigger jump.” Their teachers have noticed the uptick in students’ commitment to the project. One teacher observed in an interview, “You know, [our YATST students] came to our data crunch sessions and showed up to the meetings we had at my house. You know and with no grumbling. And I think that’s rare. And those weren’t short periods of time. Those were like 2 – 2 ½ hour blocks we’d spend [4 times]. I think that we’ve seen the engagement that is necessary to get people to go and do those sorts of things.”

Participating students have also taken the lead to address impediments to voice in their schools. For instance, noting the ethnic and linguistic diversity among students in his school, a YATST student noted that many “can’t really speak English. So we’re trying to get their voices, too, to see what they think.” His classmate continued, “So we couldn’t just distribute a survey. We had to go through it and make sure that every student would know what everything means.” In response, an English language learner among the YATST students provided direct support to other ELL students as they completed the survey.

**Other Students in YATST Schools.** YATST youth and adults alike pointed to limited progress in garnering interest in the project among other students in their schools. Several schools noted initial tension between YATST students and other student groups, particularly established student councils. One student observed, “Like it was easy for us to motivate ourselves along with [our principal] helping us along, but the harder part was getting our peers motivated. They kind of felt like ... we were taking charge instead of inviting them along with us, which I guess that was the hard part, was finding the happy medium.”

These tensions appear to have waned during the year as some YATST students began participating in the councils. At one school, a YATST adult is the co-faculty sponsor of the student council and together with two YATST students, expanded council membership and introduced leadership skills into council meetings. Noting the disparity in leadership skills between trained YATST youth and their council peers, the council sponsor observed, “[YATST students] get so frustrated because the other students don’t know how to listen to them and they don’t have the skills. And they haven’t practiced facilitated a meeting and they don’t know what that’s like. And they haven’t practiced sticking to an agenda and not just joking around. And they haven’t seen the power that they could wield as a group if they were organized and if they decided to do something and not just attend. It has taken the three of us a lot of time to try to

train others to let students have a voice and run the meetings. Both groups have come a long way.”

Across the schools, however, participants felt that the larger student body is increasingly aware of and interested in the student voice work under way in their buildings. “It’s like everyone knows [us] now,” one boy claims, “or most people do. Because we had an assembly and a survey and all that.” Another student adds, “Yeah. Because we took that survey and then all the kids were like whoa, man, they didn’t go away. They’re still here.” A student from another school highlighted the impact that a school-wide assembly, at which YATST students performed a skit to convey their research findings, had on YATST’s recognition, stating, “Our greatest accomplishment was probably that assembly. Because ... when we did our opening thing, we really got our group known and everybody knows who we are now.... We still need to get to the point where people actually know that we’re going to make changes. But at this point in time, we’re actually taken semi-seriously.” One principal noted that upon posting a list of slots available on the school’s YATST team, “there was a lot of interest in kids being on it. So at some level, kids understand it, know about it, know that they want to be part of it.

One student described in an interview the effects she’s noticed in the relations between students and teachers:

I like to see the fact that the students and the teachers are actually getting along. In the beginning, a lot of the students weren’t getting along with teachers, and now we’re addressing some of the issues that are in the school and they’re getting along a lot better. I see more students going to their teachers about their grades and about homework and in the beginning in last year, I didn’t see that as much.

Another student from another school added, “we’ve started to change some of the rules. We’re starting to take on some more ambitious projects and we have full support of the faculty. So we’re doing something.”

Students suggested a relationship between tangible improvements to their schools, such as creating a student lounge, and the recognition they gain for their work from peers. One youth cautioned, however, “It’s real easy to get like hung up on really doing something that people can see when sometimes the thing you can do at first can be really helpful but might not be as easily right in your face. [B]ut it’s sort of like a good idea to have – within your own group – a little confidence that what you’re doing [is] going to be helpful in the long run.”

**YATST Adults.** All of the YATST adults noted important changes in their own attitudes and behaviors as a result of participating in the project. Listing key learning outcomes from his own experience during the year, one adult succinctly captured the sense of his adult YATST peers: “I need to step back; Kids can do it; I get frustrated when I can’t take on a leadership role; Our students work well together, but still need time to learn how to function as a group.”

Another teacher spoke to how her newfound appreciation for YATST students extended to other students she teaches: “[T]hat week that we spent at Lyndon really helped in terms of going into the year with a junior class. I’d be like, okay, I’m going to trust them.... I know they can do it.” During the year, for the first time, she handed over to her students the task of planning the class trip to New York City. She acknowledges, however, that “maybe it’s not going to go as I want in my little head but for them, it’s going to. It’s like an ideal outcome. It’s huge. It’s

amazing.” She also echoed the core project theme of equity, reflecting, “I think that it shows to me, not that some students can do it and some students can’t but that all students can if they’re given the right situations.” The goal of equity resonates as well in her colleagues challenge “to be extremely thoughtful and intentional about including ELLs in each and every aspect of our student voice work.”

Noting the change in her own day-to-day practice, another teacher captures an observation common among YATST teachers: “I know it happens so many times throughout the year where I’d be about to say, well, why don’t you just blahblahblah .... But I would keep my mouth shut and then inevitably [the students] continue talking and they’d kind of – it seems like they kind of work things out themselves. A lot of times they don’t ... need me to tell them what to do; they just need someone to listen.... I think that I have learned from the Student Voice process.” Another teacher notes an important underlying principle at work, one prominent in voice literature: “I think that previously to [the YATST project], I thought, how can I convince this [students] that they should do my agenda? So how can I manipulate them into doing what I want them to do? And I’ve started to realize – or not started – I realize now that that doesn’t honor them; it doesn’t honor their voice.”

The nuanced manner in which YATST teachers spoke to the challenges and opportunities of partnering with students reveals a deepening understanding of the concept of student voice. One adult observed, “Although we are asking [youth] to participate in what was before an adult controlled aspect of their life, that does not mean we can expect them to behave as adults; in fact it is their perspective and understanding we are trying to empower and unlock.... Partnering with anyone requires accepting the other person’s strengths and weakness, and working to do the best with the talents of the group.” The new orientation YATST teachers toward youth affected the way students conceived of the change agendas they were undertaking. As one student noted, “[F]rom our first retreat at Lyndon, it seemed like the teachers were kind of like at the same level, and yeah, we had the same goal in mind. ... It’s just more like, what are *we* going to do?”

**Other Adults in YATST Schools.** Describing the impact on other teachers in the building, one participant noted a subtle but steady spread of student voice into the committee work of the school. “The core group of teachers who are doing this work is expanding all the time,” he notes, “just with the conversations we have with others, whether it be formal, but mostly informal.... I know that it’s flooded over into what we’re doing. We’re changing our TA system, and that’s included other adults that weren’t part of this group. And we pushed, along with these other adults, to have students be really involved in that process. And some students really were. And I think that in the end, we’re going to have a more engaging TA for students because they have been involved in the design process.” He notes further that adults witnessed students “being very helpful to the process, ...giving great suggestions and thinking about the logistics and thinking about all sorts of impacts on the school, not just what could be easy or convenient. Student involvement in the TA committee yielded, for instance, may persuade other faculty to explore student partnerships further. So,” he concludes, “I think the more people see that on both sides, students and the adults,” interest in student voice will grow. A YATST adult noted that these experiences appear to lower resistance among faculty to student involvement in decision making:

I think that the foundation that we have here now is relatively solid in that, like if some teachers are getting together to talk about something and somebody says we should ask some students, people no longer at the end of this year think, we shouldn’t do that; we’re not ready.

[T]hey've been saying for the past year and a half. We're not ready to involve students. And I think we've gotten over that hump which I think is astronomical....

Another adult noticed that "it's ... trickling through the school, perhaps, from the seen examples. ...[B]ut I also think I notice it a little bit more, too. I'm more aware." Her heightened awareness about voice opportunities and obstacles is shared by adult and youth participants alike. For instance, one adult observed "people making a conscious effort now to say, can we get a student on that committee? [B]ut I'm also seeing the other side where faculty members will come right out and say that students don't care enough about this, they aren't interested, they don't have any opinions, they don't want to do this work – why even bother asking them? So we're seeing two different mindsets in the faculty."

Perhaps in response to their increased sensitivity to voice issues, several YATST adults spoke of their leadership in promoting student voice and partnership, offering comments such as, "I found myself speaking out kind of just advocating for listening to what the students were saying and not necessarily putting on a position at all, just supporting the fact that they were there with their opinions and these ought to be considered. And that's not something that I would have been found doing before."

As to the effects of the YATST project on the rest of his faculty, another adult concludes, "[I]s there a certain thing that all teachers are doing now as a result of this? No. But is there a collective sense that is anecdotal purely that things are changing? Yes, there is." Just as important, perhaps, is the balanced tone of optimism and realism evident in participants' comments, for example: "There will always be factors that will interfere and become frustrating for the group, but it is the way in which we, as adults, choose to deal with these circumstances that will make us successful or not."

### **Has the action research process & committee work impacted student perceptions of their having a say in their educational experience?**

Although their adult partners sometimes questioned whether students valued the action research process, students spoke as if they were ready and willing to adopt a researcher's mindset, accept the challenge of the task, and appreciated its impact on their schools. One student described how the research helped in "setting guidelines for our group." He continued, "You have to make data-driven decisions; otherwise, you're really running around in a dark cave .... [H]opefully, if [other students are] honest on their surveys, then you have the beliefs of the whole group, the whole student body."

Students were nonetheless open about the challenges action research posed. "I realized how long a process research is," one student offered, "like the gathering data, then interpreting it, bringing it back to students, getting final opinions, bringing it to our group and talking about it and then bringing a proposal to the faculty, getting that approved and then finally enforcing it. It's a long process and ... there's a lot of different people that put input in." In the end, however, students recognized their achievement and the relationship between their research and eventual change: "Yeah. We reached our goal. We figured out what people wanted. We got as much of it as possible changed and now it's being enforced." Further, their research helped uncover novel insights into possible obstacles to greater student engagement in learning. As one student observed,

I know in our school it's kind of an issue getting people involved and everything because everybody is just like they have that negative attitude. They're like, I don't care. ... That's why the survey that we did was really helpful to see, because it showed that the majority of our school – like I think 2 out of every 3 people said that they actually did care about our school. But when we talked to – like kids, like 1 on 1, they'll tell you that they like hate our school but it's like really not like that at all, which is interesting.

Similarly, in another school, a YATST student said of her team's survey findings, "it felt like we were in on a secret. Like we have to like somehow let each party know that they really want to learn. Like teachers didn't think that students wanted to learn. But most of the students said that they were willing and ready to learn but I think now it's our job to relay those messages to everyone, now that we know ... the whole story."

### **What are teacher perceptions of the work and goals of this committee?**

As a result of working on their respective YATST committees, each participating adult, in their written reflections and interviews, appreciated how their own behaviors may support or undermine student voice and participation. In a typical instance, one teacher wrote, "[O]ne goal I have as I continue to work with my team is to try to hold back my ideas and opinions to allow space for others to share theirs." Another teacher wrote of her continuing "uncertainty about when to speak up and when to be quiet – when to step in and attend to details that the students perhaps don't think of." Recalling when she scrambled to purchase batteries and gather materials students had overlooked before convening focus groups, she added, "We all bear the responsibility for making sure things run smoothly, but it was a good reminder that, for a while at least, the adults in the group will have to own a lot of the details – at least make sure we help students identify them and delegate responsibility for them, and then check in regularly to make sure things that are supposed to happen actually do."

Another teacher noted how difficult it can be to gauge a students' engagement in committee work as she recalled when a student partner appeared disinterested: "You know, he'd be drawing a Superman cartoon and then stand up and say this like amazing thing. And I was like – I mean, again, it's a student presentation – well, that's not true – we watch adults in back of the meetings do the same thing all the time, but just to not judge this or this or this or whatever it is."

One teacher described how she's attending to two facets of student voice in her work: "I think that I've grown in both capacities but I think in regards to curricular stuff, I still take a little bit more of a traditional role.... But with relationships with my students, I've found that I ... am listening a lot more, I'm not jumping to offer advice or telling them what to do.... I think I'm getting better at helping them grow personally and socially and emotionally by listening more. And I think that that's come from the Student Voice."

Other adults echoed the importance of student-teacher relationships to their committee's success. "I have pretty good relationships with most of the kids at school," said one principal, "and I think it's made us closer. And I think they see me as someone who's not just the principal but someone who's really interested in this whole project, and that's been a positive thing." A teacher in another school wrote, "[W]ith and through these relationships that were formed we can begin to shape ourselves and shape one another to make the necessary changes we are about to embark on. If we tried to do this alone, neither teacher or student voice would be heard."

More generally, however, one teacher spoke humbly that “these people have been in front of me for 15 years, and now I need to listen to them more. And when I do, they’ll work with me, not necessarily against me or for themselves. I mean we can work together to make a better place.”

Most YATST adults voiced concern about the varying momentum of committee work. At each school site, at some point during the year, teachers and students noted a dip in momentum, and adults worried that the work remain “meaningful” and that more frequent, or longer, meetings are necessary to achieve progress and maintain the interest and motivation of youth and adults alike. “It feels like much of that momentum has slipped away. Several of the students who are involved [in the voice committee] are also involved in other things. Meeting for 20 minutes once a week just seems pretty paltry to me, but it is what it is. Perhaps the group will decide that we need to meet more often.” Indeed, each of the committees committed to meeting more often in year two.

Two principals spoke of the difficulty of balancing the demands of their jobs with their obligation to their school’s YATST committee. Acknowledging that he had been unable to attend some committee meetings, one principal said, “I feel like in some ways I owe it to the group of kids who committed to this and I really want to see them do a little more deeper diving in to these questions about Student Voice.” He adds, however, that he is “eternally optimistic ... that this is so important, that this is so critical that it can’t be left undone.” The commitment of other building adults to committee work is essential given the unique and unpredictable demands on principals’ time; the one site to withdraw from the project after year one had a principal as the only adult on the committee.

One principal contrasted prior voice work at his school with the current project, noting that “although I feel that was valid work and important work, it was really the adults putting that in place. ... And this work is very different. And ... ultimately the impact that this could have is going to be far greater.” He perceives the difference not only in the students, but also in how it affects him: “[F]or me to be able to see the kids that have really stuck with it and to see how excited they are.... that I think has been the most rewarding thing. And it’s not as much as I thought I needed to see to feel like there was going to be rewards, but for me right now, that’s what I’m holding up and saying this project has been worth it.”

### **Impact on Student Team Members’ Vital Results and 21st Century Skill Set**

#### **How has participation on this committee impacted student development Vital Results and 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills?**

Sharing the anecdotal evidence nonetheless may guide better documentation in the future. As one teacher observed, “I think you kind of have to know the kids to know if they grew or not. It’s really a better question for the kids.”

**Civic and Social Responsibility.** Students frequently emphasized their commitment to gather data that reflected the opinions of all students, even those whose voices may typically be underrepresented. As one student said in reference to their efforts to adjust their survey techniques to the needs of English language learners, “we really wanted to get everyone’s opinion and we valued that.” This sentiment extended to broader involvement in the school by



some YATST students. Capturing a theme heard throughout the adult interviews, one principal observed:

I mean I think the most positive thing to come out of this work has been the impact that it's had on the kids who have been involved. Of the 8 that initially were involved with the training at Lyndon and were identified, 5 of that group – 5 of those kids have really stepped up and become really committed to trying to figure this out. And they're very faithful about attending meetings. They're very – you know, they take on projects, take on aspects of the work and do it and come back. ... I've seen them throughout the school just looking to be more integral to the school rather than maybe on the edge as they were before.

In one focus group interview, however, a teacher initially questioned students' commitment to the project, suggesting, "I don't feel like they're very committed, to be honest. Or maybe they feel committed to some B minus level.... There's no fire in the belly in the group." As the conversation unfolded, however, evidence of student commitment mounted. "I feel like [Kara] cares about it," another teacher recalled, "I don't know necessarily why." She continued, "I also feel like [Mark] cares about being a part of the group and is really helpful. [Alex] is always there, dependable, engaged – because he's such a quiet kid otherwise...." She concludes, "Yeah, you're right. You're right. So I guess as we talk, there are more things. They're small – they're sort of hidden. They're not obvious. Like it's not like, this kid grew so much through this process and is now like transformed. But they did. They did gain new skills and new knowledge."

In another interview, a principal suggests some subtle distinctions regarding civic engagement and student voice work: "A lot of this is about civic engagement, not in terms of going into town and doing something or the community service level way of thinking about it, but in terms of providing service for the school and forming an opinion and trying to do something about it...." He subsequently highlights an important distinction between compliant engagement and becoming an empowered partner, noting, "Collaborating is a huge component of this. And learning the difference between working as a team and actually collaborating and the difference between ... cooperating and collaborating. We started out as cooperators and now we're really entering into that realm of collaborating."

**Communication.** Students spoke persuasively of a new communication dynamic with teachers and their team, usually attributed to their retreat experiences:

I guess the [retreat] this summer was really comfortable and it was sort of an environment where you really wanted to say something instead of sort of keeping back. You wanted to get it out there in front of other people so that they could like critique it or tell you or just to get it out there, I guess, out of like inside your head. And yeah, it was just really easy to talk about things and I think that's how it's sort of stayed in our groups. Like if you have an idea, you don't want to keep it in."

The same student concluded with a clear appreciation of the role of open communication to collaborative problem solving: "It's sort of like difficult to think of really interesting things so the more things there are, the better, I guess. So as soon as you get an idea, it's just like shared."

Another student added that open communication can sometimes create tensions, sometimes healthy, in the group. "Like along with everyone having a lot of ideas, I feel like everyone was really opinionated, too. So that sometimes makes it difficult, because everyone sort

of has their own ideas. ... But yeah, I think that's a good thing, mostly, that there are strong opinions."

The growth in students' communication skills and insights was not lost on adults. As a principal observed, "So definitely a huge effect on their communication skills. Hands down, they're all more confident speakers and more willing to speak in front of a group than they were when they came in. They may not even be aware of it, some of them, but it's clear. I've gotten responses from teachers about that. I've seen it. I've seen kids get on stage and talk where at the beginning of the year were like, no way. But they're up there comfortable doing it now." Highlighting the role of the group's purpose and the authenticity of the communication tasks, the same principal concluded, "That's got to be [attributed] to first doing it with small groups, then doing it with larger groups; then doing it with the whole school, and not really having much of a choice about that."

**Personal Development.** One teacher suggested that students arrived at the YATST project with variable leadership abilities. "I feel that the [our school's] students were a little farther behind other students in terms of leadership skills. This may have to do with the fact that our students were younger than other students at the institute, and we chose students who have the *ability* to be leaders in the school, not necessarily students whom were already considered leaders." Adults nonetheless observed substantial personal growth among most of the participating students. Describing a boy who stepped up to lead a school tour for visitors, his adult teammate offered, "I think his skills have gone up far more than anyone else in the group. As a sophomore, he was timid and quiet and sort of gangly. As a junior this year he's just like – I'm ready to run the school." Another teacher pointed to a student's mastery of YATST training and program guidelines, noting, "She definitely was a planning and an organizing person already, but I feel like as the year went on, every single tiny nugget of information around research that came in, she would say later. She was like, oh, remember, they said we were supposed to do this, this and this. And I was like, yeah, she's a learner. She's a learner."

In an instance of a student who decided to depart from the project, an adult teammate nonetheless saw growth: "She found the group incredibly frustrating and doesn't want to be in it any more and isn't going to do it again. But being able to say that was huge growth for her."

One teacher voiced disappointment about the level of growth she's seen among the students but also acknowledges the interplay between growth and opportunity: "I haven't seen too much in regards to them being more comfortable, like getting up in front of their peers. I thought that I would see that more, but I don't know that we created a ton of opportunity for it.... But maybe if we had pushed them a little bit more they could have ... grown a little bit more in that capacity as well, truly being outspoken leaders in the school." In a separate interview, however, her colleague notes that when opportunities are seized, growth occurs: "One of the quieter students on our team took a risk and facilitated a group meeting earlier this week. He was amazing! I was completely surprised at his ease and skill with this task. I guess I need to be patient and let the students progress at their own pace. Maybe some of them are still in the "observation" stage, and when they are ready, they will show me, just like [he] did."

A teacher in a different school noted of a student in a November 2008 reflective essay, "She has grown so much over the past year, and especially over the past few months. She has gotten much more comfortable expressing her views and ideas in large groups, and is willing to lead activities and discussions, which she used to be reticent about. She also isn't afraid to

disagree (respectfully but firmly) with other members of our group, which happened a couple of times during the Goddard retreat.

A particularly helpful observation written in the fall of 2008 points to the opportunities for collaborative growth, authentic leadership challenges, and the hard work of change in schools:

However, my favorite part is not a story about one student, instead it is about two students. These two girls began the year excited about the project but didn't know where it was going. Over the beginning of the year they have become more and more involved with issues around the school. They are both part of the revamped student counsel which they helped revamp. When we went to the compass school they came, and seeing them amazed by the possibilities they had not considered was also a moment of growth for them and the group. Finally, hearing them talk about the frustration they have experienced with the other students in student counsel, and then identifying that they have had added experiences to help them participate more effectively. This process of becoming empowered has been wonderful to watch and I look forward to helping them teach what they know to other students.

### **Impact on the Students' Capacity for Reasoning and Problem Solving**

**Problem Solving.** As one principal stated in an interview, "There's tons of problem solving involved in this from the big idea of what are the problems in the school and how are we going to solve them, to okay, how are we going to deal with this problem of, it's really hard to figure out a common time to meet." A teacher from another site noted that students on her team have "gotten more comfortable, certainly, as a group, and I think that their critical thinking skills have developed more." Recalling a recent data analysis session, she added, "I hear their critical thinking – you know, you can kind of see their brains turning. So I think that as we analyze some of the data, I would say that I've seen growth in their critical thinking skills."

**Investigations.** Students' growth through the action research dimension of the program was particularly evident in their focus group comments. As one student argued, "I think it's definitely helped and it's definitely necessary, because we need research to fuel what we do and to tell us some things that have to be changed." Another student emphasized the work, but also the purpose, involved in action research: "It's definitely taking a lot longer.... [W]e have to get the data and it's just a lot harder. We have to do what's best for the whole school and not just what we feel like doing." In a separate focus group, another student summarized that the impact of action research, "gives everybody the opportunity to sort of be in this sort of experimental process and try and sort of define what it is that needs to be changed in the school and figure out how that can be done. And that's rewarding to me because that means I get to show a little bit more leadership. And it gives me an opportunity to have student voice."

Students spoke of the specific research challenges as well, such as "figuring out how we were going to get the information, what worked best for our school, and our timing." Another relayed their team's struggle to "get good, reliable information ... because our school doesn't really like surveys and we didn't want to put one out but we had no other way to get every student surveyed in a short amount of time." She continued, "And like we hoped they were honest on them but unless you're like really personal, like really figuring out in a good way to get information, you can never like really rely on your information.... You have to know your student body and you have to know what they like and what they don't like."

One site learned an important lesson about the limitations of different data gathering techniques. Describing students' frustration with focus groups they conducted with other students in their school, "a lot of what our focus group leaders heard about was how much students want lunch to be improved and suggestions for a school store. While both of these are good ideas, there aren't at the center of what we are trying to get at with this project. During the retreat we had time as a group to hash this all out and came to the decision that the survey questions were probably a better way for us to get the kinds of information from students that we are really looking for."

**Planning and Organizing.** Student growth in planning and organizing was evident in comments as well. One student shared a plan he developed: "I remember that when I was doing my PR plan for our student lounge, I had this really elaborate idea that as we were doing it, we would do these fund raisers that would support local businesses, we would get papers to write about that. We would get some people who have relations with the government and state house to help us out. And, you know, that's involving community more than it is here in the schools. That was something I thought it would be important to do once we get that process going." Other students identified planning and organizing that was vital to the functioning of their YATST team. "Our group always had very like different schedules," noted one student, "so we had a lot of trouble, still have a bit of trouble, getting everyone together at the same time.... I'm working on trying to get two meetings a week but you know, my principal can't make both meetings, I can't always make both those meetings, so we're sort of trying to find someone who can overlap and do both." Her teammate explained further, "We decided to have two groups who meet 2 different days and we said the changes that we do today, this can be for the next group and then they would go ahead from where we stopped, ... and that kind I cycle."

Another student described a process he developed to communicate and make decisions on his team. "When we usually come down to a specific decision, I usually put it to a vote. If I'm working out what people are going to do for the week or what they're going to do as a project, we leave a bulletin board in the office and say come in during your free period and sign up and then I'll send you the list of which one you'll end up doing. But it's mostly democratic because no one really takes ... power over it."

Adults confirmed growth in students' planning and organizing, as in the following remarks from a principal. "I think some of the skills that they've learned and have been clearly evident to me, just planning, the ability to plan activities, the ability to sit down and say, okay, here's what we're thinking about doing, this is a little data that we got about kids' interest in doing this. And here's the project. And what do we need to do between here and there to get there? And, you know, they've gotten really good at brainstorming ideas about how to move forward."

**Taking Risks.** On the project's Wall of Accomplishments, a large sheet of paper on which teachers and students listed groups and personal achievements during the year, students listed the following: "I'm helping take responsible risks and taking them myself." "Talking in front of a group of people." "Took on a leadership role." "I talk to a lot more people and am not scared of public speaking." These and other data throughout this report suggest substantial risk taking on the part of students as they work to execute various roles and tasks on their respective YATST teams. In a particularly significant example from one site, the student skit presenting research findings to the rest of the student body, an adult teammate offered, "I mean they totally came through on that one. And I just remember feeling like, that's so cool, that they like grew

that much from the beginning to the third quarter. You know, they totally took it over and did it and everybody participated.

**Teamwork.** The following exchange during a focus group captures much about how students and teachers modeled effective teamwork skills to conduct their YATST work. Describing their decision making process, students shared,

- M: For us, it's just talking. We don't really have like votes on what we're going to do. We just kind of discuss and through those discussions, we come to decisions about what we're going to do and it's always – it always seems to be unanimous. It's not like anyone's feeling like they aren't heard or whatever.
- M: Same with us. We usually do thumbs up, sideways or down. That's how we do it.
- F: We usually have like a big discussion, but we kind of have like disagreements on our goals kind of. So we end up running in circles a little bit here and there. We don't know how specific we want to get down to it and how far we are branching off from our big goal so – but usually by the end of it, we kind of find our next step, but I don't know. We have a lot of trouble with that part.... Just because all of our ideas are so diverse that when we try to stick to the same goal, it makes it difficult.
- F: It's not easy. It sounds really exciting once you get – you get really motivated, but when you go back, it's really hard to really get started. Once you get your big goal, you've got to remember to stick to that. You – not everyone's going to be happy with what you have to say, no matter how many times you collect data and hear all the opinions. But getting the best opinion is kind of the important
- M: Yeah, I agree with the meetings. That's kind of what holds the group together, keeps you interested, keeps you moving forward, even if you're not visible progress, just talking about the work, brainstorming ideas for the future is always good.

**Lessons learned: What have been the challenges and opportunities throughout the first year from student, teacher, and principal perspectives?**

**The Committee Process.** Students stated clearly that they enjoyed working with their YATST team. When asked what part of the project they enjoyed the most, students responded, “Spending time with the group,” “that’s always fun,” “and discussing like what’s going well and what’s changed, how to do things.” Students associated the nature of the YATST work with the reward and enjoyment they derived from it. One student observed, “To actually like see the teachers getting along with the students and trying to work through it with them and like – I don’t know how to say it, but like [to] see the teachers respond to this well is good. It’s like they were cooperating – students and teachers together....” Another student added, “We were all kind of brought together by the fact that ... we’re on this program for a purpose, obviously. It’s to make the students’ voices be more heard in school. And I think that’s what made us comfortable with each other was because we were all kind of brought together.” Pointing to the novel relationship between students and teachers, one student said, “I know in like our meetings, it’s really equal between like the adults and the students, which is good.” Another student appreciated teachers’ commitment to a more equal relationship and remarked, “I think it’s awesome .... It kind of inspires you to do more and so it makes me want to take a bigger jump.

So I kind of like it.” “I’m really excited for next year,” remarked one student. Another student chimed in, “And for this summer.” “And today!” a third student responded.

Participants nonetheless noted challenges in the committee work. One adult noted that her team was “sort of floating” at one stage. She added, “Like no one had roles and we still don’t.” Another teacher noted that “we need to identify what’s needed and we need to assign [roles]. And if they switch throughout the year or what have you, . . . they just need to be addressed and assigned.” Interestingly, few explicitly cited the need for other fundamental teaming strategies such as note taking. One teacher recalled, “Last time I took notes at the meeting; I think that’s helpful. I think we need notes and a folder, like [our] leadership team.” Specific training and recommendations may be needed to assure that YATST teams are learning and implementing best teaming practices.

In spite of some logistical challenges, one adult shared a widely shared sentiment, that her team was “doing a good job of sharing responsibility for things.” She pointed to the way students took the lead on conducting focus groups with other students in the school. “There were glitches,” she notes, “but there would have been glitches if the adults were in there too.” Her last comment hints at an important lesson expressed by another adult in a reflective essay: “[We] need to be willing to fail, in order to succeed. If we are willing to let go of this fear, imagine the possibility that the entire school may some day develop this skill.” She recommended, appropriately, that teams “make sure everyone in the group has a role to play, expectations need to be realistic, and to avoid ‘Dysfunctional Rescuing’.”

Drawing on the course framework for adults and students may offer helpful guidance and accountability. As one teacher realized, “I don’t think I would have thought of that in the beginning of the year – it’s like a course. You know, now it’s like – duh, of course it is. I just wouldn’t have known if I hadn’t gone through it, I don’t think.”

Youth-adult partnership may require an appreciating the different styles each brings to the teaming process. One principle warned of the need to appreciate contrasting “codes”:

[T]hat adult speak that we have, and then the version of it that we hear – kidspeak – might not match up. So I want to be sensitive to . . . how we couch it and how we kind of take control . . . by framing the discussion in adult language, by framing it in a certain sense of seriousness or talking and responding – all the conventions of adult conversation. [A]dolescents don’t necessarily follow those. And so there’s a certain creativeness, there’s a certain spontaneity that I think that we as adults – we need to appreciate.

Similarly, the same principal wondered, “How do we develop a meeting format that doesn’t stifle that creative element, doesn’t overlay that template of maturity onto their pretty immature process or growing into a mature process? And how can we keep it fun and keep it light but acknowledge the work that we need to do?”

Another adult emphasized the need to nurture the team throughout the year, particularly in the long stretches between retreats: “[R]ecognizing that the cohesion of the team was kind of lacking this year, the motivation, . . . we wanted . . . some kind of bonding experiences, be that a canoe trip or something like that to build more camaraderie. So that’s one of the things that we’re going to change next year.”

In a building in which the principal was not directly involved in the YATST group, a

teacher noted as a major challenge the lack of “strong support” from administration, adding, “It does not feel like our principal is involved in our efforts.”

All teams were frustrated trying to find time to meet. One teacher effectively summarized in writing a widely held belief: “As with all of the other groups, I am sure, finding and making time to meet as a whole group has been one of the greatest factors that is impacting the success of the work. The lack of time is not only hurting the ability for full participation, this is causing the work to feel scattered at times, which in turn, is causing angst within our group.” One teacher concluded, “[My] advice to future schools is, make it a class or determine that time way in advance.”

Students noted a strong relationship between regular meetings and retreats and when their YATST team was “at its best.” “We felt like we were doing stuff,” said one student. Another added, “In between the ... summer and fall retreats, we’re high.” Students from one school were spurred on by an early success changing a school rule: “Now that we changed the dress code. That got us all excited.” Another student added that it is important to “give the student body something that they can see is going to change, and then that might help them stay engaged in something that’s going to take a lot longer.”

Maintaining momentum as new teams develop in year one may require more prescribed change strategies on a path toward more organic, student-directed agendas. As one teacher noted, “They have to have a clear vision of what they’re doing when they go out there. And then the skill building dovetails with that task.” A menu of voice-rich school improvement strategies, such as the iWalkthrough protocol or a student teacher feedback system, both suggested by the project director, may provide constructive starting points – substantial in their own right – for youth-adult partnerships. As the project director noted, these strategies may be implemented parallel with other agendas.

Several teachers thought that teams should have explicit plans when they start year 1 at their schools. As one teacher suggested, “Try to have something simple that can give them a sense of that process.” As another teacher concluded, “Do something. Get some action going early. And have that common time established. I think the rest of the pieces will fall into place in terms of transforming how people think and group norms, goal setting, stuff like that. If you have that, that’s all going to happen.”

Many of the lessons represented throughout this report reflect various phases and challenges of a pattern and guide noted by Adam Fletcher. As a teacher described in a reflective essay, “The clearest and most defined steps that I found that one can utilize for this work is in the article by Fletcher, *Meaningful Student Involvement*. The author includes a continuous five-step process that can be used as a helpful guide called *the Cycle of Meaningful Student Involvement* includes, 1. Listen 2. Validate 3. Authorize 4. Mobilize and 5. Reflect.” She goes on to quote Fletcher directly:

Meaningful student involvement is not a magical formula or mysterious bargain with students – but, it doesn’t just simply happen, either. By following the *Cycle of Meaningful Student Involvement*, student participation is transformed from passive, disconnected activities into a process promoting student achievement and school improvement. (Fletcher, 2005, p.6)

**Shared Training Experiences.** Students and adults emphasized the critical role YATST retreats played in recharging YATST teams. As one student explained,

I think if other schools are going to like get on board with this, I think the best thing would be for them to not just jump into it, but to come to like a retreat that we have, because like everyone was talking about the meetings really getting people more motivated and like reaffirming what their group is for. And I think that's what the retreats do is just get everyone's ideas mingled together. And then they go back to school recharged with that energy to make change."

Another student noted, "I think the retreats are really good because you know when you're in school you're focusing on your classes and your other extracurricular stuff, but the retreats give you time to just devote yourself to this project mentally and that helps you charge up and go back and really just stay focused on that." One student cautioned, "If we keep doing those [retreats], then it's going to keep this group rolling. If we don't, there's less of a chance that we're going to keep making changes."

Students also cited the value of having fun. "All the retreats have been fun," observed one student, "and like, I think that's one of the important things is having us enjoy ourselves while we're making a difference. And that keeps us motivated."

Students also referred to the value of sharing ideas and experiences across schools. "I think getting opinions from other groups on our projects is really good," said one student, "because we're not just getting opinions from our students but we're getting opinions from other students who might have the same problem that we're having, and it really works out great." Another student suggested, "The big thing about the retreats and getting together is not just to like stick with your own school. Like if you talk to other students from other schools, it's a lot more successful...."

Students described the challenge and bewilderment upon arriving at the first retreat.

S1: When I got there, I had no idea what was going on.

S2: Yeah, me either.

S3: I did not know why I was there.

S1: We just got a letter that said meet at the school at this time on this day, pretty much.

S3: Well, we had – we knew it was about leadership and voice but –

S1: We didn't know it was going to be like that.

S2: We just heard the key word "voice."

When asked how they might describe their work to new students, the group added:

M: What I'd tell them – I don't know – that they're going to be getting training in ways to help get student voice so that they can change some necessary things in their school and then just so that they can enable students to make positive changes in the school system.

F: And I think it was a little bit, but even that is really broad. Like what do you do with that?



M: It's still hard to describe. I don't know what I'd tell them.

M: They have to be committed, work hard.

Students noted the limits of learning some skills in the context of a retreat: "We were doing all of these like activities and stuff with all of the people who were sort of like in the group and who were interested in changing things," observed one student, "but when we actually had to do it with people who weren't in our group and who weren't excited about it, it was just like it didn't really help that much."

Adults shared much the same appreciation for the retreat experiences. "The blending of our team time with group sharing allowed us to transfer and explore our growing base of knowledge," wrote one teacher. "Ironically our journey was deeply personal *because* it was done with others." Another teacher explained, "The institute was very valuable. To begin, the teambuilding exercises were absolutely essential in getting our team to know each other, figure out our strengths and weaknesses, and have fun!" Another teacher wrote, "The most recent retreat was absolutely essential in giving us time to clarify our vision and make a plan for our next steps." Others emphasized the need to dedicate more retreat time to working as site teams. One teacher wrote:

In my opinion, the best thing that this course can do is to give us time and a place to get our work done. We really need time to work together, without the pressures and time constraints of the school day, to figure out what we are doing and make a reasonable plan for moving ahead. It has been extremely difficult to find time when our team can meet... I think the days in November should be structured so that we can do a little teambuilding and then create our own agendas. Perhaps then groups could request the assistance of "experts" to assist them with various aspects (surveys, research, interviews, etc.) of their work.

One principal credited retreat content as helping to build a shared understanding of student voice and partnership:

There were certain things done at the summer retreat," he said in an interview, "that began to help the students think – think differently and/or begin to articulate their kind of vision for what could be different. What might it look like? What would it sound like? ... There were different videos shown that demonstrated how you could solve problems differently or how groups might work differently and the importance of voice, not just for students but in general, letting people, ideas generate.

The same principal, capturing a widely shared belief, acknowledged the significance on on-site consulting from the project director and outside experts. "I think other things that were specifically helpful," he explained, "were times where [the director] or professionals from outside of the school actually came and worked with the students on specific skills, whether it was about learning how to lead a focus group or how to write a survey that is going to get you the information you need. And then how to interpret that information. Like real specific skill development stuff."

Another principal described how some retreat activities, helped his students figure out "what kind of leader are you. ... what my contribution is to the group process, the north, south, east or west mentality has stuck with us. We recognize who we are right off the bat." Hinting at the potential of similar activities for ongoing, site-based training, he added, "And that told me

that if we could come up with another way of also looking at leadership skills that will stick with them, that that would be really helpful.”

Summarizing his own experience with the retreats, one teacher offered:

I think that all the stuff we did and the kind of journey we went through I know was incredible for me. Sometimes it took a lot of stepping back to see that, but it certainly changed my practice, down to literally the way I interact with every student every day, like all the way down to the real small piece, and then also all the way up to when I’m sitting at a meeting with a large group of adults talking about what we need to have in schools, you know? Student Voice is present throughout that whole thing.

Another teacher wrote that retreats provide an opportunity to reconnect with students’ experience of the project:

What I learned during the retreat that will be the most helpful in this phase of the initiative was realizing how dedicated the students really are. It is hard to gauge sometimes what their thoughts on this project are and how they are feeling about this work. We have very little time during the regular school schedule to really converse, and these two days gave the necessary time for the passion of the work to be rekindled. Before the retreat, I was worried that students were losing hope and getting discouraged, which would turn into losing interest in the work. By dedicating time for dialogue, I was able to see they were still holding this work in high regard. In turn, this new awareness helped me regain enthusiasm for the work as well.

Adults offered a number of recommendations for improving the retreats. One teacher noted how student-led activities changed her thinking about students’ abilities. “When students did their sketches alone [portraying rungs on Fletcher’s Ladder of Involvement],” she recalled, “students who had been quiet up until that point told me that they took on leadership roles since no one else was. I think this is something that they need more of an opportunity to do.” Regarding the same activity, another teacher added, “I really liked that there was no adult involvement. [I]t showed me that they don’t always need us watching over them.”

Participants were of two minds when asked about learning by doing. In a chalk talk at one retreat, two participants argued for strong “foundation of understanding” needs to precede the work of research, for instance. Another suggested that “teachers think they need to spend way too much time in prep mode than they actually do.” A synthesis of these legitimate claims may call for a more rigorous routine of action and reflection, for example, to draft a survey instrument, field test it, and critically reflect upon the results with the support of expert consultants. As one teacher suggested in an interview, “I think that if we had that structure, even though it would have been an imposed structure on us, I think it would have helped – I guess I can only speak for me. I think it would have helped me focus on – on our team goals.”

Several adults suggested more student-only and adult-only time at the retreats. “I think it would be helpful to have the students [from different schools] mixed up,” one teacher said. “I think they can be more frank and ... it might create some more camaraderie between the schools so that when we get together at the dates outside of the summertime, it might lead to greater interaction and maybe more communication.” This might work well given that some adults suggest “some ‘adult time,’ in which the adults supporting this process could discuss their strengths, fears, and concerns. We probably could have learned a lot from each other, as we all

seem to be in different stages of the process.” Although there were some suggestions for altering the balance of activities at the retreats, there was broad agreement that there was much more to learn than could be fit into the retreat schedules; more training in research was a common request. As one teacher pointed out, “Ultimately, it seems like the institute could have been longer... four or five days, even!”

### **Considerations for Improvement and Sustainability**

Project leaders identified sustainability as a key concern for the future of the project. They recognized that VPA funding was insufficient to incorporate many more of high schools into the current YATST design. In addition to the findings described above, the following issues may be pertinent to reconciling VPA resource constraints and its goal to activate youth-adult partnerships in all high schools.

#### **Enhance Ongoing Learning for Students**

Adult participants clearly called for more support in providing students with the skills necessary to fulfill their potential as change partners. Recommendations pointed to developing a more rigorous course for students, particularly to promote skill development and reflection. Adults were reluctant to assume traditional teaching roles in order to support student learning. Some adults suggested more transparent teacher modeling of facilitation and research strategies, perhaps in conjunction with appropriate adult-only inquiries into problems of interest to the team.

Referring to the need for more rigorous training as part of students’ independent studies, one teacher offered, “The bottom line is learning opportunities need to be created on a consistent basis. I mean, it’s a course...that needs to be designed like a course. The teachers need training around teaching it. And then the students need to be given the learning opportunities along the way, or the group needs to be given the learning opportunities along the way.” Teachers posed a number of questions and possibilities related to students’ learning in the project:

- “We need to have the students reflect on their learning and that never happened. And I think that’s just a failure of teachers. We didn’t do our jobs there.”
- “So how do we develop a meeting format that doesn’t stifle that creative element?”
- “I’d really like to see students from student council have the opportunity to learn this material, so we can move through and progress with true student voice and leadership. “
- “We’re trying to figure out how it would be balanced where more students could join and the original students can still keep getting their credit but make it fair.”
- “I think that training in facilitation skills, leadership skills, time management, organization, and goal setting would be very helpful for our students. It seems that these are underlying skills that student leaders and change agents must have.”

One suggested approach to improving student training is more transparent teacher modeling. A teacher offered this reminder: “This project is based on a youth-adult partnership, not solely adults helping youth do this work. It is also clear that youth partners would benefit from having research strategies modeled and a transparency to adult partners navigating parallel work. [A] teacher survey is an excellent opportunity for teachers to take a lead in one aspect of

the research, teaching through modeling and carving out a clear partnership role in the process.”

Youth-adult partnerships face a dilemma, however, if they are to avoid a traditional course model in which teachers are instructing students on a range of skills, thereby re-establishing the traditional teacher-student power relationship. One principal suggested that students could facilitate meetings on a rotating basis, guiding the team through conversations to continue their learning about student voice and engagement. All teams acknowledge, however, a critical role for external facilitation on a regular basis to develop necessary skills and reconnect with core project principles. One principal argued that “it’s imperative to do the on-site stuff. Someone coming into your site is really helpful for us. It gave us sort of a target time and date and place and kept the momentum rolling.”

A principal suggested creating a dedicated space in the building for students involved in actions research. “I would like to establish a center in our school for students who want to do research about the school ... somewhere that has any data collected, or access to it... and small groups of students can take a part in improving their school.”

### **Enhance Ongoing Learning for Adults**

Participants were far less concerned about ongoing skill building for adults than they were for students. However, those comments that did emerge pointed to important and challenging issues which should inform future training. Several adults mentioned the teachers’ personal biases as an impediment to effectively engaging all students’ voices in an equitable manner. As one teacher suggested, “Once they know their own particular biases and their own particular favorites and not favorites – the things that drive them nuts about kids – they all can have a party line around, we’re going to encourage equality and justice in this group and really figure out ways to avoid elitism or avoid blahblahblah-ism or whatever the ism.”

Others emphasized that teachers may need training on how to receive feedback. Other teachers indicated a strong interest in visiting other schools that are “a year beyond where we are,” or further. Many teachers wanted to learn more about the patterns of interaction appropriate in a student-adult partnership: “When do we bite our tongue? When do we speak up?” “I guess I just imagine like role playing scenarios being helpful for that, or watching the videos of other schools who are good at it, and kind of analyzing their meetings. What are the teachers doing and saying? What are the students doing and saying? And how is that working for them?” One teacher wanted training and information about becoming the kind of classroom teacher who incorporates student voice in the classroom.

As work at each site expands to involve other teachers, they will need training as well, such as preparing them for soliciting, engaging, and responding to student voice. “It’s the change piece,” noted one YATST teacher in an interview. “Acknowledging stuff up front before it happens is just helpful,” he adds, “like saying like here’s some things to expect; this may or may not happen, but if it does, here’s probably sort of the underlying stuff that’s behind it. Try to hear through that. Saying that before the conversation takes place is helpful.” He offers poignant advice for students before sensitive conversations with adults about teaching: “Like remember that this is someone’s whole life and career.”

### **Celebrate and Disseminate Small Successes**

Intentionally celebrating and disseminating even small achievements may help to build and sustain enthusiasm in the long process of school change. As one participant warned, “new

schools should be prepared for a slow process. It doesn't happen quickly. I don't think I expected it to like revolutionize or anything like that, but I think – it just seems a lot slower. It's not going to seem like you're doing a lot right away and I think that that can be frustrating." Intentionally celebrating and disseminating even small achievements may help to build and sustain enthusiasm in the long process of school change. "Maybe we need to talk about what 'working' looks like," wondered one teacher, "because I think ... the fact that we had a group of [students] and a group of adults that worked together this year ... is a humongous success. And I believe also, like action research, if adults and youth are talking together about what's going on in school, that in itself is actually – like you put it 'W' for working – even one conversation between a teacher and a student that's a good conversation around improving teaching and learning – that's like 'W' right there – working. So maybe we should start thinking about ways to ... mark our successes."

Among achievements worth recognizing, one principal noted, "relational trust must be considered, developed and monitored, particularly in the pre-commitment phase. Short-term gains must be sought as relationships are being built." A project staff person noted the risk of not fully appreciating the significance of accomplishments that might first appear poorly aligned with project goals. One school's effort to create a student lounge may be interpreted as inconsistent with project goals to address curriculum and engagement, when students arranged with the woodworking teacher to consider building lounge furniture as part of his classes, students were in fact redirecting curriculum to better suit their interests and needs. Accordingly, this staff member recommended "some kind of facilitator" to help teams discuss "what they're doing and what they've done, to have someone really pointing out the significance." Collaborative reflection about how these achievements relate to the goals and vision of the project is essential to monitoring progress.

### **Engage Parent and Community Participation**

Students and adults argued for broader involvement of parents and community. As one student argued, "adults in the community also have to buy into this thing that we have bought into, because when it really comes down to it, they have the final say." One teacher noted the potential for misunderstandings with parents, recalling, "We have one student that I know that was really pressured to [join the YATST project] by his mother.... It's about wanting to be there. And she was like, he needs to want to be there." As a starting point, several students and adults suggested regular reporting to all stakeholders about the project and its progress. As one teacher stated, "I think that students and teachers who are part of the team should have a systematic method of reporting out to the broader school community, which means teachers – you know, all the stakeholders – teachers, parents and other students." In addition, expressions of interest in the project – from other faculty and students, as well as other organizations – can be thoughtfully tracked, considered, and developed as part of site planning and implementation.

### **Design Implications**

Based upon the information garnered from year 1 of the YATST project, coupled with experience from other school improvement initiatives and research literature, the following design possibilities may be worth considering as the YATST project moves forward.

#### ***Advocate for Systemic Alignment with Student Voice***

- Advocate for YATST priorities in DOE transformation planning.

- Advocate for YATST priorities with the Vermont Superintendent's Association and the Vermont School Board Association.

### ***Reduce Reliance on VPA Funding***

- Incorporating youth-adult partnership goals and strategies into teachers' individual professional development plans, relicensure preparation, and building and district improvement planning (including curriculum reform), and thereby capture professional development and reform dollars for work related to student voice and engagement
- Incorporate student voice goals and training into other professional development agendas

### ***Improve Marketing***

- Make student-led public presentations about the project, within the school and beyond, a core component of each YATST team's action plan
- Integrate YATST presentations and curriculum into VPA's summer Leadership Academy.
- Integrate youth-adult partnership training into principal mentoring programs.
- Require dissemination planning, including appropriate public sharing of work, as part of each YATST team's action plan

### ***Diversify Delivery***

- Emphasize documentation of YATST team actions plans, activities, and accomplishments to demonstrate team success, document student growth, and share learning with current and prospective YATST teams
- Design after school workshops for faculty interested in learning more about student voice and youth-adult partnership.
- Consider student involvement in professional learning communities, such as critical friends groups.
- Establish a regular course offering to students related to student voice and youth-adult partnership for school change.
- Make available to participating teams resources they need to conduct their own team-building activities, research trainings, videos and other materials with which they could continue reflecting on their growth with student voice and partnerships.
- Explore train-the-trainer models applied to successful voice and partnership projects.
- Consider a leadership academy for students and adult experienced with student voice and partnership in order to cultivate future trainers and facilitators. Design the use of these leaders into future YATST planning.
- Consider expanding YATST team membership for year 2 in order to broaden the pool of trained teachers and students at each site.

## **Converging Opportunities**

A number of the opportunities listed above point to an important lesson drawn from the YATST project and similar student voice initiatives. Many students and educators are drawn to student voice by witnessing students as they discover and exercise their voices. Teachers choose to join in partnership with students as they hear the powerful insights student voice can bring to their teaching and their relationship with students. The voices of teachers and students engaged in voice activities are inseparable from indicators of success; an improved climate, increased test scores, and greater student engagement can all be achieved without honoring students' voices, without embracing youth as partners in teaching and learning. The YATST project will likely benefit substantially from a thorough and public documentation and dissemination of its work.

The project is already heading in a promising direction with its increased emphasis on online tools for reflection and sharing among the project participants. Readily and freely available online technologies can be further exploited to support the following:

- Scheduling of YATST team meetings, activities, and events
- Posting of YATST team meeting minutes
- Electronic newsletters to share YATST information with other students, faculty and parents, administration, school boards, other educators and schools, and the broader community
- Electronic portfolios to chart student growth in Vital Results, 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills, and other outcomes targeted in their YATST-related independent studies or coursework
- Electronic portfolios of teacher growth resulting from YATST participation and applicable to individual professional development plans and re-licensure
- Appropriate integration of all of the above documentation into evaluation, project improvement, advocacy, marketing, and pursuit of partnerships

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