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#RealTalk: Providence Students Raise Their Voices

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On a sunny Wednesday afternoon in April, over 100 high school students gathered at the Providence Career and Technical Academy cafeteria, talking with friends, setting up tables with sheets of paper and markers, and manning sign-in tables. They were members of the [Providence Youth Caucus](http://www.pvdyouthcaucus.org/) (<http://www.pvdyouthcaucus.org/>) (PYC) – a coalition of Providence’s seven youth organizations – gathering to develop solutions to improve education in their public schools, which they would then share with relevant policymakers to advocate for change.

An entirely student-led event, the PYC Superintendent’s Forum began a little after 4pm, when student speakers took the microphone at the front of the room to lay the groundwork for the event. “Your thoughts and voices matter,” they said. “We’re going to take all of your ideas and present this data to the superintendent and city officials so we can make a difference.”

Key school leaders – including Providence Public Schools Superintendent Chris Maher – attended the event to hear the students’ insights.

After a round of icebreakers, the students quickly broke out into nine tables to discuss hot topics in education such as personalized learning, school culture, discipline, student voice, and the arts. Two facilitators – a conversation leader and a note-taker – led the discussions at each table, while the other participants rotated to a new topic table every 10 minutes.

The first table I sat down with discussed the value of arts education, the strengths and weaknesses of Providence high school art programs, and what an ideal arts education would look like.

Most students at the table felt arts programs were critical for students to develop new skills, express themselves creatively, and explore possible career paths. One student excitedly shared his experience in his school's engaging graphic design class, but most students felt their schools' arts programs were lacking or even for show. One young woman said she took a calligraphy class that lacked necessary pens and ink until a month into the semester, but "it was an arts class, so it counted." Some students lamented that art studios were eliminated to make space for engineering labs, or arts funding was cut to continue funding sports. And, others commented, because higher standardized test scores meant more school funding in general, arts programs were often cut in favor of those courses that incorporated standardized testing. Overall, students seemed to be in agreement – improved arts programs were necessary at their schools.

At a neighboring table, students contested the importance of student voice in the classroom.

Most students agreed student voice was not being adequately heard in their schools. "If it was being heard, many of these changes would have already been made," one young woman reasoned.

But why wasn't student voice being heard? Some said the burden was on students. "We should make more of an effort to speak up, organize in our schools, and discuss these issues with our principals," one young man commented. "But there are some students who are speaking up but aren't being heard," said another. Others in the group agreed. Veteran teachers were unaccustomed to incorporating student voice and made students feel like the classroom dynamic was adversarial. "Even student government can't go in front of school leaders and be taken seriously," one student chimed in.

And where did students feel their voice was most lacking? Curriculum issues struck a chord with many, leading to an animated discussion about non-white history. “The last time I heard about slavery was in 6th grade; all I’ve learned about since then are the ‘World Wars,’” noted one young woman. “Black History Month is the only time I learn about black history,” chimed in another student. Others expressed their frustration with the focus on European history: “Why can’t we have an AP African History or an AP South American History?” one student questioned. In contemplating solutions to this important issue, the Providence students concluded that it was important to have a diverse teaching staff to bring varying perspectives to history.

After students had visited a number of tables, the team facilitators shared the ideas collected over the hour with entire conference. Everyone cheered after each presentation, giving extra applause when they felt particularly inspired.

Like many of the students that night, I left feeling invigorated and inspired, excited to see where their discussion would lead in the future. The Providence Youth Caucus is scheduled to formally present their data from the Forum to the district’s school board and Superintendent Maher on July 27, 2016. Stay tuned for the results of their presentation!

Providence Youth Caucus (<http://www.pvdyouthcaucus.org/>) is comprised of seven Providence student groups – [Hope High Optimized \(H2O\)](http://inspiringmindsri.org/about-us/), [New Urban Arts](http://newurbanarts.org/), [Providence Student Union](https://www.providencestudentunion.org/), [Rhode Island Urban Debate League](http://www.riudl.org/), [Youth in Action](http://youthinactionri.org/), [YouthBuild Providence](http://youthbuildprov.org/), and [Young Voices](http://www.youngvoicesri.org/). Learn more about their efforts by following them on Twitter at [@pvdyouthcaucus](https://twitter.com/pvdyouthcaucus).

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