

Students at the Center

What do city students want
from their urban public schools?

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While educators listen in, students from Connecticut River Academy, New Roots Charter School, Two Rivers Magnet School, The Greene School, and Common Ground High School discuss how their schools achieve their environmental and social justice missions, and where they come up short. The names of student participants are listed at the end of this article.

What happens when students sit at the center of conversations about improving their schools?

Last Friday at Connecticut River Academy in Hartford, we found out. Twenty high school students from five urban public high schools sat down for a conversation about their schools. Two dozen teachers and school leaders perched and stood around the circle, leaning in to hear.

Kerry Lord -- a Teaching Our Cities advisor -- set the stage. She acknowledged that it's unusual for educators to just listen -- and for young people to hold the power in conversations about their schools. She invited adults to be active listeners, and for students to be honest and brave. And then she stepped out of the circle.

At first tentatively and then with growing confidence, students stepped in to share their experiences -- of what's working, what's not, and what they would ask of their schools. This conversation had a particular tone because all the schools represented -- from Hartford, New Haven, Ithaca, and Rhode Island -- have school-wide themes related to the environment, social justice, and sustainability. All are working on "Teaching Our Cities" -- creating urban public high schools that are actively engaged with the cities their students call home. But the conversation is also much bigger than these five schools -- reflecting how students are processing a new presidential administration, how racially and culturally diverse students experience public schools, and other big questions.

We wanted to share some of what we heard.



Students at urban public high schools -- magnet, charter, district -- bring so much to the table. One of the greatest strengths and responsibilities of our schools is creating an atmosphere that welcomes and supports our racially and culturally diverse student bodies.

“Our students are from 50 different towns and middle schools. Our school accommodates multiple backgrounds and create great experiences. The level of diversity make us able to utilize resources that people from just one place wouldn’t think of.”

“People still make jokes about muslims and it makes me upset. I’ve seen people be negative but I feel at this school more people stand with me. Friends come to my rescue. In previous school I wouldn’t bring attention to my religion. At this school I’ve been so open.”

Our schools are full of examples of students taking on rich and meaningful work, solving problems, stepping out into community. Our students value these opportunities.

Many students pointed to their senior projects as an opportunity pursue their passions ...

“Capstone projects are an opportunity to show senior voices. These projects are required to graduate.”

“Through capstones, you can also explore interests in careers and be sure what you want to do when you’re choosing colleges. You get a head start by working with a mentor, get deeper into the job.”

“Common Ground’s Senior Social Justice Experience class allows students to become young activists and leaders. If you feel something is an issue you can make a project and try to solve it. Given current events, it’s so important to be youth leaders. We are very powerful if we use our voices and push forward other student voices.”

“Connecticut River Academy’s Girlcott is a great social justice project through art. Every year students take Girlcott on as capstone project to focus on unrealistic beauty standards. Mannequins were donated by stores; it’s an open forum to write on them about beauty standards.”



Other students pointed to unique courses that their schools offer ...

“Connecticut River Academy also has Triple A Class: agriculture, aquaculture, and animals. We work in our Habitat Center, learning live animal care. Water stewardship class allows you to get your boating licence and jet ski license.”

“At Two Rivers, we can take a class on unmanned aerial systems. We can take aero club after school, learn how to fly an airplane and get trained for flying license.”

“Our school has a heavy focus on STEM and the environment. This year, there are more classes focused on environment and green building, like a renewable resource class.”

... and projects within traditional high school courses.

“In math, we estimated the cost of different wars and then we went into moral and social debate. That should be in curriculum for all schools.”

“Our math teacher tried to bring electoral college into math. It helped us learn a lot and put practical use behind the math.”

At the same time, our schools are also so far from perfect. Students are hungry for more choice and voice in their education, opportunities to pursue their passions and be valued for who they are.

“This year, we got new electives, way more than previously -- but some of us still don't think it's enough choice. More electives like art and music would help with student engagement.”

“We have electives, and a Flex period during the school day where you go to clubs based on your interest. But that's not brought into the other classrooms. We have some interdisciplinary projects, but there should be more.”

“I would like to see more incorporation of the things we care about into the everyday curriculum, as well. What you're learning about in math and science isn't necessarily connected to what you're passionate about. We have a lot of projects in some of our classes -- but we need more of that, to see how those things relate.”



Students also demand relevance -- that the curriculum builds their awareness of social and environmental issues, and that teachers make clear why skills and content matter.

They ask that their schools help them build their awareness of social issues ...

“People don’t care if they are not aware of the problem. I think what creates a lot of conflicts is ignorance, and not knowing the full facts.”

“Our school says we are about awareness and action, but it doesn’t always follow through. I think we should talk more about social issues, in small groups, in our classes.”

... and that teachers explain why content matters.

“A lot of students learn something to pass but they don’t think it’s useful to remember. By the time class is over I don’t even remember it. Understanding ‘why’ is a major part of learning.”

“I always ask teachers, ‘what is the purpose of teaching us this? How will I use later in life? How does it tie into a career? Not everyone is going to college or doing math or science for a living, so how is it applied to everyday issues and life?’”

“I know that most of our students don’t know our school’s mission statement until senior year. Senior year, we have to say how the mission statement ties into our capstone project. We need to embed the mission statement in the whole curriculum. Students need to understand it earlier, or else students won’t see the purpose.”

These young people feel urgency around challenges to the environment and social justice. They are ready to take the lead, and want support from teachers and schools as they do so.

“Students at our school went to the Women’s March in DC or Providence. Rhode Island Schools walked out of school in protest. Students are organizing for the DC climate change march April 29th. It’s student driven, not driven by the adults -- but the teachers are there to support us.”

“People are feeling uncomfortable because of the Muslim ban -- it’s an insult to all of us. Many people who aren’t directly affected are not seeing how serious it’s gotten. We have to do something now, but because it’s not affecting everyone there’s no action. We should stand with the students who are uncomfortable. We should be protesting together. We talk about justice, but at a time like this, we should be farther than we are. Our actions fall short. I think the sense of urgency is here, it’s igniting in all of us -- but there’s something we’re not fully expressing.”



“So many people are interested in moving forward but as a student what could your direct task be? I can talk and talk and talk ... But what does that do?”

“The first step is talking. Sometimes that’s underestimated, but I’ve seen people get inspired by those discussions. Be fearless. This is not a one person job. I can strengthen my voice but other have to do that as well.”

“We should use our voice *effectively*. We need to organize and strategize.”

Social justice issues are front and center -- and students are also working to connect these issues to their schools’ environmental themes.

“Most of this conversation was geared toward social justice -- but my focus is really just the environment. I am not really a social justice person.”

“I think the conversation veered that direction because environmental issues comes down to moral and ethical views, and doing what’s right. That’s the root: once social justice is implemented then you can feel confident dealing with environmental issues.”

When given a chance to ask questions, teachers followed up: How do we support students in taking action on controversial issues without assuming that all are on the same page, and without telling them what to think? Students have answers to this challenge.

Students want teachers who help students access multiple points of view, and then let students make up their own minds ...

“I think letting students take responsibility instead of having the teacher tell students their opinions. Try to keep the bias out.”

“If you were to talk about a subject, explain that there are two sides to every story. When talking about an issue you can show the different opinions and then ask for their thoughts about both.”

“Give students articles to read that help students form different opinions and allow for student discussion before you speak about it. Students can then educate their own classroom.”



... and students see ways that schools can support them in taking a stand, without forcing a point of view on young people.

“How can you have people on different playing fields both participate? Don’t stop protesting but offer opportunities so that they can strengthen their protest and meet you on the battlefield. There’s a sense of urgency, we can’t always come to consensus. That can happen once you’re out there together.”

“At Connecticut River Academy, our flex period is student-led. Students develop the clubs and ideas and teachers choose what they supervise. If a student is passionate about something they can make a club, it helps students and teachers connect over shared interests. Flex is a good opportunity for awareness and action without excluding students. It’s a chance to take action, based on what students are learning in class.”

“Promoting Black Lives Matter within the school felt like it was pushing a boundary for some people-- but it’s not the school, it’s the students within the school. Pushing things like Gay Straight Alliance does that mean they’re pushing against straight people. I don’t think that should stop students from pushing our own beliefs.”

As educators, it’s our job to respond to these voices -- to ensure that students have real choices and can pursue their passions, to create space for young people to build awareness and take action when they are called to do so. And we need to keep listening to young people -- to make sure they stay at the center of the conversation about our schools.

We are so grateful to the students who joined in this conversation: TaQuann Brown, Keilly Solano, Leesandra Mendoza, Julia Sumner, Lachara Cason, Willa Philips, Julia Rushton, Chelsea Lizardo, Nada Mohamed, Julianna Mendoza, Arqum Choudury, Victoria Carpenter, Shae Bryan, Easton Ronalter, Yazinda Baez, Malique Livingson, Jamal Robertson, Kelvin Ntiamoah, Jenique Blair, and Amritha Anup.

This style of dialogue -- one circle of people talking, another circle on the outside listening -- is called a fishbowl conversation. You can download a guide to leading fishbowl conversations, and access other resources on building urban public schools that embrace the cities our students call home, at www.teachcity.org.

