



Student Voices on the Future of High School in Virginia

Partnering Organizations: Virginia School-University Partnership, Western Albemarle High School Leadership Program, and ReinventED Lab

Overview

Students are the most important but least consulted stakeholder in education. At a time when the future of high school is being reassessed, student voices must be heard. On November 10th, 2016, **303 high school students** from **52 schools** representing **38 divisions** from across the Commonwealth of Virginia assembled in Charlottesville for the [Virginia School-University Partnership Student Leadership Conference](#). During the VSUP Student Leadership Conference, all students participated in **peer-led focus group discussions about the future of high school and how school can best serve the needs of all students in Virginia**. These discussion sessions were **designed by and for students** through the [Western Albemarle High School Leadership Program](#) with support from the education nonprofit [ReinventED Lab](#). The results of these discussions are significant at **school, division, state, and national levels**, as they provide insights directly from students about what they want to see in the high schools of the future.

Methods and Structure

Each of the focus group discussion sessions lasted one hour and began with all twenty participants sharing **things they like about coming to school**. This was followed by a critical thinking prompt for the full group **examining the purpose of school**. Then, students broke into smaller groups to **explore one of five School Improvement Discussion Topics** (Real World Application, Requirements and Credits, Assessment, Classroom Instruction, and School Climate). Each of these small groups was then asked to provide **specific feedback on the components of the Profile of a Virginia Graduate** (Content Knowledge, Workplace Skills, Career Exploration, Community Engagement, and Civic Responsibility). To conclude the focus groups, each small group shared out **specific examples** of best practices that currently exist in their schools and **specific suggestions** for other ways schools could **help all students learn the skills needed to be successful in life**. All fourteen focus groups recorded thorough notes on their conversations. These notes were compiled and analyzed by the WAHS Student Leadership Program, resulting in the following Key Findings.

Nine Key Findings

The following findings represent the synthesis of the most commonly heard sentiments in each of the fourteen focus group sessions, using students' own language. In general, these findings are suggestive of students' support for a **learner-centered educational paradigm**.

Nine Key Findings (continued)

1. Students **strongly dislike how much emphasis is placed on SOLs** and feel that the current focus on passing SOL tests causes boredom, stress, and teaching to the test.
2. Students overwhelmingly support classroom instruction that encourages **creativity, collaboration, and interaction** and that emphasizes **student voice and choice**.
3. Students see how **“hands-on” learning** and **project-based assessments** could replace rote memorization and standardized exams as a more authentic means of evaluating their learning.
4. Students wish that schools could focus on mapping out and better preparing them for a **variety of options for life after high school** (vocational schools, college, careers, and more).
5. Students highly value individualized learning as a means to **support students with different abilities, needs, and interests** as well as to **develop each student’s feeling of importance** in the school community.
6. Students are asking for **more community engagement responsibilities** inside and outside of the school building and want more information on and opportunities for community service.
7. Students want to see **classes that teach “real life” knowledge and skills**—everything from current events to how to do taxes.
8. Students would like to earn credit for what they learn through participating in **extracurricular activities** and by exploring post-graduation plans through **independent studies** and **internships**.
9. Lastly, students **recognize the constraints of school resources and educators’ time**, and stepped up to offer their energy to support new learning paradigms, suggesting that **peer teaching, tutoring, mentorship, project groups, and study groups** can efficiently and effectively support deeper understanding and learning.

Implications

Overall, these findings:

- **Validate the existing mechanisms for curricular innovation** in schools (internships, work-based learning, independent studies, mentorships, project-based learning, gifted education, interdisciplinary classes, and more) and suggest expansion of these models.
- Propose an array of specific ideas about **instructional tactics that optimize student learning and success**, according to students’ firsthand experiences in classes.
- Suggest the need for **more opportunities for students to become involved** in the process of reimagining high school.

What these findings will actually mean for schools, divisions, the state of Virginia, and the nation is still to be determined, based on the reach of and response to this report. This report will be shared with key stakeholders at all levels. The aspiration is to spark further conversations, partnerships, and action to support student involvement in re-designing high schools and improving education for the future.