

Schools we deserve dialogue Transcript

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Overview

On July 31, more than 40 people, mostly high school students, participated in a “Schools We Deserve Dialogue.” The event was organized by a committee of eight Worcester Public Schools high school students, from three of the high schools. Because students see the strengths and challenges around them in different ways - ways that are rarely discussed in public forums - than adults do, the dialogue aimed to begin a discussion from their point of view.

The discussion was wide-ranging, and each participant was free to speak about any topic that they found to be important, either because it troubled them, inspired them, or was significant to them for any reason. While the young people hail from a variety of backgrounds and age levels, there were a few common themes that emerged, which are presented below.

Those participating do not see this meeting as an end in itself, but rather the starting point for a broader set of discussions and action steps between public school students and the city’s and school department’s leadership, which will hopefully lead to a better set of circumstances for everyone involved students, teachers, and the community alike.

Indeed, the student organizers, as well as the other participants (who included elected officials and community leaders), were enthusiastic that Worcester Public Schools Superintendent Marueen Binienda has vowed to study the results of the meeting. Students in the meeting were happy to hear the words of school committee members and city councilors who vowed to become more receptive to the needs of the students - and they are looking forward to the fruits of that process.

This document does not attempt to synthesize the results of the discussion, because to do so would be to remove a number of voices. As mentioned above, this was a preliminary discussion aimed at opening up the dialogue, this time from the point of view of students. Consequently, no votes or decisions were taken or made, except to continue this advocacy.

While we make no attempt at synthesis here, we have organized the discussion for the ease of the reader. Virtually all comments fell into three categories: policy, structural issues, and culture, and this document has been structured along those lines. Where there were many people speaking on the same issue, we took the liberty of organizing the points into sub-categories, again for the convenience of the reader.

We hope that you will find this report useful and will begin to consider some of these recommendations and thoughts from Worcester students. We look forward to continued work on behalf of Worcester students.

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Why did people come?

- They wanted to listen to what students have to say, wanted to see students giving back to the community
- The first meeting, organized by the school system, was dominated by non-profit administrators who did not reflect the composition of the Worcester Public Schools community
- A lot of people want change and for their voices to be heard
- People came to talk about problems and how to approach them, in order to understand the best ways in which they can be addressed
- A Clark University graduate student came because she supports those putting in energy to make change in the school system
- Diversity in the community and support all throughout
- Some retired individuals wanted to help, saying, "We have a lot left in us!"

Policy

Youth made to feel like criminals

Removal of hoodie policy at South and Burncoat. Feels like an act of discrimination; schools in “good neighborhoods” or towns don't have the policy

Criminalization of youth through discipline: Rather than reprimanding someone for wearing a hoodie at South, why not spend energy in other, more effective and preventative ways? Many never thought of a hoodie as violent until it was deemed violent by administration, creating rather a negative reinforcement for students.

Curriculum

Arts and civics education preparing the youth for the future

Why not educate youth on life schools, e.g. how to ride the bus? This adds to the civic engagement, which should be part of the comprehensive curriculum.

More vocational work with hands on approach that will prepare students for the outside world

Create job opportunities for students now, not 20 years later . We must give young people knowledge in a range of areas such as technology, civics, and education, all pivotal in student development

Educate students in general about how to make communities better and improve quality of the city through involvement

Cell phone policy doesn't prepare students for college: it should be up the student to engage or not to engage. There will be no “cell phone policy” systemically in work, higher education, etc. Students need to learn self control now.

Funding

Focus on fighting for the foundation budget, more funding for the Worcester Public Schools

More funding that can help fulfill dreams and wishes of the students and the teachers

Dress Code

Female students are dress coded for things like shoulders and backless dresses. We need to teach male students to respect female students, not tell female students to “cover up.”

Female students of color are disproportionately dressed coded in comparison to their female peers

Teachers

Teachers have to give too much out of their pocket to buy things like school supplies. Students ask for a lot more out of their teachers and they want to help but they are working against city and state budgetary concerns

Working to support teacher and school funding we can free up a lot of energy and resources that are being used to fight for more materials, smaller class sizes, etc

More teacher diversity

Need more teachers that reflect the community in which they teach, meaning race and location. We have a lot of white teachers and teachers that are not from Worcester.

Support for students

Better support for students through wraparound services

Support services for those who do not speak english (ELL classes)

Better lunches

Testing

Less testing and more learning, not focused around testing.

The standardized testing starts at such a young age, an age at which there should be more time given to students to explore and learn - not memorize

Less testing, both improving the quality of funding and actual education systems. The scores determine funding and set up schools for failure not depending on effort or intelligence, but people's socioeconomic standing.

Problem from standardized testing: always feeling "under the gun" to "teach to the test" (for teachers) and making the mark for getting certain scores (for students). Standardized testing is unnecessarily stressing students out and pushing them to the point where you don't learn what you want or need, but still have to push yourself to keep a good grade.

Transportation

Better public transportation access

Transportation creates problems for people playing sports, after school programs, etc. People have to stop playing sports because it is not safe to walk home in the dark and there are only two days where students are given bus passes, of which there are not enough.

Students are constrained from doing the things they want to do due to time, place, and distance, e.g. participation in school council, track and Dynamy). "They want us to do all of these things but don't consider transportation. All students who go to Boston public schools have a year-round bus pass, so finding ways to make public transportation more accessible [would be good]. [In Boston,] they are working on the system where your ID from school will also offer free transportation. "It's open to everyone but it is a trial...transportation creates resources to students of all ages (from K-12 to grad school)"

Structure

Guidance

Focus on individuals rather than being numbers: students want to have more guidance counselors available to support and help kids, and wanted support in creating better relationships with guidance

Young people don't always need money but want more time and effort to be put in for students. They also want a more strategic system to dividing kids between guidance counselors

Guidance counselor support

Guidance counseling and support beyond teachers in a classroom, strengthening the relationship

There is a lack of guidance in navigation through the resources available to students, many of whom cannot get time with the guidance counselor. Some guidance counselors do have time and energy, but there is not an organizational structure to utilize them fully. A partnership has to be formed from top to bottom where there is mutual support between students and guidance counselors, and all are on the same page.

Schools, students, and the community

Grow and strengthen the connections between students and schools in the city, and create more networking opportunities for people.

Greater connections between the communities and the school system

Worcester is rich in resources, and there are many organizations (such as colleges and universities, nonprofits, churches, and museums) that will offer help, but there are too many barriers between them

Use what we have and bring it to our schools, use the people we have in our communities - such as those who are retired and people who are willing to donate their time

Greater volunteer opportunities and projects at school, which give students the opportunity to feel accomplished and capable.

Things we can do in the community such as programs like John Monfredo's reading program.

More forums and bodies to discuss young people's ideas, such as through student councils, and then applying the best seriously in schools. Create student council at all schools to give people a voice. What does each school need to do?

You can have a student council but if they don't have infrastructure to make the ideas expressed there happen, these bodies can do little to effect change

Teachers

More teachers and smaller class sizes - leads to capability of learning and stronger relationship between teacher and student

Student and teacher unity

The politics around how the money is allocated needs some changing; some schools have councils with a per-pupil budget where schools got what they wanted to help the school best (e.g., got rid of guidance and had teachers who were advisors, creating different ideas around support with lack of funding)

School committee and WPS administration

There are students capable and intelligent enough to put forward good ideas, so having a stronger connection between adults and youth gives everyone an advantage

Students are the ones affected by committee decisions, more of a voice for students to give input, more awareness of student needs

First step is giving the youth the opportunity to have a voice. Creating more venues for open discussion on the youth and people in the community

Having more of these discussions, but also more institutionalized forums, including at the school committee, with more routine input from public, especially students

Strong outreach from the school committee to the students

More communication with students; making a change rather than complaining

School committee members should go to student councils and take surveys to see what really needs to be changed

Better use of the resources that we do have, thinking beyond money; take better inventory of what we can do and work with what we already have; “be creative using limited resources”

Youth AND adults create change, it should not be the youth only

How do we make downtown interesting for high school students? Creating a pull factor that also encourages kid to be a part of the city. How do we cut money on the transportation while still improving it?

Student life

A balance where students are engaged, in which they know the importance of learning and literacy, but also are able to have fun at the same time.

In addition to having a teachers’ union, also a student union, which can united students to fight for their own needs

More youth organization, joining programs to alleviate big problems

School Culture

A new model of grading that allows students to take interesting but hard classes, so that they can learn something new without being terrified of bringing down their GPA and chances for college admissions. We don't take the challenging course but the safe one.

Student and teacher unity

More activity between teachers and students; stronger teacher relationships with students. There is no deep connection between teachers and students. Teachers seem to care of solid facts such as the "where" or the "what" but never the "why".

Closing the gap between teachers and students creating tighter bonds

Create groups that will support older and younger people. Almost a mentor system; helping others within the community whether it be through tutoring, guidance or support in any way

More acts of kindness

Vitality in schools; students are uninspired; improving morale among teachers and students

Better opportunities for student engagement in work that really matters to them and their lives; they should be doing work that they really are able to care about

Building movements and rallies that to make these changes. We have to build and we have to fight for them.

Teachers and faculty giving equal treatment to all students regardless of race, ethnicity or background; no discrimination.

[This discussion] Took the first step, being beacons of light and the hope is to take courage to speak up and use it in the future to make your voice heard . The momentum will turn our way as we progress to change through using our voices in the community.

Coalition building and creating an organization of ideas, building this work and organizing around these issues.

Normalize the ideal that students should not have to put in extra work to make their voice heard

Create and strengthen a students' union, continue to organize until voice is heard; schools are here to serve the students and teachers and population of Worcester

Participation is a key component; it creates the answers in the community

Finding willing, and even weary, students creates participation and a larger network of anticipated change.