



## DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

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Dear Colleagues and Friends,

There's nothing more important than preparing our young people to be successful as they transition to the world after high school. We know our students want to succeed. We know that they are not afraid to be challenged, and that they welcome higher expectations. Our young people want to know what's out in the world and what will be expected of them on the job and in college.

We know because our students told us all of this, and more, in a series of student forums held in the fall of 2006. These forums were organized by the Delaware Department of Education as part of the work plan for our High School Honors Grant. Students came from Delaware's rural, suburban and urban communities in all three counties. They represented comprehensive high schools, career and technical high schools and public charter schools. They were mostly juniors and seniors. These students were honest and open about their experiences, their concerns, and their needs. They spoke...and we listened.

This report details what we learned from them. Thanks to our students, we have a clearer picture of changes that need to be made. The Department of Education wants all of you – students, parents, education professionals and community members -- to be on our team. Please join our effort. Help us assure that every student graduates with the confidence, knowledge and skill to pursue their dreams as they move from our high schools to college and careers, and into the real world.

***Let's invite students to keep talking...and pledge that we'll keep listening!***

Please send your comments, ideas and suggestions to: [dedoe@doe.k12.de.us](mailto:dedoe@doe.k12.de.us)

Thank you,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Valerie A. Woodruff". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Valerie A. Woodruff,  
Secretary of Education

### **Acknowledgements**

Several people have been instrumental in this project. We would especially like to thank the Delaware high school students, their adult chaperones and Secretary Valerie Woodruff. Without Secretary Woodruff's deep commitment to all Delaware students, this work would not have been possible.

We would also like to thank the TransCen, Inc. team, led by Dr. George Tilson, and the Delaware Department of Education staff involved: Mark Chamberlin, Dr. Judi Coffield, Regina Greenwald, Joanne Miro and Linda Camponelli.

# YOUTH in DELAWARE SPEAK OUT

## Summary of Findings from Youth Forums (Fall 2006)

prepared by Dr. George Tilson, Ed.D., TransCen, Inc.

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*“I have never been to a meeting on school reform where students were invited to be part of the conversation. And yet students know what is not working in schools. They will tell me that most adults in their schools do not know them well, and that they are not held accountable for much. They tell me that many teachers talk at them, rather than exploring learning with them. Students want to be involved in improving their schools and they want to be held accountable. Students are very sophisticated about their own education. Most adults do not give them credit for this.”*

Michael Watson, Principal, Capital City School  
Washington, DC, The Washington Post, October 11, 2006

### Executive Summary

The Delaware Department of Education has made similar observations, which led the Department, in the Fall of 2006, to conduct a series of six youth forums across the State and four additional forums held in January for students attending alternative schools. We were most interested in hearing what youth – across the spectrum of abilities, life goals, socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds, and experiences – had to say about the schools: how middle schools prepared (or didn’t prepare) them for the high school world, what distinguished excellent classes from mediocre to poor ones, and importantly, how well their school experiences were preparing them for life beyond high school.

The students were encouraged to speak openly and candidly about these topics – and they did. What we noticed throughout the forums, consistently, was that these young people were passionate and respectful in their comments, bearing out the importance of truly listening to what they have to say about their schools.

### Who Participated in the Youth Forums?

All Delaware Public High schools were represented, including rural, suburban and urban communities in all three Counties. Students came from comprehensive high schools, career and technical schools, alternative high school programs, and public charter schools. The student groups were comprised primarily of juniors and seniors, although

freshmen and sophomores participated as well. In all, 232 students participated in the forums.

#### How Were the Forums Conducted?

Schools were requested to select a diverse group of students (group sizes ranged from 3 to 6 youth) to attend a forum in their region. They traveled to local conference centers where they were able to meet students from other schools. The forum planners purposely decided to hold the events away from school settings to emphasize the forums as a unique leadership activity. The students responded very favorably to this “change of scenery” and a chance to be treated like adult attendees at a conference.

Following opening remarks by Valerie Woodruff, Secretary of Education, the youth were divided into small groups – across schools. Each subgroup had a facilitator from TransCen, Inc., a non-profit organization that assists schools across the United States to develop innovative school programs. The facilitators presented a series of questions to the youth and encouraged them to express their thoughts, comments, criticisms and recommendations. Each group had an adult who took notes of the conversation. In addition, each group was asked to select a spokesperson, who would present highlights of the group’s conversation during the time when all students had reconvened.

It should be noted that all adult chaperones were requested not to comment or otherwise contribute to the discussions. The intent throughout was to reinforce the importance of hearing what the youth had to say in an atmosphere where they would feel comfortable enough to be candid.

In the large group discussion, each group’s spokesperson had 10 minutes to make their presentations. Members of the youth audience were then given an opportunity to add comments. The result was a comprehensive listing of responses to the key questions along with recommendations.

All participating youth were asked to complete evaluations of the forums. These evaluations were subsequently compiled and analyzed by DOE staff. Overall, the students rated the experience highly.

Secretary Woodruff wrapped-up the sessions, thanking the youth for their participation and reiterating the Department’s commitment to taking the youths’ comments and suggestions to educational leaders, the Governor’s Office, parents, teachers and counselors, and the community.

In addition to the forums, TransCen facilitated student discussion groups at Ferris School and three alternative high school programs to gather feedback from those students’ perspectives.

#### Regarding Middle School to High School Transitions

Groups were asked the following questions:

1. What kinds of advice, guidance, or planning did you receive to help you to enter high school prepared to do the work required at that level?

This question took many students by surprise initially because if they were juniors or seniors middle school was – as one young woman said – “eons ago.” However, with some prompting to “go back in time” many animated discussions took place. With a few exceptions, the students viewed middle school as an important transition from elementary to high school; however, when the facilitators encouraged them to dig more deeply, responses were more indicative of middle schools being a “holding tank.” Many of the youth wished they had been given high school level courses, to accelerate accumulation of high school credits earlier, thereby alleviating some of the pressures later on. Others spoke of their desire, in hindsight, to have had career guidance (in addition to academic and personal counseling) as well as more discussions – and resources to learn about college and other postsecondary education and training options. *“If I knew then what I know now about what I needed to do in high school, so I could get into college, I wouldn’t be freaked out now.”*

Even in their pointed criticisms, the students were quick to point out instances where individual teachers, counselors and other school personnel had taken the time to discuss the future with the students – and give them opportunities such as career fairs and exploratory activities. They spoke highly of occasions when they were able to relate what they were learning in school to their future goals. *“During the last year of middle school we did surveys that told you what you’d be good at, what you were interested in and what courses you should take. That helped me a lot.”* Students who had not had the benefit of these kinds of experiences all expressed disappointment that they had not had similar experiences.

When asked about access to guidance counselors, while some of the youth expressed the opinion that they had received ample attention/support from their counselors, the vast majority of youth said they had rarely, if ever, talked with a counselor. One young man said, *“They have counselors in middle schools?”* which elicited a chorus of similar sentiments. The facilitators later reported hearing the same theme repeatedly over the six forums.

2. Do you believe that middle school adequately prepared you for courses in high school?

On the subject of the extent to which their middle school experiences prepared them for high school coursework, a can of worms was opened. While perhaps a third of the youth felt their middle schools had done a good job, the majority expressed dissatisfaction.

The issue of orientation to the high school environment brought about animated discussion. Where students had a successful transition, examples included such things as visiting the high schools while they were still in middle school, having high school students and teachers come to the middle schools to make presentations, high school guidance counselors visiting the middle schools, having an upperclassman in high school be a peer mentor, selection of high school

courses in the last semester of middle school – and a strong orientation day. Students in one school reported having their own full day at the high school before the others students reported for class.

These were the good examples. The majority of youth felt ill-prepared emotionally for the “night and day” change. Interestingly, most youth did not dwell on this, saying that they ultimately got a handle on the new environment. The biggest criticisms had to do with things like not knowing more in advance about the course offerings, being “enrolled in course” rather than having options and making selections, and the fact that middle school academic coursework was not nearly as rigorous and demanding as the high school coursework. Students who have had a long track record of success academically wanted to be challenged more in preparation for college. Others of their peers reported wanting less of a “college-prep” focus and more vocational-technical coursework geared towards entering their careers after high school. The topic of career pathways came up frequently. Youth expressed regret that they had not been exposed to the notion of career pathways early on, in middle school – nor had an opportunity to learn more about the range of career options.

Another issue dealt with study skills and habits. Those who had teachers in middle schools who really taught them “how to learn,” what their unique learning styles were and how to study, take notes, take tests, and know how to express what they have learned in different ways – felt they were at a tremendous advantage over those who did not.

Quite a few youth said they wished they had been able to take foreign languages while in middle school. The notion of rigor emerged consistently, as typified by *“I went from doing elementary school work in middle school to college work in high school. I was totally lost. They should have made work harder in middle school so we wouldn’t be surprised.”* This sentiment was echoed by students who reported the opposite experience – taking tougher classes while in middle school: *“My teachers piled it on. They said ‘wait till you see the stuff they’re going to give you next year!’ They weren’t joking. And I’m doing great.”*

Sample Student Comments:

*“There were several after school meetings with people already attending high school. Sometimes it is more comfortable getting information from your friends.”*

*“Teachers helped us to figure out which courses to take (i.e. content areas) and to know what to expect in high school, how to hand things in, stay organized, and a lot of the do’s and don’ts.”*

*“For me it was hard; I wish I was taught how to manage my time better. That was really hard in HS, but my older brother helped me get through it.”*

*“One of my high school teachers said ‘Didn’t you learn that in middle school?’ and I said, ‘Like, duh, no.’”*

*“This counselor—I never saw him in my life – asked me what courses I was going to take. I said I didn’t know. He said ‘it’s in the handbook.’ And walked away.”*

### Teaching & Learning

3. Think about the best courses you’ve had in middle school and high school. What made them your best courses?

In almost every group, when students were asked this question, responses were enthusiastic. They appeared eager to talk about the factors that contribute to good classes. Not surprisingly, the common denominator was the teacher. With very little prompting from the facilitators, the youth participants praised teachers who were knowledgeable AND passionate (note that both traits were required) about the subjects they taught, demonstrated an ability to “get the content across” in a way that captured the attention of students and capitalized on their learning styles, set high expectations and standards, and took the time to know them as individuals. They spoke of teachers who were able to convey the relevance of their courses to “the real world,” including careers, who challenged them to think, and provided ample opportunities for hands-on experiences, innovative projects, and labs. Interaction and discussions were highlighted by many of the youth. As one young man stated, *“It’s great to have a teacher who asks the students what they think about a topic. Gets debate going. Instead of the teacher just lecturing at us.”* They also pointed to smaller class sizes as allowing teachers to have more control over their classrooms and to allow for more individualized attention. Quite a few of the students appreciated teachers who took the time to teach them note taking and study methods and who helped them “get organized.”

The strongest theme to emerge from all of the sessions was the importance of teachers who genuinely cared about teaching and students. They used terms such as: personable, knowledgeable, passionate, sense of humor, tough but fair, compassionate, creative, organized, able to control a classroom, willing to take the extra time to help students who wanted the help, *“talked to me about my future goals,”* and so forth. This quote sums it up nicely, *“My mom and dad got a divorce, and all I could do was cry all the time. Going to school was the last thing on my mind. My math teacher came up to me one day (and I was flunking math, so I knew she was going to get on my case, but she didn’t.) She said she noticed something was making me sad, and was there something she could do to help. It’s the first time that ever happened to me. I still had problems. But I’ll never forget that math teacher who asked me, ‘Can I help?’”*

### Sample Student Comments:

*“My best course was 8<sup>th</sup> grade English. The teacher was really hard, but she was really good. I had my friends in there. She helped us when we needed it before and after school. It was hard not to do good in the class because she gave us so much help.”*

*“I really liked my 10<sup>th</sup> grade history class. It wasn’t out of the book. The teacher would write topics on the board and then she would tell us and we would take*

*notes down. She taught us how to take notes. I like how she taught the class. She said this is how it would be in college. It was interesting; she would actually talk to us.*"

*"In English we did a lot more interactive lessons- read orally, plays, and a lot more interaction. Whenever your teachers really care, that's what makes the difference. The teacher told us I'm not here to make you fail. I'm here to help you succeed. But you're going to have to work with me."*

4. Think about the *worst* classes you've had in middle school and high school. What made them your *worst* courses? (*no names, please*)

Not surprisingly, the youth had fun answering this question. However, once the collective groans subsided, there were very thoughtful responses. For the most part, the responses were the flip-side of the comments dealing with "what makes a course a good course." Again the common denominator was the teacher. The students described teachers who did not seem to know their content, or knew their subject, but could not convey it to students. They commented on teachers who did not seem to enjoy teaching. Another criticism was for teachers who were inadequately prepared (*"He expected us to do our homework, but he never had everything ready for the labs."*) Further, they cited examples where teachers could not handle disruptive students and let their classrooms become chaotic and non-conducive to learning. (It is only fair to note here that students gave an equal measure of criticism to fellow students who were disruptive, disrespectful, and cavalier about learning). Teachers being "boring" was a frequently-voiced theme. Upon further probing, most of the youth agreed that a teacher did not necessarily have to be a "stand up comic" – but at the very least needed to present material in a dynamic manner. They were critical of teachers who did not deviate from their teaching styles, even when, as one student expressed *"we were clueless and couldn't understand anything. I'm talking the whole class was clueless."* The majority of students made a distinction between necessary review of material (from one level of a course to another, in order to "be reminded of the concepts") – and unnecessary repetition of material from one class to another. Many of the youth decried teachers' over-emphasis on the DSTP (state test) who stopped regular instruction to prepare for the DSTP – *"They want to drill us to death instead of teaching us."* A number of students mentioned the challenge of having long-term substitute teachers, including some who did not know the subject to which they were assigned.

The students identified overly-large classes as detrimental, something they recognized was *"out of the teachers' hands."* This theme did, however, affect teachers' abilities to maintain a positive learning environment and provide individualized attention to students.

These were the comments about "what makes a course a bad course." We noticed that few responses dealt with inadequate books or supplies, or even problems with the school facility. The youth rarely voiced complaints about deficient or poorly-

designed curricula. To them a course was a bad course primarily because of the teacher. And the distinguishing features between a good teacher and a poor teacher were expressed clearly and succinctly.

#### Preparation for the Future

5. To what extent do you believe middle and high schools are preparing you for the future?

When the youth were asked this particular question, most of their responses appeared more appropriate for the follow-up question “What recommendations do you have for making schools a better place for all students?” This may be due to the fact that these students have not yet graduated from high school; therefore it may have been difficult for them to know what effect their secondary school experiences will have, personally, on the next phase of their lives. It is a reflective question. Generally speaking, from the responses we heard, students appeared to think that their school experiences were doing a fair job at preparing them for the future. They were not overly-enthused.

It is likely that many educators reading the responses to this next question will take heart. For every recommendation students generated, there are individual teachers, administrators, and counselors who will recognize themselves as people who already do these things.

6. What recommendations do you have to make schools a better place for all students?

The youth charged at this question enthusiastically. They had many ideas to contribute. The following is a summary of those recommendations:

Somewhat surprisingly, there was a general view expressed by these youth that middle and high schools should set higher expectations, be more rigorous and demanding, and that more advanced courses should be brought into the middle schools. The same held true for high school students who felt there should be more college-level classes offered to them. Many felt that middle school students “coast” – only to be shocked by the much higher expectations in high schools. One recommendation that repeatedly emerged was to have middle school teachers, administrators and counselors talk to the students about their future career goals and what they need to do to prepare to meet those goals. These discussions would address academic, vocational, and personal issues.

Another recommendation was repeated so often, it should be considered a very important theme – the need for much more counseling and guidance (by teachers as well as counselors themselves) on what to expect in high school. Along with this was the recommendation that middle school students receive much more information about courses (core, advanced, and elective) available to them in high school – and options to select from. This also applied to extra-curricular activities.

Fervently expressed was the notion of earlier exposure and planning for careers and college. As one student eloquently put it, *“If I was given a chance earlier in high school to learn more about all the kinds of colleges out there, I might have*

*felt more hopeful about maybe going to college. I always thought college was for AP [students]. Not for me.*” Some of the recommendations related to this included more (and earlier) visits to colleges and postsecondary training programs, guest speakers, college-level courses offered in high school (in addition to existing AP classes) – and high school classes that were structured more like college classes, with more discussion, debate, and projects. Youth who were from the career-technical high schools felt there should be more AP courses offered in their schools. More information and counseling about financial aid for college and trade schools was a recurring recommendation.

More training and preparation for those students who were not planning to go on to college was another recurring theme. Students recommended there be more opportunities throughout the middle and high school years to visit job sites (and post secondary institutions where they could learn the skills to become certified in high-paying trade professions). They wanted the chance to talk with business people about the range of career options. Many of the students mentioned the value of having increased career exploration during middle school – as a way to get students more excited about their futures – and to see the relevance of a good high school education.

On the issue of career preparation, students suggested that career concepts be incorporated into all classes, including the most rigorous academic courses. *“Just going to see the counselor once a year isn’t enough,”* was a typical response. Related to this was a recommendation that there be more flexibility in the career pathways, so that students who discovered they were in a pathway that was wrong for them could have a means of opting for another. Students felt that better exposure to the career pathways in middle school would lessen the likelihood of students getting “trapped” into a pathway in high school.

Overwhelmingly, students expressed the need for more personalized attention from the adults in their schools. *“You can get lost in school, and nobody would ever know,”* was how one student described it. Another said, *“How come it’s the kids who cause trouble who get all the attention? Or the ones who scored like a bazillion on their SATs?”* Since there were many such sentiments expressed by youth in these forums, this recommendation may be one of the most important. Students recommended more counselors, and counselors and teachers who were open and accessible to giving students one-on-one attention for academic, career, and personal issues. *“They should be saying ‘hi, how are things going? Tell me about how you’re doing in your classes.’”* Interestingly, many youth talked about teachers and counselors reaching out more to their parents. Students recognized that teachers and counselors are extremely busy with many demands made on them. Many suggested that certain staff be designated to handle the discipline problems so teachers and counselors would be freed up to be available to the majority of students who needed and wanted support in the areas of academics, career development, personal/social issues, and future planning.

It should be noted that in every session, when the issue came up about students needing more support from teachers and counselors, invariably students remarked on the other side of the equation: the need for students to assume responsibility

for doing their part – working hard, taking school seriously, and communicating their ideas, thoughts, and needs to school staff, in a positive manner.

This notion of communication cropped up repeatedly in the recommendations. For example, students suggested that student advisory boards be established in their schools as a way to provide regular feedback to, and have frequent dialogue with, teachers, counselors and school leaders. Another idea that resonated with the youth was to establish some sort of activity (such as a teacher inservice) where students shared with school staff about the current “youth culture.” They believe that better relationships will be fostered when adults learn about what and how youth think about diverse issues, the popular culture (including language, attire, music, leisure time pursuits), views on the world, and so forth.

The Delaware State Testing Program (DSTP) was a frequent topic of animated discussion during the forums. Suffice it to say, while most students said they understood the purpose the state tests, the majority appeared to agree that changes were needed in both the content of the tests and how they were administered. When asked what they recommended be done, students were rather vague. While many said there was too great an emphasis placed on the tests, and too much educational time spent on preparing for the tests themselves, others had the opposite view that they were not given enough time and support for preparing for the tests. One student made a remark that was reflected by many of the youth: *“I think they should spend more time preparing all students to take things like SATs. Tests that matter for your future. I know a lot of kids that will never get into college because they are afraid to take the SATs. But they’re all worried and stuff about the DSTP.”*

There were other miscellaneous recommendations that emerged from the youth discussions:

- Invite former graduates to return and talk to students about what they are doing, and the importance of middle school and high school.
- Provide more opportunities for students to acquire course credits in non-traditional ways, such as through service learning and special projects – earlier than senior year.
- Hold assemblies to talk about future options.
- Teach students how to study, what their learning styles are, and organizational and note-taking skills.
- Help students prepare to lead parent/teacher conferences and IEP meetings.
- Provide greater opportunities for families to be involved in the schools. Make the school a friendlier place for parents. Hold special events like cook-outs, parties, and recreational activities. Recognize families for their involvement. Have teacher-parent meetings at times when parents who work and have childcare problems can attend. Have support for non-English-speaking parents. “Explain

things in ways my mother can understand. She don't know nothing about [sic] this and that school stuff."

- Give students an opportunity to give their teachers and counselors constructive feedback through evaluation forms end of each semester, as is done in college courses.
- Establish more peer tutoring and a buddy system.
- Provide more after-school transportation so students who do not have cars (or a ride) can participate in extra-curricular activities, clubs, and sports.
- Increase the number of bilingual staff and teachers.
- Improve the physical plants (air conditioning, appearance) and update the equipment. Provide greater access to computers.
- Ensure that more students who don't have access to computers at home have access to resources to either get computers, or can easily access the local library.
- Give the principals more opportunities to interact with students more frequently. Students also suggested that principals should stop into classes more often, unannounced – so that teachers could get more feedback on their teaching styles.
- Elective classes can be larger; however, core academic classes should be smaller.
- Hire teachers who love their job and like working with teenagers.

#### Sample Student Comments:

*"It is pointless to take career pathways when you are 14-15 years old especially when you do not know what you want to do when you are that young."*

*"Our new principal is around out in the hallway greeting us. A stickler on how you present yourself. He wants to know how he can help us. Lots of interaction with the administration and us which shows they care about us."*

*"DSTP- we should strike it, abolish it, start over because the DSTP is one test and that one test depicts a lot about what is going to happen to a student in his future."*

#### SUMMARY

The six Delaware youth forums held in the Fall of 2006 were rated highly successful by the participating youth, their faculty sponsors, the facilitators, and the organizing team at the Department of Education. The feedback from youth was insightful, candid, heartfelt, and to-the-point. Most impressive was the fact that the youth did not want to focus on the negative. They were positive and action-oriented, that is, for every not-so-positive remark there were responses that addressed what could be done to fix this or to make it better next time. So many ideas were expressed that it is difficult to capture all the thoughts, ideas, and comments in a summary. The major themes that emerged were:

- Teacher quality, creativity, and caring had a great impact on how well students did in class, how motivated they were, and how memorable the learning experience. All students want to know that there are adults in the school who (1) know them “as a person”; (2) ask them what is going on in their lives; (3) encourage and challenge them; and (4) help them (or find help for them).
- Many of the youth reported feeling that middle school was not nearly as challenging as it should have been. Subsequently they did not feel adequately prepared for the rigorous coursework they faced in high school. On a reverse note, there were students who reported taking academically rigorous classes while in middle school only to find themselves repeating these classes in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade. This finding suggests that high schools need to recognize the rigor of some middle school courses and ensure that students who have successfully completed those classes continue on a challenging path academically.
- Many students indicated that when there were activities planned to ease the transition from middle school to high school they were more effective when presented to them in social settings, or included HS students, rather than adults.
- Middle school administrators, teachers and counselors must focus on preparing students for high school level classes and raising academic expectation at the middle school level. This would be made possible by offering higher level Math and English courses, and beginning a Foreign Language in 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> grade level.
- While the “best” courses had strong content, how these courses were taught was almost more important in the eyes of these students. Alternate teaching strategies and non-traditional methods made the students excited to learn.
- Many of the worst courses had to do with the lack of passion or understanding of the instructor. In many cases, instability in the classroom (long-term subs), size of classes, and lack of disciplinary control characterized the worst courses. Administrators need to hire highly qualified teachers that engage students as well as meet the state and county qualification standards of Excellence in Education and No Child Left Behind.
- As far as general career preparation in the middle school and high school, the consensus was to start earlier (elementary school), present lots of different career options and creative opportunities to explore these options. This was as important to youth who planned to go to college as it was to their peers who planned to go on to other post-secondary training, and/or directly into jobs.
- Administrative involvement with students is crucial for academic success at the Middle school and High School.
- High level academic challenges must be made available for ALL students to raise the bar and excel academically, in both middle schools and high schools, and Career and Technical Education. This effort should also include students in Special Education with IEP’s and students in ESL programs.

- There is a great need to provide College and Career Seminars at both the Middle School and High School level. This information needs to be presented to students and their parents on a yearly basis. Academic and Career and Technical information should be provided and explained clearly in order for students and their parents to choose classes and determine prerequisites for higher level classes and College and Career preparation.

## Youth in Delaware Speak Out – Addendum Summary of Findings from Youth Forums (January, 2007)

*“Whatever you do, do it to the purpose; do it thoroughly; not superficially. Go to the bottom of things. Anything half done, or half known, is in my mind, neither done or know at all. Nay, worse, for it often misleads” – Lord Chesterfield*

### Introduction

In an effort to talk to and hear from youth in various academic programs, it was determined that youth who are in alternative schools should have an opportunity to share their thoughts and personal experiences regarding middle and high school education in Delaware. Therefore, it was arranged to have a consultant from TransCen, Inc. and representatives from the Delaware State Department of Education meet with secondary age students who are currently enrolled at Ferris School (Youth Detention Center), Commodore McDonough, the PEAK School and Richard Allen Alternative School.

Each school was asked to select 6-8 students, representing grades 9 -12 including students with and without disabilities, where appropriate. Prior to the beginning of each session, the representative from DOE gave an overview of Secretary Woodruff’s desire to hear from students and explained that students from across the state had been given the same opportunity to share their thoughts.

Students were asked the same questions as their peers who had participated in the Fall forums by the TransCen Consultant. The DOE representative served as the recorder. Only at Richard Allen did a representative from the school sit in on the discussion.

Students echoed many of the same comments, concerns and recommendations that were given in the Fall. However, given their unique situations, some additional thoughts are included in this report.

### **1. What kinds of advice, guidance, or planning did you receive to help you to enter high school prepared to do the work required at that level? Before you selected your courses for the ninth grade, what kinds of support, advice, and planning assistance did you receive from teachers, counselors, and administrators at the middle and high school?**

Students indicated that they were warned that everything they did would start to count and they should buckle down; that it would be harder to get away with things: and they needed to “grow up”.

Like their peers, the responses included getting assistance from counselor to pick classes “that you like”, to receiving no assistance and picking courses on their own. Those who had help from a counselor indicated that the assistance was helpful. Students indicated that they felt scared about going from middle school to high school.

A number of students admitted that they began skipping classes in the middle school; therefore if assistance was given, they were not there to receive it. When asked why they skipped classes/school, students confessed that they didn't like the teacher and felt that the teachers didn't like them, they weren't getting the help needed, they didn't want to be embarrassed in class and felt that no one cared whether they were in school or not. After a while cutting classes became "addictive".

## **2. Do you believe that middle school adequately prepared you for courses in high school?**

The responses were mixed. A few students indicated that some middle school classes had given them the basic skills for courses at the high school level. The majority of the students indicated that middle school classes focused on things they already knew, and that high school was an "extreme change" from middle school. Comments included:

"We just had basic stuff in MS".

"They did nothing like what high schools do".

"I felt very uncomfortable".

"At my school, we all do the same thing. There is no change between middle and high school".

One student indicated that he had attended an alternative middle school, thus commenting "in my alternative school, we had mixed grades in the same class, and we were all working on the same things" regardless of grade level.

## **3. Think about the best courses you have taken. What made them the best courses?**

Like their peers, these students identified classes that included physical education, sciences, business, math and tech shop. When asked what made these classes the best classes, just as students had done in the fall, they focused on teachers. Teachers who offered help/support to students having difficulties by breaking material down and explaining step-by-step, made learning fun, forced them to use their brain, had a sense of humor, were laid back and not so strict were at the top of their list. They also mentioned classes that incorporated hands-on activities, included field trips and got them excited about learning were the best.

Comments included:

"Computer course in MS was something I was very interested in, and it got me excited".

"Pre-algebra- teaching me something I had never been taught before

"Media Course has opened a lot of doors for me. I have a job interview tomorrow using the skills I learned in the class".

When expressing their thoughts on good teachers, student said:

“They sit down and talk with me, rather than just say, “here’s the book.”  
“Will answer questions, help with work “  
“Won’t talk too much and bore everyone.”  
“Give hands-on work and discussion time.”  
“One teacher gives me break time during the day. I like that.”

#### **4. Think about the worst courses you have taken. What made them the worst courses?**

The worse courses included math, reading, English, health, Spanish and social studies. In their worse courses, the students felt that teachers did not provide help, talked a lot, gave all book work and required lots of note taking. The classes were too large and teachers could not provide the individual help students needed.

Comments included:

“The teacher talks a lot. I have ADHD, so I can’t take notes and listen. I learn best by just listening”.  
“My teacher had favorites, and I never felt like he cared”.  
“Math: I never really “got” the concepts. They just throw the book at you and provided no help. I was afraid of looking dumb in class, so I never asked questions. The teachers weren’t focused on individuals, just the whole class”.  
“My reading class was so big, they just push you through and can’t or don’t take the time to help”.

#### **5. To what extent do you believe that middle and high schools are preparing you for your future?**

The majority of the students at three of the four sites agreed that their current academic program is preparing them for their future. Some students expressed a desire to remain in the alternative setting because of the interest the teacher had in students and, the smaller classes. Other students indicated a desire to go back to their home schools.

Students at the fourth site felt differently. They remarked that they were getting the same old stuff and that their teachers were not prepared in the specific academic courses. They made statement such as:

“It’s the same old stuff”.  
“Teachers don’t care about teaching, just the paycheck”.  
“I think our school is just a training place for teachers. If they can make it here with the bad kids, then they can teacher anybody. They don’t stay.”  
“They just say ‘do it’, without explaining.”  
“Our math teacher is a Vo-Tech teacher/cooking teacher, and they have her teaching math. We will suffer next year with Math.”

However, each site indicated that they would like more vocational/ career guidance, as well as work experiences.

## **6. What recommendations do you have to make schools a better place for all students?**

The major comments and recommendation centered on teachers and school activities. These comments were very similar to those of students from the Fall forums.

Their recommendations regarding teachers were:

- “We need teachers who really teach, not just putting pieces of paper on our desks.”
- “Teachers should be more qualified to be here.”
- “They want us to succeed, but we won’t with what they’re teaching us.”
- “There are 14 of us today, out of 40 students” (referring to students absent from school due to lack of interest).
- “Students should get the opportunity as a group, to meet with individual teachers and give them feedback on how they’re (the teachers) are doing.”
- “Have school open from 7:30-5:00pm and let you come and go to take courses you select. You’d just come for them and you could go somewhere else when you weren’t in class”.
- “Have team teachers so one can teacher and the other can help students who need help.”

As far as school activities and courses, the recommendations were:

- “We want more free time, like gym.”
- “Activities like after-school sports”
- “Exploratory classes dealing with careers”.
- “Get rid of standardized test. We spend so much time with that, we can’t learn what we need to learn”.
- “Smaller class sizes (15-20) students (referring to home schools)”.
- “More time to change classes. Some high schools are so big”.
- “Not so many rules.”
- “Reward programs to keep kids from dropping out”.

However, students attending the alternative programs had additional concerns and recommendations that were not expressed by their peers. These students talked about being treated differently from peers in regular high schools, and the lack of adequate school supplies, equipment and materials.

Their comments and recommendations were:

- “We are treated like elementary kids; they even walk us to the restroom and we get elementary school portions for lunch”. (Lunch is prepared at a nearby elementary school and brought to the alternative program; student also indicated that the food is cold).

- “Why do we have to be labeled as alternative students?”

“We need special permission to attend XYZ high school events, but we’ll get a XYZ diploma when we leave here.”

“Even if we could participate in XYZ high school events, we can’t because our schedule doesn’t let us out until after everything’s started over there. Our school has elementary school hours. Sometimes, we are on the bus for well over an hour.”

“More supplies; always running out.”

“Up-to-date computers would help. Ours are always breaking down.”

Finally, students at the different sites talked about other things such as dropping out of school, participating in IEP meetings, employment and recommending the State provide a “boarding school” type program where they could go and didn’t have to get in trouble first. Students indicated that they only earn five credits per year and “we can’t keep up. We need opportunities to catch up on credits”. Some students indicated that they didn’t think they would be able to “make it, so why stay?” Several students indicated that they have or have had jobs, most of which they had to find on their own. Only a very few students indicated that the school had helped find employment. When students at one school were asked about their IEPs, they all knew about the IEP, the meetings and had participated in setting goals. Comments were “I know and I make sure I get what I need” and “I did my own IEP, and I helped to set goals – good behavior and reading skills”.