Youth Voice

Louisville's Young People Speak Out on Their Experiences in School

During the spring and early summer of 2008, approximately three hundred of Louisville's young people participated in discussions and completed surveys on their experiences in high school and their plans for the future. These young people, ages 14 to 24 years, represented the ethnic and economic diversity of the community. Some were in college, were enrolled in a pubic or private high school or had dropped out of school. Some young people had never attended high school while others attended several. Some had been involved in the juvenile justice or foster care systems. All shared their dreams about career or personal goals and their ideas about how our community could help them better prepare for these goals. The suggestions and experiences of these young people are presented in this report *in their own words.*

These efforts to capture the suggestions and experiences of young people were conducted as part of a community-wide effort to address Louisville's high school dropout problem. The Youth Voice Committee for the Dropout Prevention Summit was formed to collect, analyze and make available this information. This report, however, should be considered a starting point. To help all young people succeed in high school will require the continued participation of the community's youth.

Chairperson of Dropout Prevention Summit Committee
Mary Gwen Wheeler, Louisville Metro Office of Policy and Management

Youth Voice Committee Co-chairs:
Kevin Fields, Louisville Urban League
Lorena Lasky, Youth Opportunities Unlimited

Youth Voice Committee Members:

Darrell Aniton, Metro Office of Youth Development	Anthony Smith, Making Connections
Clinton Bennett, Louisville Central Community Centers	Dennis Enix, YMCA Safe Place
D'Shawn Johnson, Louisville Urban League	Greg Hudelson, Metro United Way
Elizabeth Senn-Alvey, Emerging Workforce Initiative	Judy Jones, Louisville Urban League
Hadiya Mergerson, Youth Volunteer	**Je'nea Thomas, Youth Volunteer**
Kimber Abshire, Youth Volunteer	Lynn Johnson, Chestnut Street YMCA
Lawrence Wilbon, Presbyterian Community Center	Shawn Moore, Louisville Urban League
Rick Hutchinson, Jefferson County Public Schools	Juanita Sands, Louisville Urban League
Megan Robison, GE Consumer & Industrial	**Lonnell Middleton, Youth Volunteer**
Terry Pulce, Youth Opportunity Unlimited	**Tiffanie Foster, Youth Volunteer**
William Thomas, Youth Volunteer	

Emerging Themes

1 ## Optimism and Ownership

Most young people, regardless of whether they dropped out of school, say they are hopeful about their future and that success or failure is up to them.

2 ## Adult and Community Support

Interest and involvement from adults and the community at large significantly impact student retention.

3 ## Academic Relevance and Rigor

Students report their courses often fail to teach material they believe is relevant to their lives and career goals or to reach them at their current level of understanding.

4 ## Large and Impersonal Schools

Large classes, school transfers and limited involvement in school activities often leave young people feeling their own learning and personal needs are overlooked.

5 ## School Environment

Young people report the "feel" of school is a challenge.

In Their Own Words:
Optimism and Ownership

While most participants described improvements the schools could make, they also acknowledged the responsibility they had in their own success.

- "Everyone deserves a chance to learn but it's up to them to take advantage of it."
- "It's 90% the student and 10% the school. It's up to the student to learn."
- "It shouldn't matter what school you go to, the student has to put in their effort."
- What would have made it possible to stay in school? "Stay out of trouble; the problem was my choices."

"How things turn out for me depends on my effort more than luck."

- 89.4% of students/graduates agree or strongly agree.
- 86.2% of dropouts agree or strongly agree.

"I could go to college if I tried hard enough"

- 94.7% of students/graduates agree or strongly agree.
- 79.3% of dropouts agree or strongly agree

Typical of the youth who shared their plans for the future were four who wanted to be a nurse, one who wanted to earn a masters degree in mechanical engineering and two who wanted to be a Pharmacist. Several expressed an interest in owning a business and in earning a PhD. Only one person stated, "I'm pretty much taking it day to day".

"I feel optimistic about my future."

- 83.3% of students/graduates agree or strongly agree.
- 70.7% of dropouts agree or strongly agree.

"I can overcome most any problem."

- 81.1% of students/graduates agree or strongly agree.
- 72.5% of dropouts agree or strongly agree.

"I will reach my goals"

- 90.9% of students/graduates agree or strongly agree.
- 91.4% of dropouts agree or strongly agree.

In Their Own Words:
Adult and Community Support

Many young people talked about the influence parents and other family members have in their decision to stay or do well in school.

- One young person shared, "my mom left me when I was in high school and it really led to me dropping out."
- "My mom was the reason why I finished. She made me sign a contract that I would graduate and had me put my fingerprint on it."

"My parents/guardians tell me education is important."

- 96.3% of students/graduates agree or strongly agree.
- 86.2% of dropouts agree or strongly agree.

"Some people don't think I will succeed."

- 50.0% of students/graduates agree or strongly agree.
- 72.4% of dropouts agree or strongly agree.

There were many comments from focus group participants about the support they received from teachers and other adults at school.

- "It would have been easier to stay in school if the teachers seemed like they cared."
- "The only time I had the attention of an adult at school was when I was in trouble."
- "They help you if they like you, otherwise they ignore you."
- "A teacher told me 'you're no good'."
- "Three teachers said, 'I don't care if you are here or not'."

"My teachers treat me with respect."

- 73.5% of students/graduates agree or strongly agree.
- 62.0% of dropouts agree or strongly agree.

When asked about how their community influenced their experiences at school, young people responded:

- "I don't hear much positive stuff about young people."
- "Seeing the bad side of life all day makes it hard to believe education is the key."
- "Poverty, drugs, violence in the neighborhood makes it hard to go to school."

"My community treats young people like they are important to the future."

- 47.7% of students/graduates agree or strongly agree.
- 31.0% of dropouts agree or strongly agree.

In Their Own Words:
Academic Relevance and Rigor

Many young people felt schools did not have equitable opportunities and expectations for students at all levels.

- "They should have better teachers who can teach on different levels."
- "Give kids more advanced material at earlier ages so they will be ready when they get to high school; a lot of kids drop because they don't understand."
- "If you aren't getting it you need someone who will help you out. Schools just pass you to get you out of there."
- "There was a world of difference between schools. Some schools are really loose on what they teach you and on discipline. The tougher school is about getting you ready. They should teach all students to work hard, even at different levels."
- "Make them (the schools) all equal, same opportunities for all students in all schools."
- "Schools need to be more equal – not some kids get high level classes, special programs and interesting activities but not other kids."

Of surveyed youth who dropped out of high school:

- 46.4% say falling behind in the class work contributed to their dropping out.
- 39.7% say the difficult of their classes contributed to their dropping out.
- 18.9% of students who dropped say their classes were too easy.

Other young people commented on how schools should guide students to the programs or schools that work best for them.

- "Kids should be told more about their options for high school when they are in 8th grade."
- "Students need more information on magnet and other program choices."
- "Make magnet options easier to understand, apply to."

Youth shared their experiences on the relevance of classroom material.

- "I think most of the classes they taught me were pointless. I didn't take any classes in high school that apply to what I learn in college."
- "Make learning more fun – less time in books, more hands-on, more real."

"My classes teach me things I'll use in life."

- 80.3% of students/graduates agree or strongly agree.
- 72.4% of dropouts agree or strongly agree.

"High school helped me get ready for college."

- 66.7% of students/graduates agree or strongly agree.
- 44.8% of dropouts agree or strongly agree.
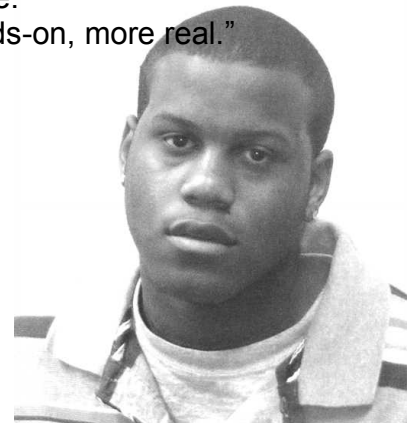
In Their Own Words:
Large and Impersonal Schools

Young people who dropped out of school were much less likely to be "connected" to their school or community.

- 13.5% of high school students/graduates surveyed reported they attended more than one high school while 73.7% of dropouts reported they had switched high schools at least once.
- 74.4% of students/graduates report they participate in extracurricular activities. Only 43.8% of dropouts report any type of extracurricular involvement.

The most frequent reason young people who dropped out cited for leaving school was "personal or family problems".

- 70.7% of drop out say personal issues contributed to their leaving high school.
- "When they asked me about why I missed school, my problems were personal and I didn't feel comfortable telling them."
- However, most young people who dropped out could not think of anyone at school they would have gone to for help with their problems.

When asked, "what would make schools better", young people had many suggestions that reflected a need for more individual, positive interaction from adults.

- "More one on one time with students who need help".
- "If the teachers wanted to teach kids how to act right, they need more one on one time."
- "I acted out because I wanted attention, not because I wanted to be bad."
- "Teachers need to be highly skilled; they should be able to deal with kids' issues."
- "Teacher must persevere even with the struggling kids."
- "Have teachers pay more attention to students."
- "There is not enough time with teachers."

Frequently, young people talked about feeling like it didn't matter to anyone whether they were in school.

- 43.1% of all dropouts report the fact that "no one encouraged me to stay" contributed somewhat or significantly to their leaving school.
- "Let kids go to school in their neighborhood. It makes more of a community where people know each other and become more involved. You're more likely to behave if people know you."

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In Their Own Words:

School Environment
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When asked why they dropped out of school, most young people described a general dislike for school. 60.3% percent of young people who dropped out do so in part because "school was boring".

> "I didn't like it at all."
> "School wasn't for me."
> "Wasn't feeling high school."
> "I hated school."
> "School is dull."

Of surveyed youth who dropped out of high school:
34.4% report the school environment contributed to their dropping out.
31.1% report they didn't "fit in" at school.

When asked for more specific impressions about school, young people reported:
- "High school is like an introduction to the real world and mostly you feel lonely there."
- "Its hard to keep attention on the learning, hard to stay focused."
- "The harder (more demanding) school had a better environment because the teachers cared and told you it mattered whether you cared."
- "You can tell if teachers are only there for a paycheck."

Many observations and comments were about discipline.
- "Schools pay more attention to discipline than on how you are learning; they check your clothes for dress code more than they check your homework."
- "It was all discipline and punishment, not much help."
- "They use detention too much; I got detention because the teacher shut the door as I was walking in class and all they do there is give you a packet and tell you to do it."
- "Schools should talk to kids about alternatives to their poor choices, not just punish them."
- "Teachers sometimes spread the word about kids who cut up and it makes it nearly impossible to get over that. If a teacher hears you are bad, they never look at you any other way."
- "They send kids to detention too fast. They send you and then it's like much easier to drop out from there."

Other comments reflected difficulties with peers.
- "I didn't like being judged or stereotyped by the teachers or the kids."
- "Some people choose to be retarded even though they are smart."
- "Peer interactions make it tough. People make comments, pick on me."
- "I could get along with the teachers but the issue was getting along with friends."

Reasons for Dropping Out

While youth and young adults shared many valuable comments about their experiences in high schools, one of the most insightful responses came from the question, "why did you dropout?" Focus group participants seemed guarded at times in sharing their personal stories. The anonymity of the survey provided the opportunity to learn more about why some young people choose to dropout of high school.

The chart below outlines the reasons survey respondents said contributed to their dropping out of school. The "reasons" are listed from most to least commonly selected. Respondents were able to choose as many "reasons" as they felt applied.

	A Major Reason	Somewhat a Reason	Not a Reason
Personal or family problems	20.7%	50.0%	29.3%
Got in trouble in school	31.0%	31.0%	37.9%
Bored in school	29.3%	31.0%	39.7%
Could not keep up with the work	12.1%	34.5%	53.4%
No one encouraged me to stay	13.8%	29.3%	56.9%
Money problems	15.5%	25.9%	58.6%
Classes were too hard	6.9%	32.8%	60.3%
Learning is hard for me	8.6%	27.6%	63.8%
To get a full time job	15.5%	19.0%	65.5%
Became a parent	15.5%	19.0%	65.5%
School environment	17.2%	17.2%	65.5%
Didn't fit in	5.2%	25.9%	69.0%
Discriminated against	12.1%	17.2%	70.7%
Parents needed me	12.1%	15.5%	72.4%
Housing	6.9%	20.7%	72.4%
Substance abuse problems	5.2%	20.7%	74.1%
Legal problems	12.1%	12.1%	75.9%
Illness or injury	5.2%	17.2%	77.6%
School did not have the courses I needed	6.9%	15.5%	77.6%
Physical disability	5.2%	13.8%	81.0%
Victim of a crime	6.9%	12.1%	81.0%
School was too easy	3.4%	15.5%	81.0%
Don't need school for what I want to do	5.2%	13.8%	81.0%
Criminal conviction	3.4%	15.5%	81.0%
Concerns about personal safety at school	5.2%	12.1%	82.8%
Friends encouraged me to drop out	5.2%	12.1%	82.8%
Family encouraged me to drop out	3.4%	12.1%	84.5%
Teachers encouraged me to drop out	6.9%	8.6%	84.5%