

Catalyst-Chicago

“Chicago students give recommendations to fix failing high schools” Posted By Sarah Karp On Tuesday, August 25, 2009

In [High Schools](#) What’s wrong with high schools? Just about everything, according to students.

A group of students walked into CEO Ron Huberman’s office last week and presented him with a wish list for improving high schools. He, in turn, handed them a reality check.

Antwan Ward, a senior at Orr High School, was part of the group, the Mikva Challenge Education Council. They told Huberman that in order to reinvent high schools, he’ll have to dramatically cut class sizes, to 15 to 20 students; significantly lengthen the school day, from the current 5 hours and 45 minutes to 7 hours; buy more laptops; find more challenging curricula and get teachers to make classes more engaging; and stop schools from suspending students for any but the most serious offenses.

Their recommendations are based on a survey of 400 students from a cross-section of public high schools.

Ward says that Huberman seemed excited that the students were so engaged and gave them an assignment: Look through the several-hundred-page budget book and consider how they would spend the money—implying that the district doesn’t have the cash for their wish list.

Still, Ward says he considers the assignment a compliment. “I felt proud that he had that much confidence in us,” he says.

One of their recommendations was to expand a program that Huberman axed. In their report, the Mikva members say that every student should take two college-level courses, either Advanced Placement classes at their high school or courses at a college. But CPS officials determined that College Bridge, which allowed students to take courses at universities, did not have a significant impact and eliminated it.

Some of the recommendations had less to do with money and more to do with the way students are treated. For example, the students called on principals to only suspend students for serious offenses.

As evidence that inordinate suspensions are a problem, the students cited Catalyst’s most recent issue, in which we reported that [one in four black male students was suspended](#) at least once in 2008, a rate that is significantly higher than that for other student groups. The students also point to their own survey, in which students reported that the No. 1 problem with their schools is discipline policies and strategies that do not help students change their behavior.

The complaint that school is boring echoes the finding of a 2006 report by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, which said lack of challenging coursework contributes to the dropout problem. The Gates Foundation was a significant contributor to the district’s High School

Transformation Project, which sought to bring more challenging curricula to schools but has not had a significant impact, according to a recent report.