

# Teens have good ideas on fixing high schools

August 24, 2009

It's jarring how simple and reasonable are the requests by this group of Chicago public high schoolers.

At least two small classes each day.

Counselors with time for kids, not just paperwork.

Requiring all kids to keep busy after school -- be it an extracurricular activity or a job.

Punishing minor student misdeeds by having parents shadow their kids for a day rather than having kids serve mindless in-school suspensions.

Fifteen high schoolers drew up these recommendations and others this summer after Chicago Public Schools CEO Ron Huberman asked them one question: How we can reinvent our high schools?

With average graduation rates around 50 percent, abysmally low state test scores and chronically low college-enrollment numbers, workable answers have eluded experts for years.

But these students, unburdened by past failures and unsullied by educational jargon, barreled ahead anyway, offering up some fresh and relatively simple solutions. Their ideas cut across multiple areas -- from more-challenging coursework to teaching anger management along with reading and math -- but there was broad agreement on the underlying problems:

Too many kids aren't focused on learning, they said, and school discipline strategies aren't changing bad student behavior.

The 15 students, assembled by the Mikva Challenge, a nonprofit that develops student leaders, combed academic research, mined their own experiences in schools across Chicago and surveyed 400 of their classmates.

About 50 percent of students, their survey found, thought the kids in their schools weren't focused on learning. Fifty-two percent said discipline in their schools didn't change student behavior.

Instead of calling for more security guards, zero-tolerance rules or more standardized tests, though, the Mikva Challenge Education Council proposed some compelling ideas about how to engage students -- most of which revolve around more meaningful adult interaction.

One set of recommendations covers territory this page has championed for a year now -- pushing schools to attend to the social and emotional needs of kids.

"We're trying to get to the root causes of the problems: being abused, dad locked up," said Laurise Johnson, a sophomore at Sullivan High School in Rogers Park. "We're trying to make it so when those problems occur, students won't just get disciplined but the school will actually go the root cause, which many don't."

This page, along with the Mikva students, wants schools to deal with these problems head-on by adding more counselors and teaching skills that some kids don't get at home: how to stand in another person's shoes, how to get along, how to resolve a conflict without violence.

The kids know intuitively why this works, but research also supports it. Kids who complete social and emotional learning programs score higher than students who don't and also behave better and are less depressed.

Huberman met with the students last week. He said they validated much of his thinking about high school strategy, and he endorsed many of their ideas, including a focus on social and emotional learning. Huberman has been telling us all summer that he plans to roll out a "bold initiative" on social and emotional learning once the school year starts. That's good news, though the details are crucial.

We hope the push by a new constituency -- real public high school students -- will keep the pressure on Huberman. Their ideas aren't earth-shattering. They aren't revolutionary. They just make old-fashioned sense.

That's why they're so good -- and why it's so important to listen to them.