

Engaging Students in Their Own Learning: Rhode Island Youth Perspectives

This report presents findings from **six focus groups on student-centered learning conducted with students from seven public high schools** in Central Falls, Pawtucket, and Providence, Rhode Island.

Adopting student-centered learning practices at the high school level can help students develop meaningful relationships with adults inside and outside of school, increase engagement and achievement for students from a variety of backgrounds, and ensure that students graduate from high school with important social and emotional skills, including problem solving, critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and strong work habits, that are essential for success in college and careers.^{1,2,3,4}

Four Tenets of Student-Centered Learning

Student-centered learning means learning that is personalized, competency-based, can happen anytime and anywhere, and allows students to take ownership over their own learning.⁵



Learning that is personalized

A range of instructional approaches that are designed to address the skills, knowledge, needs, interests, and aspirations of individual students^{6,7}

Learning that is competency-based

An approach to teaching and learning that bases student advancement on mastery of skills and academic content, rather than age, seat time, or hours on task and also may be called mastery-based or proficiency-based learning^{8,9,10,11}

Learning that happens anytime, anywhere

The principle that structured, credit-bearing learning experiences can take place outside of the traditional school day, or even the school year, and that they can take place in the community and are not restricted to the classroom^{12,13}

Learning that allows students to take ownership

Allowing students to become actively engaged in their own success by incorporating students' interests and skills into the learning process and giving students a voice in decision making about issues that affect their learning at the classroom, school, district, and state levels^{14,15,16}

Executive Summary

Rhode Island's policies and statewide strategic plan for education were developed to support student-centered learning, but must be followed with strong implementation.

- Are students' academic, career, social, and personal goals being supported?
- Do students have strong, supportive relationships with adults who are guiding their learning and helping them achieve their goals?
- Do students have Individual Learning Plans (ILPs), and are these plans being used as an ongoing tool to help students achieve their goals?
- What are students actually experiencing in their classrooms?
- Are students taking advantage of opportunities to pursue rigorous and engaging learning opportunities, such as those available through the Advanced Coursework Network and dual and concurrent coursework? If not, why not?
- Do students have control over the pace, space, and content of their learning?
- Do students have a voice in school-level decision making?

We hope that this report will provide answers to some of these questions.

All information provided in this report is based on the results of six focus groups and represents the views of 56 students at seven public high schools in Central Falls, Pawtucket, and Providence, Rhode Island. The report provides youth perspectives on what teaching and learning looks like in schools currently, what experiences students have had with more student-centered approaches to learning, and how schools could better engage students in their own learning and prepare them for success in college and careers.

Focus Group Overview

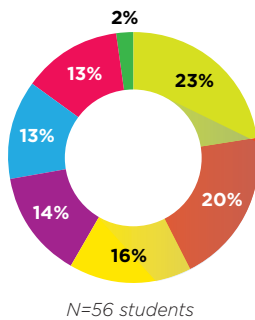
Rhode Island KIDS COUNT partnered with **Young Voices**, a youth empowerment organization that teaches youth to understand policy issues, think strategically, speak out and lead, and ultimately achieve success in high school, college, and life. Together, Rhode Island KIDS COUNT and Young Voices planned and conducted a series of focus groups with students at several urban high schools in Rhode Island to get their perspectives about what teaching and learning looks like in their schools currently and what experiences they have had with more "student-centered" approaches to learning.

Students were asked questions about:

- How their academic, career, and personal goals are being assessed and supported
- What opportunities are available for learning outside of the traditional classroom and school day
- How their teachers personalize their learning to match their interests, goals, strengths, and weaknesses
- How, or if, students have a voice in their schools and how they are run
- How schools could better engage students in their own learning and prepare them for success in the future – for college, a career, or life after high school



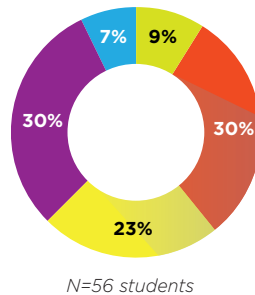
Characteristics of Youth Participants



High Schools Attended by Participating Students

Classical High School (Providence)	23% (13 students)
Blackstone Academy Charter School (Charter).....	20% (11 students)
Jorge Alvarez High School (Providence).....	16% (9 students)
360 High School (Providence).....	14% (8 students)
Central Falls High School (Central Falls).....	13% (7 students)
Juanita Sanchez Educational Complex (Providence)....	13% (7 students)
Nowell Leadership Academy (Charter)	2% (1 student)

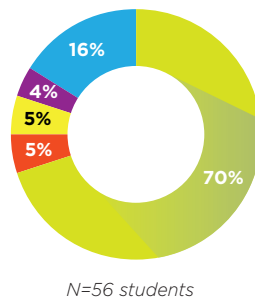
- A total of six focus groups were conducted.
- The results of these focus groups represent the perspectives of 56 youth attending seven public high schools in Central Falls, Pawtucket, and Providence.
- Blackstone Academy Charter School and Nowell Leadership Academy are public charter schools. 360 High School is a public high school in Providence designed to feature student-centered learning and student voice. Classical High School is an exam school in Providence. The remaining schools are traditional public high schools selected because they serve low-income students and offer varying degrees of student-centered learning.



Grade Levels of Participating Students

9th Grade	9% (5 students)
10th Grade	30% (17 students)
11th Grade	23% (13 students)
12th Grade.....	30% (17 students)
Unknown.....	7% (4 students)

- Focus group participants included students in ninth through twelfth grade.

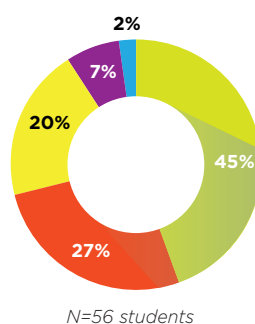


Race/Ethnicity of Participating Students

Hispanic or Latino.....	70% (39 students)
Black or African American	5% (3 students)
White	5% (3 students)
Asian or Pacific Islander	4% (2 students)
Other*	16% (9 students)

*Students self-identified their race and ethnicity, and some selected more than one response. Other includes students who selected more than one response or who identified themselves as Two or More Races, Nigerian, or Cape Verdean.

- The majority of students (70%) identified as Hispanic or Latino.



Primary Language Spoken at Homes of Participating Students

Spanish.....	45% (25 students)
English	27% (15 students)
English and Spanish.....	20% (11 students)
Other Language*	7% (4 students)
Unknown.....	2% (1 student)

*These households spoke French, Nepali, Yoruba, and both English and Arabic.

- Only 27% of students reported that English was the primary language spoken in their home.

Students Were Involved In Every Aspect of This Project, From Beginning to End

Design:

Students helped design the focus group guide by suggesting topics and writing and editing questions.

Translation:

One focus group included several students who were English language learners, and the student co-facilitator and other students helped translate questions and responses as needed.

Analysis:

Students contributed to the analysis of findings and development of recommendations.

Facilitation:

Focus groups were all co-facilitated by an adult staff member of Rhode Island KIDS COUNT and a youth member of Young Voices.

Recording and Transcribing:

Students recorded and transcribed all focus groups.

Presenting Findings:

Students are presenting the findings to audiences across the state, including policymakers, school and district administrators, teachers, nonprofit leaders, and other students.

The Benefits of Authentic Youth Involvement in Research

For educators, policymakers, and researchers:

- Having students involved in all aspects of the research ensures that the questions will be authentic, worded in ways that students understand, and focused on the issues that students care most about.
- Involving students in all aspects of the research also ensures that student responses are truly understood and that conclusions and recommendations reflect students' lived experiences and priorities.
- Research that focuses on student voice provides school, district, and state decision makers with knowledge and perspectives about what happens in school that they could not obtain any other way.^{17,18}

For students:

- Being involved in a research project from beginning to end allows students to develop mentoring relationships with adult researchers, practice research skills, and explore a potential career. It also builds the important social and emotional skills, critical thinking, communication, and collaboration skills essential for success in college and careers.
- Students also benefit from the feeling of being heard and valued and contributing to a project that will benefit students like them.^{19,20}



Rhode Island's *Secondary School Regulations* Support Personalization

- Rhode Island's *Secondary School Regulations* include a requirement that middle schools and high schools implement strategies for creating personalized learning environments.^{21,22}
- Every middle and high school student must be assigned a responsible adult, in addition to a school guidance counselor, who is knowledgeable about that student's academic, career, and social/personal goals. This can be accomplished through student advisories, schools within schools, academies, and/or interdisciplinary teams supporting groups of students.^{23,24}
- School districts are responsible for helping students in grades six through 12 develop Individual Learning Plans (ILPs) that describe students' academic, career, and social/personal goals and map out the path they will take to achieve their goals. ILPs should be developed and revised with the support of school personnel as well as parents. Students should have the opportunity to revise their ILP at least twice each year.^{25,26}

Learning That Is Personalized: How Students' Academic, Career, and Social/Personal Goals Are Assessed and Supported

Advisors and Guidance Counselors

According to Rhode Island's *Secondary School Regulations*, every middle and high school student must be assigned a responsible adult, in addition to a school counselor, who is knowledgeable about that student's academic, career, and social/personal goals. Many students discussed how having a close working relationship with such an adult helped them identify and pursue learning opportunities that will help them achieve their goals.

"Basically, they want to know our personal ideas or what we're passionate about or our understanding of what we want to do in the working world or what we want to do for careers in general."

"In this school, you get to know people, and they help you get better. They have this idea of what you want and listen to what you want. There's at least one teacher you have a solid relationship with, and they help you figure it out."

"Luckily for me, I have a teacher who has taken an interest in me and has given me the opportunity to, for example, teach a class. Since I want to be a teacher, he gives me these kinds of chances to learn about it."

However, many students reported that some advisors were more helpful than others and that therefore some students learned about opportunities and others did not. Many students noted that only students who took the initiative and asked for help got assistance developing a plan to meet their goals.

"Not all advisory teachers are the same, but I feel like they should be. I feel like they all should be on the same page and help everybody...It isn't fair for everybody."

"My advisor doesn't really do anything. We walk in, and we really don't do anything. I don't even think he's ever asked what we want to be or anything like that."

"I think if you actually care about something enough to talk to someone about it and kind of ask for help, most of the adults in this building are willing to take time out and help you."

"A lot of the positive experiences that people are saying, they are individual examples [that happened] by chance, like survival of the fittest. If you meet a teacher that can be your friend, you're good. If you go to an organization outside of school like Young Voices, you're good. However, there is not some sort of plan implemented by the school system that provides a lot of these positive opportunities for students."

"I've never had a teacher actually ask me what I want to do. The counselor has only been concerned about what colleges I'm going to. I think she asked me like once [what my academic, career, and personal goals are], but I haven't really gotten any guidance. I've gotten more guidance at Young Voices for what I want to do than at school."



Individual Learning Plans

Although state regulations require that all students have Individual Learning Plans (ILPs) starting in the sixth grade, many students in the focus groups reported that they did not have these plans. Students who did have ILPs often reported that they did not get enough guidance when developing their plans, although plans are supposed to be developed with the support of school personnel.

“One day, we walked into homeroom and get to advisory. They made an announcement [and told us] you have to go to this link. They made everyone pull out their phones. I remind you that not everyone has a phone to do it on, so they didn’t provide the actual resources needed to do it. Basically, you were just required to fill it out, but no one actually tried to see if you completed it. People just filled out very predictable things like I want to graduate from high school, and then I want to go to college.”

“I remember we had this thing we had to do in sophomore year called Richer Picture. It was super useless, because we had to write down what our goals were, and a lot of us didn’t know what to write down. I basically had to write down graduating from high school, go to college, making money afterwards because that’s everyone’s basic goal in life. However, there was no follow-up. You didn’t meet with your counselor regarding your goals. You didn’t have any guidance from your counselors, and then we never did it again. We just did it one day.”

Other students did not see the value of ILPs because their schools do not use them as intended. A number of students in the focus groups reported that their guidance counselors, advisors, and teachers do not seem to use the ILPs to help guide students toward opportunities in the classroom and the larger community that will help them achieve their goals.

“There’s nothing we really do to help achieve these goals. It’s basically just writing them down.”

“They’re not connecting what you said your goals are with helping you with ideas about how to get there unless you ask them.”

“I think there should be some follow-up, like the [career interest inventory] activity we did. I liked it because I could start to see what field I may be talented in, but there was no follow-up to it, so most people just threw the papers away.”

When they are implemented well and with adult guidance, students found the ILPs helpful and appreciated the opportunity to reflect on their own goals and get help identifying a path to achieving them.

“A lot of students think of what they want to do and what their goals are, but not a lot of them think about what they need to get there. An ILP actually makes

you think about that... It actually makes them think what path they need to take.”

“For me personally, [the ILP] was a great idea! It was a great place to [put] all of my ideas and goals that I had in my mind down and keep all of my goals together. It helped me push more for it, like I wanted to be in the Honor Society this year, and I’m really proud of myself because I really used it to become an Honor Society member.”

“When I came here, my ILP was not very effective... However, I could see my peers having discussions of their ILPs and that it is needed and continually updated, especially at the end of the year. My advisor made a big effort to proactively keep it up-to-date as things went along and to encourage students to keep it up-to-date...I think it is very important that the school empowers students in terms of you doing things for yourself...I think that is crucial because that’s the way most people build these skills...That’s another thing that Blackstone is good at doing in my opinion.”

Blackstone Academy Charter School’s Commitment to Personalization

Blackstone Academy Charter School was founded in 2002 with the goal of offering high school students the opportunity to get a high-quality education in a small school setting that is committed to personalization, civic engagement, and social-emotional growth.

Blackstone Academy’s graduation requirements include a rigorous portfolio system. Portfolio requirements include an ILP that is updated each year, a career map and inventory, a 20-hour service learning project plan, a 20-hour internship, a 100-hour senior project, and reflections on these experiences, as well as other compilations of students’ work that come from both coursework and outside experiences.

Blackstone Academy believes that its strong advisory program has been a critical component of the school’s success. Students have the same advisor for their entire high school career. Advisors are the primary point of contact with students’ families. They have time during the school day to get to know students well and support them in whatever ways are needed. There is also designated common planning time during which advisors can set goals, plan events, or evaluate the unique needs of students in collaboration with administrators and other advisors.²⁷²⁸

Students shared their ideas about how to make the ILPs more meaningful by building the development of ILPs into existing systems.

"If there is follow-up, kids would take it more seriously...if there was a clear-cut way to know how this is affecting you personally and how you can basically help yourself...and also if they help us actually go through it, rather than just throw us into the website, but instead helped us through from beginning to end, not holding our hands but kind of pushing you in the right direction."

"In the beginning of the year, we have a mandatory meeting with our guidance counselor, so I think the guidance counselors could incorporate Richer Picture into that meeting. They could pull out a computer as they are at the meeting. The guidance counselor could be typing the goals that you have and then they could follow up with that and talk to us either halfway through the year or the next year when we have the next meeting and say, 'Okay, what goals did you meet?' "

Opportunities to Pursue Career Pathways

Some students described opportunities their schools offer to learn about and prepare for a career they are interested in by taking college courses in that area, or by participating in internships or job shadowing experiences. These students talked passionately about the value of these experiences.

"I came here last year and straight from the beginning I was encouraged to do internships...I worked with police stations in Central Falls. With my internship I was also involved in a police school at Roger Williams University...They have been giving me all these opportunities that will help me next year for sure."

"I'm really into marine biology. I want to go to URI in a few years and specialize in marine biology. This school, these people got me an internship in North Kingstown. It was a very fun experience. I was there for six months and went there every week. Every time I went I learned something new about marine biology. There were also people from URI working there, so I got information from biologists working there. It was a good experience."

"I think that it's like this. [With tracks,] it's kind of more personal, so I think you're kind of more connected with your school because there's a specific thing you're doing."

"There's a mentorship program just for biotech. We get mentors. They're all adults and most of them are part of Lifespan. They volunteer to be a mentor to students at JSEC. They kind of have a relationship and catch up on them and see what's going on with them personally or academically. It could be anything. I have a mentor, and she's a social worker. She's actually a manager of social work at Rhode Island



Hospital. These people are all professionals and educated, and they can actually offer you a lot of summer programs and internships and give you a lot of advice for college."

Although students generally liked the ability to select career pathways or tracks, they felt that giving students a choice of tracks, the ability to wait to select tracks, and the flexibility to transfer between tracks would make the experience more valuable.

"Some people just get randomly picked and placed in the tracks. For example, one of my friends wanted to do community development, and her schedule had biotech. She did not pick that, and now she can't change it, because she's already too far into the course, and she's a sophomore. She already took a pre-biology course, so by her junior year she has to take AP Biology. She can't take community development, because she didn't take the pre-course."





Juanita Sanchez Educational Complex: Career Pathway Opportunities

Through partnerships with Roger Williams University and the University of Rhode Island (URI), students at Juanita Sanchez Educational Complex (JSEC) have the opportunity to choose from four different college credit-bearing pathways:

- (1) **The Biotechnology Pathway** offers students the opportunity to take courses that provide them with industry-recognized skills through a partnership with URI. The Biotechnology program prepares students for a wide range of biologic and health-related fields, including biomedical, the fastest growing field in Rhode Island. Students have industry mentors, including mentors from Lifespan, who inform them about opportunities related to their interests.
- (2) **The Community Development Pathway** introduces students to the intersection of public health, public safety, education, government, economic development, transportation, and housing. Students are required to do an internship to build their skills in addressing current community development issues. This year, students participating in the community development track at JSEC created a food bank as part of a class about creating and running a nonprofit organization.
- (3) **The Global Systems Thinking Pathway** provides students with a global perspective on community development-related elements and issues and global communities; cultural and ethnic competency for global community practitioners; sustainability and environmental elements and issues; international policy and economic development; and the skills and techniques necessary to support, advocate, and mobilize global communities. This pathway launched this year and will soon include an internship requirement and industry mentors.
- (4) **The Computer Science Pathway** offers students the opportunity to earn a half of a minor in Computer Science at URI upon high school graduation. Computer Science is the study of computers and computational systems. This pathway provides students with specific skills that lead to a range of diverse careers using technology, coding, and security in industry. This pathway launched last spring and will soon include an internship requirement and industry mentors. Within this pathway, students may choose to study either computer science and networking or network security.^{29,30}

Personalized High School Diplomas

As part of the new diploma system that starts with the Class of 2021, Rhode Island high school graduates will be eligible to earn diploma designations designed to “validate the achievements of high school students through flexible and personalized high school learning experiences, to allow public recognition of specific skills, and to incentivize students to meet additional high standards beyond those needed to earn a high school diploma.” Diploma designations will include:

- **Commissioner’s Seal:** proficiency in English language arts and math
- **Seal of Biliteracy:** proficiency in English and one or more other world languages
- **Pathway Endorsements:** demonstration of deep learning in a chosen area of interest and preparedness for employment or further study³¹

Rhode Island's *Strategic Plan* Supports Competency-Based Learning

- Competency-based learning, often called mastery-based or proficiency-based learning, bases student advancement on mastery of skills and academic content, rather than age, seat time, or hours on task. In competency-based learning, students are provided with clear learning objectives, given control over their learning and work pace, and able to demonstrate mastery in multiple ways to show a thorough understanding of the competencies being assessed (e.g., content knowledge or critical skills, such as communication and collaboration).^{32,33}
- *Rhode Island's Strategic Plan for Public Education: 2015-2020* states that the Rhode Island Department of Education will “establish a policy and fiscal framework that enables student control over the pace, space, and content of their learning while meeting state and local requirements.”³⁴
- The *Strategic Plan* also highlights as a key desired outcome “increased number of schools implementing a school-wide proficiency-based model for instruction and advancement.”³⁵

Learning That Is Competency Based

Understanding Learning Objectives

Students appreciated when their teachers clearly stated their learning objectives or the reason they were being taught a particular skill or content. They were particularly engaged when they saw how what they were being taught would help them pursue a career of interest or complete the work of everyday life.

“I think that most of my teachers really go out of their way to emphasize why we are learning stuff. For example, my AP environmental science teacher...I can't count the number of times he's said, 'You're going to need this in the future. You're going to need this and this and this' – building a green house, how to tell different plants, and getting us involved with different communities. He's trying to set up this trip to go over to this organization that's cleaning up the river and showing us things beyond the classroom every day. We go outside and learn outside, and we learn what's around us, because that's part of our class.”

“My math teacher – I take advanced math and decision making – he's teaching us how math is basically a part of everyday life and showing us examples...Our examples are not very traditional. It's more out of the box. He gives us weird word problems, but they relate more to everyday life. So it's kind of like, say you're constructing this house, we'll have to use diagrams and know how to set everything up.”

“I have some teachers...they don't try to go to work so quick. They try to maybe explain why you have to learn it and they teach in a way that you don't get bored, and you don't say 'I'm never going to use this.' ”

“Last year, we had to make a business plan. I didn't want to do it, but after she [my teacher] told me why it was important, I actually felt like doing it.”

Some students in the focus groups expressed frustration when their teachers did not provide information on why they were learning a particular skill or content.

“I think I've only had two teachers at school, in high school, and three teachers in my whole life who actually, before we began something, actually say 'Hey this is why we're learning this. This is why it's important.' ”

Students appreciated the opportunity to demonstrate mastery of a skill or content and be recognized for this accomplishment.

“[We're graded on how hard we work, not what we learn.] I think it should depend on the learning, but right now it's only on the work. Sometimes teachers give you surprise tests, and you barely know anything, but the teacher still gives you a passing grade as long as you tried it.”

"I've seen a lot of students do this where they just kind of regurgitate things and never really learn the information. You can see it on a test and other assessments. Students kind of cram the night before because they don't know what they were supposed to be learning and not because they weren't paying attention, but because the teacher wasn't really engaging them and wasn't really giving them the option to be more engaged."

Students appreciated the opportunity to have choices about the way they learn and the way they demonstrate that they have a thorough understanding of a competency.

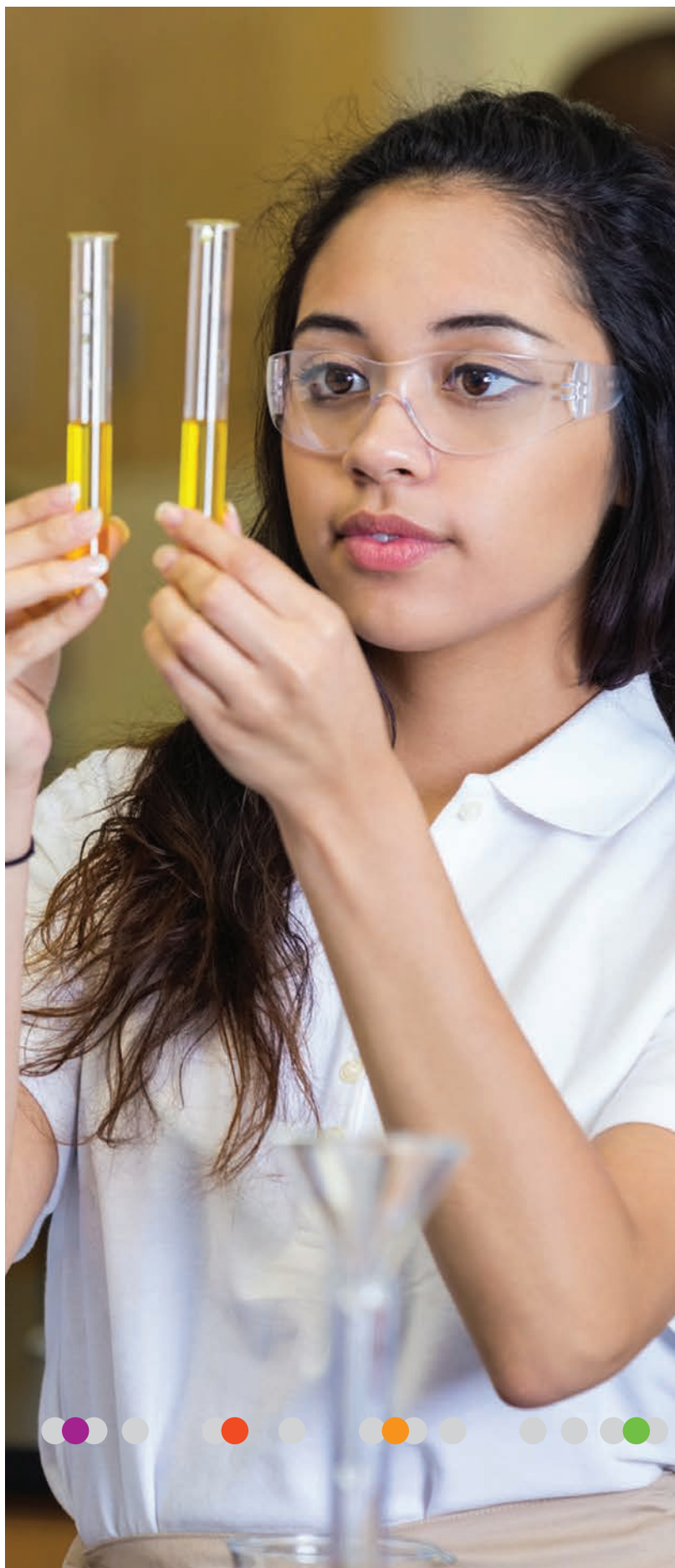
"She assigned us a type of cancer that we had to work on, and we could do it online or like a project-based paper. It was kind of like a choice that we could make. And even though we didn't get to choose what cancer type we wanted to work on, we had a choice on how we wanted to work and if we wanted to work by ourselves or not, because some people don't do very well in groups."

"Most classrooms have the format of lecture - practice - test - lecture - practice - test...There's some variety in how you do things. You work in groups. You do projects sometimes, but again you don't have a personal say in how you want to do it. Even though there's variety, every single student has to do the same things every single time."

When schools adopt a competency-based grading system, they may find it challenging to get students and their parents to understand and buy into this new system of grading. Some students expressed frustration with changes from traditional grading systems to a system measuring competency.

"This school is really great, but I don't like this system [of competency-based grading] because it's very vague, and it gets tough with colleges. I want to know whether I got A, B, or C."

"My mom got mad at me, thinking a 3 was bad."





Learning Anytime, Anywhere

Some students talked about the value of the courses they were able to access through the Advanced Coursework Network. These courses allowed them to pursue a personal interest, learn in a different way, or gain college credit.

“I did the Advanced Coursework Network for Young Voices, and I think it was actually a good experience because I’m not really good at public speaking, and it gave me a chance to put myself out there.”

“I was able to get credit for something that didn’t have to do with school and that I was actually interested in and involved with.”

“Teachers should tell us about [the Advanced Coursework Network and other opportunities] so we can be ready for college.”

Other students talked about the college courses they took through the Advanced Coursework Network or the PrepareRI Dual Enrollment Program. These courses helped students prepare for the rigor of college classes, pursue deeper knowledge in a subject area of interest, and potentially save money by completing college credits before they even graduate from high school.

“I’m actually taking a college class [in public health], and I think it’s really good...It actually gives you a hint about what it’s going to be like in college...”

“I was taking two college courses at the same time, and honestly I didn’t know if I could do it because it was two college courses, and I had a lot of essays and homework to do. [It gave me] a sense of what college homework is like, and it taught me how to manage my time and school with sports as well.”

“Every Tuesday, we had online college classes. I took it in aerospace since that’s what I want to study.”

“College is expensive and you get the opportunity to take a class that counts as college credit. That is one less college class to pay for.”

Advanced Coursework Network

- Beginning in the fall of 2016, Rhode Island students attending middle and high school in participating traditional public school districts, as well as several charter schools and state-operated schools, were able to participate in advanced coursework not normally available at their own school.³⁶
- The Advanced Coursework Network allows students to take traditional, online, and blended courses. Depending on the course, students can earn middle school, high school, Advanced Placement, and/or postsecondary credit, or progress toward an industry-recognized certificate or credential.^{37,38}
- Courses are offered by traditional school districts, private higher education institutions, charter schools, and community-based nonprofits.^{39,40}

Dual and Concurrent Enrollment

- **Dual enrollment:** allows students to take courses *at a higher education institution* and earn both high school and college credit.⁴¹
- **Concurrent enrollment:** allows students to take a college course *at their high school* and earn both high school and college credit.⁴²
- The PrepareRI Dual Enrollment Fund provides funding for public high school students to take dual or concurrent coursework offered by the Community College of Rhode Island, Rhode Island College, or University of Rhode Island, earning both high school and college credit, at no cost to them or their families.⁴³
- Dual and concurrent enrollment provides advanced coursework options for high-achieving students, reduces the time and expenses required to earn a college degree, and increases high school and college achievement.^{44,45}





While many students talked about the value of taking non-traditional courses that allow them to learn outside of the traditional classroom setting, engage them in different ways of learning, and even earn college credit, others had not heard of these opportunities or did not hear about them in time to enroll.

“I didn’t sign up for any of those classes, because I didn’t know about them, but then one of my friends told me about it, but it was too late for me to sign up.”

“No one in my class even knew that they could take classes in other organizations, such as a computer science class or something online. They’d never even heard of it. Now that [the school] actually got around to putting it on their website, all the classes are basically full, so no one actually got a chance to sign up for it.”

Some students expressed concern that certain groups of students, particularly English language learners, were not told about these types of course options, perhaps because teachers and administrators did not think they were ready for them or thought they should focus on building their English skills.

“Sometimes people don’t hear about those opportunities like the Advanced Coursework Network until all the spots are full. And I have heard some students who are English language learners saying they felt like they weren’t getting exposed to as many opportunities as the other English-speaking students. They can be kind of segregated from the other part of the school.”

“Some opportunities they only give to the ones in regular classes, and they don’t give them to us that are in ESL.”

“In our school, there’s a group of people that are new to the country, and I feel as though they have no idea what goes on in this school. Just because as a person that’s experienced that feeling, I can relate a lot to that situation, and it’s like you’re just here and you’re trying to fit in and like you’re trying to get used to the country and kind of excelling isn’t on your mind because you kind of don’t know what’s going on. So I feel like some kids really don’t do it because of the language barrier or because they are not aware of the things that go on in this world or in class.”

Still other students talked about the logistical challenges associated with participating, especially problems associated with getting to classes when they do not have transportation. In some cases, their schools were able to provide bus passes or transportation.

“I wanted to do this program on the weekends, but me and my mom struggled to find the right schedule where she could pick me up, so transportation is a problem.”

“When I was taking a course through the Advanced Coursework Network, I had problems with transportation, so they helped by giving us bus passes.”



Learning That Allows Students to Take Ownership: Student Voice

Students want to be heard and respected. When they are not heard and respected, they are not engaged in their own learning and cannot provide important perspectives about what happens in schools and how their schools can be improved.

"There was a time when a kid supposedly got in trouble for swearing at a teacher. He said he was just talking and wasn't swearing. The teachers weren't listening to him. He said, 'Just because I'm a student doesn't mean I don't have a voice in this school,' and since he was younger didn't mean he didn't matter and it's unfair. Even though it wasn't right to swear, they should have at least listened to him. He matters. Just because we are students doesn't mean we don't matter."

"I just wish they listened to us. It's like they think we only come to this school to get information. That isn't right. I'm not a robot."

"Student voice...the only way it's heard is through organizations such as Young Voices or PSU [Providence Student Union]...The administration themselves don't really focus on that student voice, and you have very few teachers and guidance counselors who would listen to this voice. It's very difficult for students to have a voice and be heard, which then leads to negative student voices, and that only leads to more problems which then only leads to miscommunication and just goes into this whole spiral thing going over and over again, just teachers not listening, administrators not listening, and students getting angry."

Students are proud of the work they have done to make their schools better. They appreciate the support they receive from principals and other school staff who actively seek their opinions and then act on students' concerns and recommendations. They also appreciate the role that organizations like Young Voices, the Providence Student Union, and the NAACP play in ensuring that their voices are heard. The voices of students have made a difference in issues such as avoiding school closures, considering school redesign, expanding bus pass access, changing dress code policies, and more.

"A long time ago, Alvarez was almost about to be closed completely until Young Voices voiced their concerns about why the school should stay here... Students testified to the people that wanted to shut it down...They wanted to close it down and turn Alvarez into a middle school and have all of the students go to Mount Pleasant or Central possibly and we said no. We can't possibly do this."

"Our voice is pretty powerful right now because we have the Principal Advisory, so we meet once a month with the principal, and she always asks our opinions of like how do you want to see your school look in the next year, because my school is going to split up into two schools, and so she was asking, 'What do you want our school to be named for the next year, and how many programs do you want to add to the school system?' And so next year we're going to have more programs. It's because the students wanted more."

There was this time when we had a dress code, and we made a survey to keep the dress code or change it or get rid of it. We gave it to most of the students. I know 500 students chose to change it. Then we showed the data to the principal, and he was very interested. The principal listened, and we are able to wear t-shirts now. It was all thanks to this program."

"There is some space for student voice because I know at Classical we have an NAACP branch and we have a representative from our branch that actually communicates. They sit down with the principal and talk to them about problems that they think they should fix...like school lunches, the bathroom, and stuff like that...Someone goes and tells it all to our principal and so like whether they take action or not... sometimes they do. But we get our voice out to them. Last year, we were pushing to get ethnic studies in our schools, and now apparently that's going to become a thing next year."

"We were representing our school at these meetings [the Student Advisory Committee to the Council on Elementary and Secondary Education] with other people from other schools all over Rhode Island, and we talk about how we can make schools better."

The students at Blackstone Academy Charter School and 360 High School participate in the hiring process, observing teacher candidates teach sample classes and helping to make decisions about which teachers are hired.

"Students interview their teachers, so we can agree or disagree with the perspective of the teacher or have an influence on who our teachers are."

"When a teacher wants to get a job at this school, they first check the teacher and then they do a class for us and then we can tell the principal whether we liked it or not."

360 High School: A School Designed by and for Students

In June 2014, the Carnegie Corporation of New York awarded a \$3 million grant to the Providence Public School District to create two new high schools (360 High School and Evolutions High School) modeled on their 10 Integrated Principles for High Performing Schools.

School design teams, including students, school district staff, teachers, community partners, and parents, met regularly over a nine-month period to design 360 High School to be personalized to meet students' needs and to prioritize mastery of rigorous standards aligned to college and career readiness.

360 High School was built on the idea that students should be empowered to take control of their education and their future. The school's leadership structure offers multiple opportunities for students to take on leadership roles, including student ambassadors who represent 360 High School in the school and in the community. Student representation and input is built into the school's design model with student representatives who meet weekly with school leaders.

Instead of traditional parent-teacher conferences, 360 High School has student-led conferences where students reflect on and share their learning with their families and teachers.^{46,47}



Recommendations

Over the past five years, Rhode Island has made significant progress in redesigning its education systems to be more student-centered at every level, offering more personalized, competency-based, anytime/anywhere learning opportunities that promote student voice and choice. Continuing to ensure that Rhode Island students have opportunities for student-centered learning will require the complementary and sustained efforts of a variety of stakeholders, including policymakers, state education officials, district and school administrators, teachers and school personnel, parents, and students. Each of these stakeholders has a role to play in terms of ensuring that we have strong policies and regulations, adequate financial resources, guidance and professional development, and targeted communications efforts to get the word out about the importance of rigorous and engaging, student-centered learning opportunities that prepare students for success in college and careers.

Assess and support students' academic, career, and social/personal goals.

- Ensure that all middle and high school students have advisors who are knowledgeable about their academic, career, and social/personal goals, and can guide the student in developing an Individual Learning Plan (ILP) and selecting coursework and in-school and out-of-school opportunities that will help them achieve their goals.
- Ensure that ILPs are people-based systems that include teacher, advisor, and/or guidance counselor support for students to develop goals and identify pathways to achieving them and not just computer programs or applications.
- Ensure that ILPs are ongoing learning management tools that are regularly used by students, parents, teachers, and other school personnel to identify opportunities inside and outside school that will help students achieve their goals.

Offer all students a rigorous and engaging curriculum that allows students to explore career pathways.

- Encourage more high schools to offer career pathways that include opportunities to explore broad career fields through rigorous coursework, internships, and mentorships while obtaining college credits and/or recognized career credentials.
- Ensure that students can explore one or more career pathways based on interest and that they are not merely assigned a pathway based on availability of slots.
- Conduct outreach with middle and high school students and their parents to make them aware of the value of career pathways and the Pathway Endorsements that will be available as diploma designations starting with the Class of 2021 (i.e., the current 9th graders).

Ensure equitable access to advanced coursework.

- Provide easy-to-access information about the Advanced Coursework Network and PrepareRI and the benefits of these opportunities to all students, particularly low-income, minority, and English language learners, and their parents and ensure that this information is available in multiple languages.
- Work to reduce inequities in access to the Advanced Coursework Network and PrepareRI dual enrollment coursework by providing funding for transportation to learning sites and by providing information on these opportunities to all students, including English language learners.

Support the move toward competency-based learning.

- Encourage teachers to clearly articulate learning objectives at the start of a unit or lesson so students can understand the relevance of the lesson and connection to their academic, career, and social/personal goals.
- Provide students with rubrics that allow them to track their own progress in achieving mastery of learning standards and with opportunities to discuss their progress with teachers and/or advisors.
- Give students choices about the way they learn (e.g., in groups or individually) and the way they demonstrate what they have learned (e.g., through an oral presentation or report) whenever possible.
- Take the time to educate both parents and students about new grading systems put in place when implementing competency-based learning and grading policies.

Allow students to take ownership over their own learning.

- Put systems in place that encourage students to provide input and participate in decision making that affects their individual learning as well as their larger school community.
- Actively seek student input when making school-, district-, and state-level decisions that directly impact students and their schools.

Provide opportunities for districts and schools already implementing student-centered learning practices to share their experiences and practices with other districts and schools.



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