



leap the gap
YOUTH EMPOWERMENT PROJECT
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SUMMARY RECOMMENDATIONS for ACTION:

To Change the Status Quo that Perpetuates
DISPARITIES in EDUCATION
In the Ann Arbor Public Schools and Community

10 Guiding Principles for Change
22 Action Plans for Change
Supporting Documents

SUMMER DRAFT
June 27, 2007

Respectfully Submitted By:
Leap the GAP, a 2 ½ year research project of the Youth Senate
in partnership with the Ann Arbor Public Schools



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The Ann Arbor Public Schools (AAPS), a school system with a high school student body of nearly 6000 students, recognizes that the disparities in student achievement affects ALL students and therefore underwrote a singular comprehensive study developed and implemented by students.¹

The following Recommendations for Action are the result of 2 ½ years of comprehensive research, analysis, dialogue and a planning process driven by Ann Arbor public high school students with adult support. It was conducted by the Youth Senate and sponsored by the Youth Empowerment Project.

During the 2 ½ years, a proportionately diverse group of over 1400 high school students was engaged to provide insights into perceived barriers to their achievement. They also identified solutions to the achievement disparities that plague our schools and community life, shatter the hopes and squash the potential of thousands of our children while permanently weakening the tapestry of our society.

In their research, the students identified 23 CORE BARRIERS to achievement in the personal, school and community spheres of their lives. These barriers were examined carefully and the solutions were identified in the same three categories. Engaging adults from the schools and greater community, the Summary Recommendations for Action presented here were developed to address the 23 Core Barriers identified from the research. For details, refer to the 23 Core Barriers to Achievement; Seven Dominant Core Barriers with sample quotes from the Focus Groups; and Youth-Defined Recommendations (on Seven Dominant Core Barriers) with specific implementation strategies for most of the Summary Recommendations listed here.

While the research and analysis was done with high school students, the results are a cumulative reflection of their elementary, middle and high school experiences. The full Report and ensuing Recommendations for Action have direct relevance to all AAPS educators at all levels.

¹ Additional support was provided by the Earl Cress Policy Fund of the Ann Arbor Area Community Foundation, Pfizer Global Research and Development, the University of Michigan Institute for Social Justice, Meijer, Inc., and Kiwanis Club of Ann Arbor.



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In our learning communities, the educational experience seamlessly blends aspects of personal, school, and community life. The Recommendations for Action summarized here are organized according to which of the three facets of a student's life best corresponds to the action that needs to be taken. No recommendation exists isolated in its category.

Understanding the students' frame of reference is important in order to know where best to start for improving their educational experience. From our research, the focus groups made clear that high school students consider their school as their community. As a result, many leave school feeling unprepared to take initiative and maneuver independently in the larger community. This has a direct impact on how far they reach for productivity and success.

To start with the base familiar to students, many recommendations that might be considered a shared responsibility of the larger community to help resolve are listed in the school section. These are noted with a C to encourage mutual consideration by school and community institutions. In fact, the responsibility of the community to support youth directly, and to assist the schools to increase its capacity to address disparities, alienation, a disconnect with civic life, etc., needs dialogue and initiative by both school and community stakeholders, with parents and students.

These Summary Recommendations, in DRAFT for the summer of 2007, are respectfully submitted to the Adult Allies with the 2007 MLK Legacy Forum and the Administration and Board of Trustees of the Ann Arbor Public Schools for further analysis, dialogue, planning and implementation. It is requested that these Recommendations and the students engaged in their development be integrated in all other related district planning processes over the next five years - including the district's current strategic planning process.

NOTE: The full report, with all the documents distributed to the School Board since December 2006, will be distributed at the June 27 meeting of the Board of Trustees. At that time, it will also be made available to the public online at www.youthempowerment.com. The full report is a documentation of information concluded from the project's research database. It is not a 'how-to' for adapting the project in other schools or communities. For this information, interested persons should contact the Youth Empowerment Project.



RECOMMENDED: 10 GUIDING PRINCIPLES for CHANGE
(for use by school and community-based adults)

1. Ensure that ALL students* are receiving a high-quality education preparing them for the challenges of our global economy with options for college, career and work success.
 - Including those expelled
2. With students, create and support a culture of personal and team engagement in academically rigorous learning environments with high expectations and personalized achievement that prepares them for satisfying success in life.
3. Encourage and support education-based risk-taking in problem-solving, skill-building, personal goal-setting, student initiative, teamwork, and leadership in and outside of the classroom.
4. Extend and strengthen the collaborative and supportive relationships played among all school personnel, the student, parent(s), and community agents to challenge, motivate and support the student with intellectually stimulating and formative life skills and experiences preparing them for independence and success.
5. Practice education for democracy: promote, encourage, facilitate and support youth voice, initiative, decision-making, and youth ownership of their education, in and outside of classrooms and schools.
6. Encourage student engagement in the larger community for fulfilling academic and career planning curriculum requirements and rewarding, productive service-learning experiences that foster values and skills for responsible citizenship.
7. Invest in equitable access to school and community opportunities and provide all students with resources needed to be accomplished, productive members of the economy and responsible, knowledgeable civically engaged young citizens with independent life skills.
8. All Actions taken should engender a dynamic infrastructure of support between student, school and community staff, and parents to maximize student success.
9. View youth as positive resources rather than as problems or deficits.
10. ASK: Do the youths have and perceive they have a personal or collaborative stake in the education issue, event, or requirements at hand?



RECOMMENDED: 22 ACTION PLANS for CHANGE

PERSONAL

1. Create Advisory Forums (adapted from Community High School) for personal and systemic resources for a personalized and academically rigorous learning environment, and personal initiative and self-awareness of participation in the learning community.
2. Invest in accessible and quality systemic support for increasing three-way communications among school personnel working with students and each student and their parent(s) or guardian(s) for the purpose of supporting student progress and success with goal setting and Personal Achievement Action Plans, and include a fourth link in the communications circle, where appropriate, with personnel in community-based programs in which the student is engaged. **C***
3. Work with formal and informal student leadership in existing infrastructures to increase skills and knowledge for cultural understanding and minimizing stereotyping through peer to peer training and role-modeling among more students.
4. Provide student organizations with increased open recruitment skills and opportunities to provide more students with more accessibility to extracurricular opportunities out of the classroom, and develop independent skills to use them.
5. Engage parents from diverse identity groups in open dialogue forums about respective roles and practices for holistic support of student academic success. (These dialogues might include educators as well).

SCHOOL

6. Decentralize and Personalize large schools into smaller learning communities that embody the 10 Guiding Principles for Change.
7. Multiply Courageous Conversations and dialogue forums among students, staff, parents and community members on race, cultural diversity, social economic handicap, privilege, and more. **C**
8. Provide students with needed staff encouragement, engagement and support resources, with a climate conducive to positive peer support and accessibility to all staff to maximize academic success.

***C** = For additional consideration by Community stakeholders.



9. Increase understanding and sensitivity of cultural factors (including religion, gender, ethnicity, immigrant challenges, race, socio-economic factors, youth culture) among all staff* to increase competency and equitable reflection of appreciation for diversity and decrease stereotyping and discrimination.
* Staff here also includes staff of community-based organizations. C
10. Update professional development to increase use of diverse teaching methods in support of diverse learning styles, and a counseling model to interface with new system of Advisory Forums and additional Recommendations, including 10 Guiding Principles for Change.
11. Invest in making more information available and accessible for civic engagement opportunities with hands-on experiences and productive/meaningful service-learning projects interfaced with academic studies and career planning, and encourage student initiative to seek and use opportunities and resources. C
12. Create a dynamic centralized system (including internet) in the high schools with strong “in and out” flow of information for Advisory Forums about community resources, jobs, volunteer and leadership opportunities, and tutoring and mentoring resources using “Standards and Best Practices,” and foster independent student initiative for use of resources. C
13. Fully inform and significantly involve students in their own education choices, with regular goal setting, Personal Achievement Action Plans and career planning; and inform/seek feedback from parents, counselors, teachers, and community-based resource staff where appropriate. C
14. Expanding on existing program resources for recruitment, training, placement and support, increase implementation of ‘youth voice’ and ‘youth as resource’ practices in school and community decision-making, increasing equitable representation of diverse student bodies and inclusion for their input in school and district policies, as well as community and city policies where relevant. C
15. Invest in low cost information and equitable access to school and community information, opportunities and support resources for students and parents, including contemporary technology and library resources, and money for school expenses such as supplies, transportation and activities that otherwise are more accessible to the



economically privileged; and encourage student initiative and independence to use available resources. **C**

16. With student leadership, simplify, strengthen and enforce policies for structure and firm standards (skipping & tardy policies, cheating, suspension criteria, etc.).
17. Restructure student schooldays to free up more time for jobs and participation in other real-life community opportunities, and encourage student initiative to seek and use resources accordingly. **C**
18. Increase teacher and staff accountability to approved principles and recommendations in this document, including regular evaluations by fellow teachers, students, and administrators.

COMMUNITY

19. Provide more accessibility to and subsidy for transportation, including additional routes and passes for students with limited means.
20. Increase community funding (including more business resources) to support more students' accessibility to existing youth programs and subsequent need for increased staffing.
21. Increase ways corporations, merchants, associations and youth service providers work with and support youth as resources and legitimately engaged people contributing to the quality of life of the greater community.
22. Increase professional development resources and forums for community youth service providers on the many above referenced best practices for tutoring, mentoring, youth engagement, youth as resources, youth in decision-making, and those methods and programs most relevant to community based youth work such as youth-driven community programming, civic engagement and life skills including goal setting, independence and initiative for responsible citizenship, education and employment.

NOTE: For additional ways community agents can work with students, families and the schools to engage and support student achievement and success, refer to numbers: 2, 7, 9, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, and 17 in the School section above. The entirety of the Recommended 10 Principles also applies to community stakeholders.

***C** = For additional consideration by Community stakeholders.