

# Urban Youth: Powerful Reform Partners—Commentary on a project of the Annenberg Institute for School Reform

David Loertscher

**A** fascinating report available from the Annenberg Institute for School Reform begins with the following:

The voices most often left out of the debates around education policy belong to the very people who are most affected: the parents, young people, and other residents of low-income, high-minority communities with struggling schools. The young men and women who attend high schools in these communities are often the targets of well-meaning but mistaken assumptions about their needs, or of vicious stereotypes about their behavior, attitudes, and intellectual capacity. These preconceptions can lead to policy decisions that are ineffective—and sometimes even harmful.

The work of the Annenberg Institute has shown that youth organizations around the country are developing leaders, gathering and interpreting data about their schools, presenting solid evidence to policy-makers, designing workable solutions, forming alliances with adult organizations around common interests, attracting resources, gaining meaningful participation in decision making, and applying pressure when necessary. Where this has happened, young leaders have become effective and powerful partners in school reform.

Now, before you read further, check out the full article and reports at [http://www.annenberginstitute.org/Commentary/index.php?utm\\_source=AISR+E-Newsletter&utm\\_campaign=b6aa08cb9b-Commentary\\_Youth\\_Leadership1\\_5\\_2010&utm\\_medium=email](http://www.annenberginstitute.org/Commentary/index.php?utm_source=AISR+E-Newsletter&utm_campaign=b6aa08cb9b-Commentary_Youth_Leadership1_5_2010&utm_medium=email).

And if that URL is too much to type in, search for the Annenberg Institute and find the report.

## WHAT CAN WE SAY?

Are we surprised, shocked, and suspicious of the findings of the number of researchers funded by this foundation? Can youth be trusted enough to even be asked their opinion about the major problems facing education today?

We suspect that few government officials give credence to youth voices because that somehow reflects on the expertise of adults. Evidence of rejection and sometimes fear is expressed daily by adults who are creating and managing computer systems for children and teens without their advice. As one tech director was overheard saying recently, he is kept awake at nights wondering who of the teen hackers will crash his system or just get around its filters again. And again.

For the past two years, I have been urging teacher-librarians to reinvent the school library into a learning commons that has a client-side design vs. the traditional “what’s good for your organizational structure” (Loertscher, Koechlin, & Zwaan, 2008). I remember interviewing, with my co-authors, a Texas teen girl who criticized her school’s library in her local newspaper and her critique went viral across the nation to the chagrin of many.

My own constant stream of interviews with children and teens wherever I go convinces me that as a profession, we need to listen and listen and listen some more. I am hoping that some day, at least one of my 21 grandchildren spread around the country will report to grandpa how wonderful their school library/learning commons is in their intellectual and cultural life. It hasn’t happened yet.

## THINK BIG, BE BRAVE, AND ASK FOR FEEDBACK

Recently, I published with Carol Koechlin and Sandi Zwaan, a book entitled *The Big Think: 9 metacognitive strategies that make the unit end just the beginning of learning*, which advocates that at the end of a library/learning commons project or learning activity both students and adults do a metacognitive analysis of: “What I learned; What we learned; How I learned what I learned; How we learned what we learned; So what?; and, What’s next?” The premise is that if you ask learners about their experiences with their assignments, they will respond.

The problem is that both teacher and teacher-librarian might hear the truth that could be both positive and negative. Then we are faced with what to do with the suggestions we solicited from this younger set.

However, the Annenberg report gives us courage to recommend even more loudly that we should involve kids and teens in the design, management, operation, and change from the traditional organizational structure of the library to a learning commons that kids, teens, and even classroom teachers claim as “their territory.”

Ask focus groups about their experience with library technology and school technology systems. Ask them about the information systems provided. Ask about the school library/learning commons

as a cultural center. Have an adult come about the lunchroom asking kids how valuable the school library/learning commons is to their assignments and in what they read. Also ask how interesting they find the place. What percentage of our potential patrons just Google around us? What are the best things we contribute? How could be more central to their learning?

Focus groups, lunchroom interviews, and Joyce Valenza's practice of exit interviews with her seniors coupled with the Annenberg message is a major clue for all of us as teacher-librarians.

What does a learning commons look like, feel like, and ultimately contribute to the day-to-day life of a child and a teen? Ross Todd (2004) presented us with hundreds of positive voices in his Ohio study. We need to listen to the negative comments, but more important design our programs where the learners win.

It is said that the problem with owning a cute puppy is that it grows up. The problem with kids and teens is they be-

come tax payers, school board members, and parents.

## RESOURCES

King, D. & Balch-Gonzalez, M. (2009).

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Todd, R. & Kuhlthau, C. (2004). *Student learning through Ohio school libraries: Background, methodology and report of findings*. Columbus, OH: OELMA.

## Voice of Youth Advocates

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### Praise for VOYA

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Teen Services Coordinator and author of *Connecting Young Adults and Libraries*, 3rd and 4th editions



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