

Student-led bullying discussions influence state-wide policy

Too often in public education the voice of students, the very people schools set out to serve, is the last to be heard.

Kassie Tarpley decided she wanted to use her senior project to disrupt that trend. When Tarpley, a student at Kohala High School on the Big Island of Hawaii, was looking for a senior project topic, she decided to look at the trending issue of bullying prevention in her school from the student's perspective.

Tarpley approached Art Souza, superintendent of West Hawaii Complex Area, with the idea. Souza agreed it was a worthy topic and urged her to think bigger; to cast the net wider than just her school and include all students in the district.

More people, more connection

Souza also told Tarpley that Thoughtexchange could help her reach more students in a more meaningful way than the survey and in-person interviews she was initially planning to use.

"I was nervous about it. At first, I didn't want the project to go large across the island," Tarpley shares. "But when I learned that I could get a broader audience, with more people involved and more connection, I was excited."

Souza connected Tarpley with the Thoughtexchange team, and they worked together with the software to ask students across the district this open-ended question:

Q: *What instructions, if any, has your school provided on bullying prevention?*

The crowdsourced exchange data revealed a sharp divide between how school administrators thought they were addressing bullying, and how well-equipped students felt they were to deal with a problem that can impact student experience in profoundly negative ways. The exchange also gave students a voice they felt they didn't have before.

"It's been overwhelming," Tarpley says. "A lot of students won't go to teachers or principals to talk about bullying. But this was an opportunity to get their voice out to the administration."



West Hawaii is one of 15 complex areas in Hawaii's statewide school system, serving a diverse population of students at 19 schools.

INDUSTRY
 K-12 Education

LOCATION
 Hawaii

SIZE
 11,000 students



Students influencing state-wide policy

According to Souza, the project is also causing the district to rethink student engagement, with an eye toward creating more meaningful discussions.

“As educators, we’re really good at dealing with expert knowledge and data. We rarely have the ability to solicit student input,” Souza explains. “Kassie got broad-based student opinion, and she’s used this to create policy change across our state. It’s student-generated, and Kassie took the lead. Thoughtexchange was the vehicle. I don’t think Kassie realizes the impact she has had at a potential state policy level. I’m excited to see what will come of it.”

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Kassie Tarpley, Student

Souza envisions many opportunities moving forward to build on Tarpley’s student voice success. He’s imagining using Thoughtexchange to transform schools into places where solutions can be student-generated and not always the result of top-down policy and curriculum design.

“What Kassie did was a model. Thoughtexchange is interactive. Students can rate one another’s responses using their devices. It’s a very deep and thoughtful way for students to create their own learnings and their own interventions,” Souza says. “This is a move to new technology and a new way of generating public knowledge.”

Inspiring future crowd leaders

Souza believes students like Tarpley, who can leverage Thoughtexchange to become leaders around school issues, will also gain the skills and confidence to become leaders for positive change in society after they graduate.

“It has long term implications, not just that she created a model project that will impact state policy, but also that she built an understanding of what it means to be a community leader,” Souza says. “The more we can give kids these kinds of opportunities, my goodness that’s what we want to do as schools.”

WINS

- Gave students a safe space to exchange thoughts and be heard adults on a sensitive topic
- Influenced state bullying policy with a student-led initiative and created a model for future student-generated solutions
- Inspired a future community crowd leader by empowering a student to take a leadership role on a school issue

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