

# Rethinking Schools

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## Youth Take the Lead on High School Reform Issues

Summer 2005

### *Sistas and Brothas United*

**By Fernando Carlo, Antoine Powell, Laura Vazquez, Shoshana Daniels, Clay Smith, with Kavitha Mediratta and Amy Zimmer**

In fall 2002, after years of organizing efforts to reduce overcrowding and improve the quality of education in John F. Kennedy, Walton, and Clinton High Schools, young people in the northwest Bronx, N.Y., united to create their own high school. Their three-year struggle to bring the project to fruition offers a cautionary tale about the potential — and struggle — for youth leadership in the top-down, fast-moving small schools movement.

Sistas and Brothas United (SBU), a six-year-old youth leadership project of the Northwest Bronx Community and Clergy Coalition (NWBCCC), had been working to improve local high schools for the past five years. Fernando Carlo, a senior at Satellite High School who transferred from John F. Kennedy, had worked on campaigns to reform Kennedy. "Security was a huge issue, so we managed to get more school counselors and security guards in the school," Carlo recalls. SBU also convinced the administration to repair broken-down escalators and ensure that fire-safety mechanisms were working properly. SBU's efforts helped oust one of Kennedy's principals, who repeatedly refused to meet with the organization to discuss their concerns.

In 2002, SBU formed a design team and invited parents, teachers, and representatives from Fordham University to propose a new small school for the area serving John F. Kennedy High School in response to the New Century High School initiative. Through this initiative, launched in 2001 by New Visions for Public Schools, the Department of Education has created almost 100 new small schools throughout the city. Small schools will eventually replace the large, failing schools that currently anchor the city's high school system. The initiative is funded through grants from the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and the Open Society Institute.

As they gained experience, SBU members began attending school reform conferences organized by the Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform, Temple University, and other groups. Through these conferences and through trainings and visits to effective schools in Oakland, Chicago, and Philadelphia, SBU's youth leaders encountered strategies for improving teaching and learning that dramatically changed the focus of their organizing.

They began to analyze the causes of the poor education they were receiving, and through individual meetings and surveys of their peers, identified poor student-teacher relationships, lackluster instruction, and the lack of access to school guidance counselors as critical school problems. Laura Vazquez, director of SBU, explains:

Lots of students were complaining about the lack of connection they felt with their teachers. Teachers would just teach straight out of the book, using a lecture format, without giving students a chance to ask questions or taking the time to



Sistas and Brothas organizer Mustafa Sullivan speaks to the press about an incident at Walton High School, allegedly due to overcrowding, involving a student maced by the police.

Photo: Heather Hadden

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make sure students really understood the material. But when we began talking to teachers, we found that teachers had it hard too. Some of them were assigned to teach subjects that they didn't really know themselves.

SBU then surveyed high school teachers about their professional development needs and began to research strategies for raising teacher expectations for student performance. As the youth members became increasingly involved in education reform, they underwent a transformation. They began to care more about their own education and the education of their peers. They began to see their own potential to change the education system from the bottom up.

Attention quickly focused on the new schools that were opening throughout the Bronx as part of the New Century High Schools initiative. The reform process called for community organizations and educators to partner/collaborate in designing new small high schools.

### The Vision

Students began to imagine a high school that would combine the attributes of the best schools they had visited. They wanted to base the school on the principles of grassroots organizing, shared leadership, and power that had proven so effective within SBU. In the SBU model, young people are brought into a process of collective decision-making and action to create positive change in the community. This work is supported by ongoing leadership development to help members understand their own power to make change happen and learn how to support the development of leadership in others.

In fall 2002, youth began planning their school. "We wanted a school where things would be different from our current schools, where students could have one-on-one interactions with teachers," Luz Milanes, who was a high school senior in 2002, says.

The proposed school, the Leadership Institute, would promote student leadership and community action. Students would work with SBU on community campaigns to improve neighborhood safety, for example, and work with teachers to integrate this campaign work into the curriculum. "We put community action at the center of the Leadership Institute because we wanted students to take an active role in their education, their communities, and their lives," Carlo says.

Antoine Powell, 18, a graduate of the High School of the Health Professions further explains the goals in forming the school:

Our goal was to design a school in which SBU's three central themes of leadership, social justice, and community action would be incorporated into the school environment. We not only want our members to become familiar with these concepts, we want them instilled in their characters so they can apply them in the future. In the Leadership Institute, a leader is a person who is not only able to identify a situation in their community that may be detrimental, but also possesses the power to unite the members of his or her community to work towards fixing the issue at hand.

These ideas led the youth to build what they call community action projects into the school's curriculum. In their advisories, students will be introduced to basic organizing skills through political action and organizing workshops jointly designed and taught by youth and educators. Teachers and organizers will help students apply these skills to a community issue through a semester-long community action project, which will be integrated into their English, social studies, math, and science classes. Through SBU, students will be helped to create a large event, such as a press conference or meeting with elected officials, to present their recommendations for reform. They will also lead meetings to discuss community issues with parents and other neighborhood residents and report on their community action-oriented projects.

In addition to community action, organizers and faculty will help students take leadership roles in the school. They will share in the governance of the school, for example, by participating in developing the school's discipline code, and they will also have regular opportunities, through face-to-face meetings and surveys, to provide feedback to teachers on the effectiveness of classroom instruction.

### A Square Peg in a Round Hole

The New Century reform process specified a very tight timeline for new school development. Concept papers were due to the Department of Education in November 2002. Once approved, school design teams received

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modest planning grants of \$7,500, and were required to submit a fully developed proposal within four months. Teams that passed a second interview were expected to open their schools the following September. The Department of Education required design teams to include an administrator, a teacher, a community partner, a parent, and a young person.

Because students conceived and initiated the Leadership Institute, the school design process took on an added degree of complexity. Educators initiated most school teams; they developed concept papers and subsequently identified nonprofit partners.

In contrast, SBU began with youth and had to develop partnerships with educators who could help students develop the concept paper and eventually the proposal. SBU wanted to ensure that students' ideas drove the process. New Visions and the Department of Education offered technical support after school hours in order to accommodate the schedules of educators, but this limited the ability of community organizations, parents, and students to participate.

SBU formed a team of youth leaders who began meeting weekly, often late into the night, to give shape to their initial ideas. Young people ran the meetings, which often involved spirited debates over issues like the role of youth in conducting teacher evaluations. The youth reached out to selected teachers from their local high schools and invited educators from Bank Street College, Manhattan College, and Fordham University to help them shape their ideas into a concrete proposal.

It was a slow process of building trust, shared vision, and mutual respect. "When we first invited adults to work with us, they'd come into meetings and talk at the students," Vazquez says. "They weren't doing this intentionally. That's how adults are used to operating. Our youth challenged them to listen. When the adults saw how much our members knew about their schools and education reform, the dynamics shifted and the conversation became more inclusive and collaborative."

### Roadblocks

In March 2003, SBU learned that its initial proposal was denied for several reasons. They hadn't been able to choose a school leader and teachers, and they had not been able to answer detailed questions about the curriculum. And the youth's envisioned role in setting school rules and evaluating teacher performance went far beyond what the proposal selection committee considered appropriate.

"We are trying to design a school where youth have an actual voice — besides sitting on a student council and figuring out what parties to throw — in figuring out what funds go to what programs and how teachers are hired, and in designing the curriculum," Carlo says. "A lot of educators aren't used to hearing that type of thing from youth, and it scared them."

Disagreements about the role of youth in high school reform have persisted. The Leadership Institute attempted to put students in new positions — as creators and controllers of their education — not as passive recipients. This vision of student power alienated some potential teachers, principals, and administrators, who questioned youth capacity and knowledge to play a driving role in new school creation. Others saw SBU's youth-led design process as too loose, too slow, or not sufficiently professional. Antoine Powell explains:

Two years later, in February 2005, SBU finally received approval for its school. By then it had gone through three rounds of interviews with Department of Education, New Visions, and representatives of the teachers' and principals' unions. SBU had hired a principal, Bernadette Anand, a former school principal in Montclair, N.J., who left her tenured faculty position at Bank Street College to lead the school. Youth had also assembled a core of teaching faculty committed to the Leadership Institute's founding vision who were willing to hang in while SBU fought for the school's approval. The school will open in September 2005, with funding from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and support from New Visions for Public Schools.

"It's important that we've had youth and adults with different points of view coming together to design our school," Remon Cyrille, 17, says. "Some of the adults on our team have been teachers, principals, superintendents, and parents, so they bring those perspectives. As youth we know what it's like to be in a classroom and what we need to learn. Our design team shows that youth can work with adults and come up with something that really works."

The youth and adults who created Leadership Institute believe that school quality is linked to other areas of community life, such as environmental

conditions and the availability of affordable housing and jobs. Shoshana Daniels, education director of SBU, describes the kind of curriculum that they want to implement at the school:

We developed an interdisciplinary curriculum that links academic learning with the skills development necessary to take action. Youth will learn the skills they need to develop campaigns for social change: how to conduct research on land-use policies, for example; how to analyze and present data about available tracts of land in our neighborhood that could be used for new school facilities; how to interview experts; how to develop well-supported position papers on key reform strategies; how to write compelling letters to elected officials; and how to speak persuasively at press conferences. We believe that true learning happens when students, not teachers, are at the center of the learning experience. The role of the teacher is to create an environment in which students can ask critical questions and develop projects that help them find answers.

One issue that SBU anticipates will draw many students is its work to improve college readiness across Bronx high schools. Small schools, like the large schools, are plagued by a lack of resources, and many lack sufficient guidance and college counselors and support services for students with special needs. In the tradition of the young people who developed the Leadership Institute, young people will be encouraged to get involved in campaigns to improve educational opportunity for their community, not just themselves.

SBU's work took three years to germinate fully. During that time, they fought continually to force the school system to recognize the legitimacy of their vision and their process. "Our approach doesn't fit the model of 'let's restructure these big failing schools quick, now, in a big way, before the next election,'" SBU director Laura Vazquez says. "There's something to be said for urgency and scale in high school reform, but there are also high costs in what you produce in terms of local leadership and ownership."

In the three-year process of developing the proposal, the initial cohort of youth grew, aged, and graduated to college, jobs, and other projects. The organization needed to bring new youth into a design process that was already underway to maintain youth control and decision-making without starting over. SBU did so by sharing leadership, mentoring newer members, and teaching young people and adults how to struggle through conflict in an open and honest way. Although the adult educators and youth members had learned to work together in a respectful and collaborative environment, after working on the project for a year and a half the discussions at their meetings were becoming circular and frustrating. So the youth proposed a set of ground rules for the team. "The idea was to make sure everyone would have a say, and to make sure that everyone felt comfortable holding each other accountable," Daniels says. "Even though youth always chaired design team meetings, it often took a while for newer SBU members to feel comfortable asking adults to wait their turn to speak, or refocusing their comments on the topic at hand. And it often took just as long for new adults to adjust to that dynamic."

The process of designing the Leadership Institute changed the youth who were involved — their conceptions of themselves, their role in their education, their role in their communities, and their place in the world. SBU's work, and its leadership in developing the school, has also transformed how the adults involved in the process view youth and what a quality education can be. Teresa Anderson, a mother of three daughters, recounts the experience of watching her daughter discover her power to lead reform:

It changed how she looked at herself. She started engaging more in school, and soon she was scoring in the 90s. Next year she'll be going to college in Kentucky on a full scholarship. In our neighborhoods here in the Bronx, we teach our children how to survive, but not how to live. I think this school can change that.

### **Tackling the Big Schools**

Though the Leadership Institute was a major focus of the organization's work, SBU has organized simultaneously to improve the quality of instruction and student-teacher relationships in the large high schools its members attend. In spring 2004, youth surveyed teachers in the three large neighborhood high schools about their teaching style, relationships with students, perceptions of the school climate, and the quality of professional development they receive. SBU subsequently convened student-teacher meetings to discuss the lack of communication among students and teachers. Students felt the lack of

communication exacerbated teacher perceptions of student disengagement and student perceptions of teachers as uncaring. It also made it difficult for students to feel safe asking questions in class or providing feedback to teachers when lessons were hard to understand. Vazquez says these meetings were valuable:

The teachers who came to these meetings were blown away. They saw students who they had pegged as troublemakers leading discussions about teaching and learning. Our point was to show teachers that youth do care about their learning. If teachers took the time to talk with the students, they would know what is going on in that student's life and why they missed school or acted the way they did. We said, 'Your job is to find out What leadership qualities does this student have? How can you draw out those qualities at school?' If students had a chance to shine in schools, they would do better. But that means someone inside the school has to take the time to get to know the student.

Building on these meetings with teachers, SBU decided to conduct a neighborhood tour for local educators. Members wanted to challenge stereotypes about local youth and to demonstrate to teachers SBU's power to win improvements in the neighborhood. They also wanted to show the value of working with the organization. In August 2004, after several months of negotiation, SBU led a neighborhood tour for 160 teachers and administrators from Walton and Roosevelt and their small high schools. The tour concluded with focus groups on improving student-teacher relationships and communication in these schools. SBU has subsequently organized a series of meetings with teachers to discuss joint action to improve student-teacher communication on Walton campus.

In these discussions, youth learned that teachers felt overwhelmed by the increasing overcrowding on Walton campus. The campus is in transition and houses three new schools in addition to the Walton high school program, which is being phased out. Since the introduction of small schools in 2002, building utilization has steadily increased. The school is currently at 175 percent of capacity, and has drawn extensive media coverage for violence between students and confrontations between students and police. In response to overcrowding, many teachers do not have assigned rooms, which they believe impedes their ability to connect with students outside of the classroom.

Youth began organizing to confront the growing chaos and instability on the Walton campus. Youth and parents held a press conference outside the school to protest the Department of Education's decision to place another small school on the Walton campus. Since December 2004, SBU has been meeting with local administrators to discuss its recommendations for stabilizing the school. These recommendations include:

- Reducing overcrowding by moving small schools into their own facilities.
- Suspending the creation of new small schools on the Walton campus until the overcrowding is sufficiently reduced.
- Reconfiguring the Walton facility so that each small school has its own space and identity.
- Expanding conflict reduction programs that involve young people as peer mediators.
- Providing gang mediation.
- Suspending the use of aggressive police tactics in the school that exacerbate the climate of suspicion and distrust on the campus.

SBU is currently negotiating with local school administrators to conduct building-wide student meetings to elicit youth perspectives on reform and school improvement. SBU has already begun surveying youth regarding their perceptions of safety and community in the school and hopes to survey teachers as well. Once the school is stabilized, youth hope to work with teachers to create a comprehensive school counseling program that would include an attendance improvement program and academic support for struggling students.

Historically, education reform has always been in the hands of educators outside of the classroom: policymakers, government officials, and even private foundations. There's been little or no involvement from parents, classroom teachers, and students. Of these groups, youth are the largest and most silenced group in educational decision-making.

While the small schools movement has opened a door for youth voices, top-down models have circumscribed youth roles. SBU's work challenges all who are engaged in the complex work of school reform to think bigger about the possibilities of youth engagement — to move beyond youth voices to embrace the possibilities of youth leadership and agency. Doing so will help

ensure that the decisions made by the top will bear fruit at the bottom.

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