Student-Led Community Fora with Parents & Youth for Change

(Report Summary, a 60-page Full Length Report is Available Upon Request)
PROJECT SUMMARY

This report is the result of several months of planning meetings, work sessions, team building and the generous contributions of many supporters and participants. We are thankful to every student and community partner who contributed their time and expertise to this work so that others may learn about some of the perspectives Burlington, South Burlington and Winooski community members have on the state of our local and global affairs.

We are also extremely grateful for the lessons that this project has provided its organizers and participants in our learning about the opportunities and challenges to student-led projects.

The overall objective of these months of work was to host forums addressing issues facing the community with a specific focus issues that had arisen, or been exacerbated, by the 2016 Presidential election. This primary goal and vision for this forum was for it to be 100% student led and driven, where young people and adults share decision-making. Whereas, young people have the ideas, set up the project and invite adults to join them in making decisions throughout the project in an equal partnership.

Soon after students were recruited, the group created the following purpose statement:

Our goal is to create a safe and respectful environment where open and meaningful exchanges of ideas and values can occur. The community forums will address issues in the post-2016 election political climate on national, state, and local levels faced by community members in within Burlington, South Burlington, and Winooski.

- We will engage community members in thought provoking discussions, facilitated by mediation practitioners.
- We will get to know our audience first by participating with them in group activities before we start the big event.
- These forums intend to represent people from different political, social, economic backgrounds/ideologies
- We will strive to invite those from all parts of the political spectrum.
- Student leaders will reflect on community feedback to improve engagement among community members.
- Student leaders will identify next steps after the completion of the community forums

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1 See Hart’s Ladder of Student Participation
THE BURLINGTON FORUM

The Burlington High School forum took place on Wednesday, November 1st, 5:30 PM to 7:30 PM in the Burlington High School cafeteria; 14 people attended.

Attendees began arriving at around 5:30 pm. Upon arriving attendees were encouraged to eat dinner and socialize with other participants. At around 6:00 pm the group gathered to play an ice breaker. This game served as a way to allow attendees, moderators, and facilitators to not only familiarize themselves with the room but the game was also how participants were divided into their smaller discussion groups. The forum covered four topics: Immigration, LGBTQ+ Issues, Terrorism/Foreign Affairs, and Healthcare. There was a facilitator and moderator at each table who guided the conversation. Each topic was allotted 15 minutes for discussion.

Successes

*Group format:* The small group format and the format of keeping all of the participants in the same groups throughout the event helped to make the forum a success. This gave the participants the opportunity to get to know each other well and become comfortable with one another. With fewer people in each group it allotted more time for each participant to share their experiences and perspectives.

There were a few issues in preparing for the forum and the forum had to be postponed and was almost cancelled so it was in many ways a success that the Burlington forum actually took place. When the time came around the students really buckled down and put in the work necessary to make the forum happen.

Challenges

*Team member relationship:* With the Burlington team starting out as the largest and most diverse group of student leaders, there was a considerable amount of interpersonal conflict within the group that made prepping for the forum difficult. Because of these issues we thought it necessary to postpone the forum for three weeks later in order to give the students more time to prepare. Due to this there were a couple students who were no longer able to attend the forum so we ended up losing a few students.

*Lack of experience:* The Burlington team had very little experience with leading student-led projects, which led to some confusion about roles and responsibilities. There was also vary degrees of participation that resulted in significant attrition of Burlington team members.
THE SOUTH BURLINGTON FORUM

Monday, November 6th at 5:00pm in the South Burlington High School cafeteria. There were 12 participants, two of which were folks who were new to the project.

Because of the low number of new participants, this forum was facilitated as one large group discussion. We covered three different issues (intolerance, polarization, and education) and each discussion was facilitated by different moderators/facilitators. We allotted thirty minutes for each topic.

Successes

Preparation and engagement: This forum was successful in the discussion sections, informing the participants of the complexities of the three issues, while welcoming constructive disagreements, and larger solutions. This forum could serve as an ideal way to run a forum both big and small allowing those who took part the ability to participate at a high level. The facilitators did a great job of engaging the participants in the conversation, and while there were occasion silences, these did not detract from the experience.

Challenges

Attendance: Attendance was low with only twelve attendees (this included the moderators and PYC staff). The student leader in charge of this project had warned us that engaging students at South Burlington is incredibly difficult. This appears to be true from this forum where students, although the event was promoted well and the feedback from the teachers groups and other supported it, failed to attend. This can be fixed potentially by having government classes attend the class for credit, but that did not work very well in South Burlington this time.

Student Participation: Student leader participation was also a challenge. All but one of the student leaders who had signed up to work on this project ended up dropping out. All of the work for this forum was done by one student leader and the PYC intern. This was a obstacle that was hard to overcome but it was possible.
The Winooski Community Forum on Current Issues was held on Monday, October 16, 2017 from 4:30 PM to 7:30 PM in the Winooski School cafeteria.

A total of 27 participants attended the Winooski Community Forum on Current Issues. Several significant members of the Winooski community and beyond attended, including the former National Education Association (NEA) president, a Winooski administrator, a Winooski High School principal, and a Winooski School teacher. In addition, several Winooski high school students (many of them athletes) were present.

Attendees began arriving around 4:30 pm. Upon arriving, attendees were encouraged to eat dinner and socialize with other participants. At around 5:15 PM, student leaders led opening remarks before participants broke out into three discussion groups, which rotated through the three issues that the forum covered: white supremacy, Islamophobia, and proficiency-based learning. Each discussion group, which focused on a particular issue, was opened by a speaker who provided fact-based information regarding the issue, a moderator who guided the dialogue and managed time, and a student leader who took notes and/or participated in the dialogues. Each group spent approximately 25 minutes learning about and engaging in conversation about the assigned issue.

Successes
There were a lot of successes experienced throughout the process of planning and hosting the Winooski Community Forum on Current Issues. Here are some of the biggest successes that we experienced:

Productivity: While student leaders struggled to communicate in a timely manner, the in-person meetings were incredibly productive. Student leaders participated in informative, respectful dialogues and openly voiced their opinions, differences and agreements with the utmost consideration. So many clarifications and new ideas were discovered during these meetings. Students really took ownership of the time they had together; there was always pressure to get a lot done since we only met once per week but student leaders kept themselves focused and maintained an efficient balance of seriousness and fun.

Self-growth: This forum project really pushed everyone – adults and youth – to experience self-growth. Some of the evident growth throughout the process was: speaking in front of a large
group of people, students collaborating with teachers and other adults on more of a peer-to-peer level, flexible thinking in terms of letting go of original plans to accommodate unexpected problems or changes, building relationships with people you don’t know well or at all, learning how to have and/or moderate uncomfortable conversations, time-management and other organizational skills, and many more.

Forum Event: Student leaders shared several concerns about the forum event throughout the planning process… everything from low turnout, time to fit everything in, recruiting helpers, and more. And the really cool thing is that the forum happened and it happened with only minor glitches.

Challenges

Both adult facilitators and student leaders collaborating on the Winooski forum encountered challenges in the planning process and hosting of the forum event:

Time: The biggest challenge consistently experienced by Winooski student leaders was time. All student leaders were juggling multiple responsibilities, including AP classes, college visits, school work, athletics, after school activities, and family responsibilities. It was challenging to get everyone in the same place at the same time and for student leaders to find and organize time to complete their individual and collaborative aspects to planning the forum. If there was more time to complete the forum, student leaders would have had more opportunities to exhibit leadership and create different materials for the forum, such as the speaking script, flyer, program, etc. These documents could have provided a lot of learning for these students but it was mostly assumed by one or more adult facilitators due to time constraints.

Communication. Communication was also a consistent challenge for both student leaders and adult facilitators. It was challenging to communicate, in general, with all of the invested parties that contributed to the Winooski forum - adult facilitators, student leaders, moderators, interpreters, community members, and more. Keeping everyone informed, up-to-date, and included in the process was certainly a learning process for the adult facilitator assigned to assisting Winooski student leaders and for student leaders themselves; it took awhile to figure out how to streamline the communication process and there was certainly room for improvement even at the conclusion of forum event. It was particularly difficult to maintain communication with and amongst student leaders… Consistently, two Winooski student leaders rarely responded to ongoing email communications. One Winooski student leader did consistently respond to email communications in a timely manner, requested assistance as needed, wrote on behalf of the other student leaders, and took on the responsibility of communicating with the other student leaders through in-person interactions. The lack of communication made it difficult to plan meetings in a timely manner, oftentimes resulting in meetings being planned with minimal advanced notice. However, the email communications helped student leaders become more knowledgeable about email functions, such as “reply” and “reply all.” And the lack of
communication was partially compensated for in the weekly planning meetings, where a
designated amount of time was set for students to ask questions, share updates, and make sure
everyone was on the same page.

Ownership: It was interesting to see the varying degrees of ownership demonstrated by student
leaders throughout the forum project. There is no doubt that all of the student leaders
demonstrated ownership of their forum during in-person meetings, but it was in between the
in-person meetings where ownership tended to decrease. Many times, the tasks that were
delegated to different student leaders at one meeting were never accomplished and had to be
revisited, reassigned or completed together during the following meeting. Continual offers to
assist students in-person with various tasks were almost always turned down and, out of
respect for the choices of the student leaders, were never pushed further than the initial offer.
The challenges of time and communication already mentioned certainly contributed to the
different degrees of ownership exhibited by the individual student leaders at Winooski.
Additionally, some student leaders had limited access to technology at home (e.g., computer or
printer) and the forum required numerous skill sets and personal self-growth (e.g., time
management skills, getting the courage to speak in front of a large audience, etc.).

Language facilitation: Lastly, it was challenging to accommodate the many languages that are
presently spoken in the Winooski community in the students’ advertising methods and
interpretation services at the forum. Student leaders prepared a district-wide message to
families that was translated into a couple of languages before being delivered to families.
However, the forum flyer could not accommodate any foreign languages and therefore was
written only in English. This did affect awareness of the forum and its details to a degree… For
example, one parent who required interpretation services attended the forum but was not aware
that child care assistance was available; she had to leave the forum before the meal was
completed to return to her children at home. It was also challenging for student leaders to
choose which languages would be supported at their forum, how many interpreters would be
available to support a particular language, etc. Student leaders ended up recruiting student
interpreters from their school for a variety of languages – but they had little control over the
variety of the languages that would be supported and depended more on the willingness of
certain students to contribute interpretation services to the forum; thankfully, adult interpreters
were recruited by adult facilitators and therefore multiple languages were able to be supported
at the forum.
Conclusion

The scope of this project was expanded above and beyond what was proposed to the Nellie Mae Education Foundation when the application for this opportunity was submitted, so that we could create the space for emerging young leaders to set new precedents for student-led initiatives.

While there were some unforeseen challenges, as well as some that were expected, the overall outcome of the project was an invaluable shared experience with unending nuance.

This project was the first of its kind in our community, and we are grateful for the opportunity to be leaders in this work. Ideally, not only will this project provide some insight into where young people stand on some of our most pressing issues, it may also serve as a baseline for how we engage young people on a routine basis.