

Part 4 – INCLUDING STUDENT VOICES

One of the fundamental principles of a future search is to “get the whole system in the room.” We do this by working with a planning team that ideally represents the whole system. Interestingly, the group that typically eludes the planning team is the one that is most affected by the work of school districts—children and youth. Some people feel the kids really cannot handle a future search (kids ranging in age from 9 to 16) and that it would not be responsible to demand this of them. They worry that the children would not be comfortable speaking up in such a setting. Invariably the youth participants become the “truth tellers” and the ones who raise the really important issues, or ask very provocative, simple questions that enable the whole conference to move deeper.

If youth are important stakeholders in the outcome, they need to be involved in the planning team, as they are mindful of youth needs. Getting youth participants to attend the conference often presents some additional challenges to the conference planning team. Arranging transportation and securing parental permission and support is vital. The planning team must enlist a diversity of youth; the young people who look “good” to adults, the young people who are respected by their peers, and the young people who are outsiders and not being well served. The three chapters in this section illustrate the influence children and youth were able to have.

In Santa Monica, CA (chapter 10), student voices were heard, student leadership was acknowledged, and the issue of equity and equality for *all* strategic plan is to close the achievement gap that is documented in achievement scores and distrust—the gap that appears between rich and poor, between whites and Hispanics, blacks, and other people of color living in Santa Monica.

At the Novato School District Future Search Conference in California (chapter 11), there had been no students on the planning committee. The student participants had not been informed about the structure or principles of the process and fought it because they had no confidence that their voices would be heard. At the most critical part of the conference, the students threatened to walk out! Other voices resonated and were sympathetic to student concerns. How this was handled as well as how this school district successfully used future search to respond to charges of racism are described in this chapter.

In Montreal, QC (chapter 12), the story about students is not found so much in what happened during the conference but rather what happened afterward. One of the six action groups from this future search formed a central student committee, ensuring that students are full educational partners in this district. These central student committees—still a rarity in the education world although most individual schools have student committees—are gaining in popularity as students are speaking up and having a greater influence on their education. This chapter also includes discussions on leadership, broad commitment to follow-up, and meaningful coincidence.