Students matter in school reform: leaving fingerprints and becoming leaders

JERUSHA OSBERG, DENISE POPE and MOLLIE GALLOWAY

Our examination of three schools demonstrates how students can be involved in school reform by giving input about problems, helping design the reform, and sharing implementation responsibilities with adult leaders. Their involvement affects both the reform—as students leave their fingerprints on it—and the students themselves, who show signs of emerging leadership.

In 1982, Michael Fullan posed the question: ‘What would happen if we treated the student as someone whose opinion mattered in the introduction and implementation of reform in school?’ When he revised the work nearly two decades later, he repeated this same question, noting, ‘little progress has been made … in treating the student as a serious member of the school’ (Fullan 2001: 151).

Though Fullan’s question remains largely unanswered, calls to involve students in school reform have grown louder and more frequent. Scholars enumerate pragmatic reasons to involve students in school change, such as students having unique perspectives and insights to contribute (Rudduck, Day and Wallace 1997, Cook-Sather 2002); student data can galvanize otherwise skeptical teachers to make changes (Levin 2000); and students can undermine or sabotage even the best-intentioned reform effort if they have not bought into it (Cervone 2002). Other researchers argue that students should play an active role in determining the learning environment (Levin 2000, Cook-Sather 2002), and that youth involvement in school reform is consistent with democratic notions of representation and participation (Checkoway and Richards-Schuster forthcoming).

These recent arguments have been bolstered by a handful of reports and studies that highlight student participation in school reform (for a review, see Fletcher 2004). Much of this research describes groups of students, facilitated by an adult leader, who examine a problem in their schools and then make demands or recommendations for change. Research on student participation has shown...
leaders who partner with traditional adult leaders within the school to effect change remains rare. Furthermore, current research on student voice tends to focus on student empowerment or to consider how the experience of participation changed students (Soo Hoo 1993, Mitra 2004, Kirshner 2004). How the school changed (or failed to change) in the wake of their efforts is less thoroughly documented.

This article looks closely at school reform and the involvement of individual student leaders occupying a sanctioned seat at the table alongside adult decision-makers. The dual perspectives of adults and students presented here convey the complexity of school change and offer implications for both small-scale and school-wide student participation in education reform.

The SOS intervention and reform model

This article relies on data from participants in the Stressed-Out Students (SOS) intervention. SOS aims to provide school stakeholders with tools to reduce academic stress and to promote student health, engagement in learning, and academic integrity. The intervention helps school leaders effect change in their school cultures, policies, and practices.

Each school that chooses to participate in the intervention establishes an SOS school team, comprised of a variety of school stakeholders. School teams of up to eight individuals must include the principal and at least one teacher, one student, and one parent. In addition, an outside ‘coach’ is assigned to each team to help facilitate discussion and to provide information about research-based best practices. Here, we focus on adult and student perceptions of the student’s role on the SOS team.

Twice a year, the SOS teams gather at Stanford University, where they participate in facilitated exchanges with other SOS school teams, research-based workshops, and structured work time in which they design their own blueprints for change. School teams identify the most pressing issues affecting student health, engagement, and integrity in their sites; they then determine which changes they can make in policy and practice to address those issues. In the last three years, the intervention has involved over 25 middle schools and high schools.

Methods and sample

This article presents the work and experiences of three SOS school teams. Each of these schools has been involved with the intervention for three years. These three sites were selected for this study because they emerged as leaders within the context of the SOS intervention. Toward the end of their first year of involvement, a team member from each of these schools responded to an email sent by the SOS staff, requesting volunteers to speak about their experiences with SOS on a panel in front of an audience of new and veteran SOS teams. These three respondents included: an assistant principal, representing a public high school; a parent and teacher, representing an
independent school (grades 6–12); and a principal, representing a private high school.

We draw on data from multiple sources, including transcripts of the speakers’ comments on the panel, follow-up interviews with the three speakers, and interviews with a select sample of student stakeholders on these three teams. All interviews followed a semi-structured protocol, were taped and transcribed, and have been coded using open and axial coding techniques (Strauss and Corbin 1998).

To develop a more complete understanding of how the teams operated and how they involved students in their work, we also draw on transcripts of team meetings, and on field notes recorded during a cross-team sharing session during their second year of involvement, in which the team members from these three schools gathered in small groups to discuss their experiences and progress with other school teams.

**SOS work in three schools**

In this section, we present portraits of our three case study schools, focusing on the different strategies the schools use to involve students in the reform process. In each case, we describe who was involved in the reform, how adults and students view the success of the reform, and how the students feel about their contributions to the team process.

**Fairview**

A medium-sized comprehensive high school, located in an affluent California (USA) suburb, Fairview has consistently ranked as one of the highest performing schools in the state, based on student standardized test scores. In the last ten years, the numbers of Asian students in the school has risen steadily, and Asian students now comprise half of the student body.

At Fairview, the SOS work was melded into the work of an existing committee associated with the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC), a regional accrediting association. The SOS/WASC committee consisted of four teachers, four parents, two administrators, and six students. The teachers had volunteered, the parents had been elected by members of the Parent Teacher Student Association (PTSA), and the administrators hand-selected the students because, as Sally, the assistant principal recalled, ‘We wanted a cross-section of kids, a cross-section of grade levels and ethnicities… GPAs [Grade Point Averages].’ In addition, the school established a subcommittee of teachers to work on scheduling issues, and a subcommittee of teachers to work on devising a homework policy.

Fairview began its joint SOS/WASC efforts by surveying all of its students, using a survey instrument developed by the Stanford coach, based on data she had collected in initial focus groups and on items and scales from research on motivation and schooling. The survey questions asked students about their perceptions of the school culture, their mental health, and their
experiences in one of their core academic classes. The coach analysed the results and shared them with the school. Sally recalled:

There were four things that came out loud and clear... One was the amount of homework. One was that kids had no time; their lives were completely programmed. The third one [was] a lot of pressure about grades and a lot of pressure from the parents... And that’s why we felt really comfortable delving into those areas.

According to Sally, the homework policy subcommittee and the scheduling subcommittee were created to tackle the issues that emerged from the student surveys.

As the SOS/WASC committee and the subcommittees moved forward with their work, changes began to happen at Fairview, eventually resulting in what Sally would deem ‘a complete transformation’. The scheduling subcommittee recommended that the school change from a traditional seven period day to a modified block schedule. At the panel session, Sally explained, ‘we have had a faculty vote now on the alternative schedule and we will be starting the alternative schedule next year with 70% of the faculty in favour of that process’. Sally also noted that, ‘we, as a staff, initiated several other changes’. At a faculty meeting in the second year of SOS work, the staff voted to change their grading system, by eliminating pluses and minuses and to support a system of un-weighted GPAs. Three departments also voted to ‘go open access’, allowing any student to enrol in honours and Advanced Placement courses. According to Sally, in its second and third year of SOS involvement, Fairview ‘made enough changes to last for ten years’.

One of the changes that most pleased Sally was the newfound empowerment of the faculty:

We have seen so much teacher leadership that has never existed before because they've never been given the opportunity... The things we're doing are great and it’s all teacher-generated. So that's a really exciting component.

From Sally’s perspective, the teachers deserve credit for initiating change, implementing new policies and practices, and improving the educational climate at Fairview.

One of the student stakeholders on the SOS team, Alice, tells a slightly different version of the school change process. According to Alice, the students on the SOS/WASC committee were responsible for coming up with the modified block schedule idea and for voting to approve the change in how GPAs were calculated. In an interview in year three, Alice recounted how the students first suggested the school consider a block schedule:

ALICE: In the beginning of the [SOS/WASC] meetings [the facilitator] kept asking us, ‘What do you think would be the best way to, you know, reduce stress without lowering the academic rigor at this school?’ We were like, ‘Well maybe like a modified schedule.’

INTERVIEWER: and ‘we’ meaning?

ALICE: The students on WASC.

Later in the year, at an SOS retreat, for which Alice and the other student stakeholders missed a day of school, the students were asked to explain what they wanted in a new daily schedule. Alice recalled, ‘We said we wanted a
break in the mid-morning and they really understood that... We made a list of exactly what we could do to make the schedule better and they really like catered to our needs’. Alice affirmed that all of the student demands on this list were met. In explaining the school’s decision to implement the block schedule, Alice mentioned neither the teacher scheduling subcommittee nor the faculty vote, in which 70% of the teachers approved the change. In fact, Alice believed that the SOS/WASC committee never met without the student representatives: ‘I don’t think they would have done that [met without the students] either... because we’re like the students. We’re what is, you know, making this school’.

With regard to the change in GPA calculation, Alice worried that perhaps the students on the WASC committee had not adequately represented the perspective of the entire student body:

We decided that we didn’t want that extra point given... and lots of upper class men didn’t like that too much, and so that was one of the things that we weren’t really sure about... We weren’t sure if they were being exactly heard, because we want to do our best to represent everyone.

Despite this slight misgiving, Alice believed that it was the students on the SOS/WASC committee who had made the decision to change the GPA policy.

Overall, Alice was proud of her involvement with the committee, and she had only positive things to say about the effectiveness of the new block schedule. She attributed the success of the new schedule to the committee members’ ‘determination’ and desire to improve the school. As a student member, she felt ‘listened to’, and she believed the adult members took the students’ ideas and suggestions ‘seriously’. In response to the question, ‘Who had the ultimate say?’ Alice responded, ‘It was equal [students and adults]. We made sure that everyone was okay with something before we decided on it’.

Redwood

Walkways lined with flowers curve around the Redwood private school campus, flanking grand, old stone buildings and running past benches and oak trees. Slightly more than 700 students attend Redwood, some of whose daily commutes to school take more than an hour each way. The student body consists primarily of students from middle to upper middle class backgrounds, with minority students making up one-third of the population.

The SOS school team Redwood created consisted of the principal, two students (both freshmen), two parents, and two faculty members, one of whom served as the school’s college counsellor. In the second year, another student, who had heard about the group and expressed interest in their work, joined the team. On the SOS team, the principal, Susanna, became a strong presence, demonstrating a firm commitment to the SOS work.

Although Susanna asserted herself as the unofficial leader of the SOS team, she acknowledged that the students on the team were responsible for ‘generating issues for our school to look at, such as the test calendar and the Declaration of Integrity’. The test calendar shows which teachers have assigned tests on which dates, and ideally should be used to ensure that students don’t have too many exams each week. Corroborating Susanna’s
J. OSBERG, D. POPE AND M. GALLOWAY

notion that the idea to focus on the test calendar came from the students, one of the student stakeholders described the process by which the team decided to look at this practice:

The one big change that we [students] were pushing for was for the test calendar to be more effective. We have one, but the teachers can reschedule, and there are seriously some leaks, where there’s just test, test, test, test, test, like every period. And I don’t think the teachers realize it.

‘At the suggestion of our SOS students’, the school has put the test calendar on-line and established a policy that no student can have more than three tests a day. Susanna has monitored which teachers do not use or honour the testing calendar, and she has worked with department chairs to get these teachers to adjust their practices. The students on the SOS team also have been involved with monitoring their teachers’ use of the test calendar. In the third year of their SOS involvement, one student, Karen, reflected that the test calendar still needed some work, ‘because some of the teachers, they still have to sign up for it, but they are not’. She continued, ‘[This is one] thing we have started and need to improve upon’.

Another reform effort the SOS group undertook involved the school’s honour code and issues of academic integrity. According to Susanna, the honour code project ‘came through one of the adult members and one of the student members on our team’. The project began with a survey of the student body, which was designed by the members of the SOS team to gauge levels and conceptions of cheating, students’ familiarity with and respect for the existing honour code, and students’ perceptions of teacher practices around the honour code. According to one of the students involved, a main finding to emerge from the surveys was ‘that people didn’t know much about the honour code… some of the words are hard to understand… and people didn’t really get it’. In response, the SOS team decided to launch a year-long process in which all students would be involved in rewriting the school’s honour code. As one student explained, the feeling on the SOS team was that ‘if everyone helped create one, it would mean more to them. They would be more invested in it’. In their homerooms, students were asked to brainstorm words, phrases, and concepts that they thought should be included in the new honour code. Representatives from each homeroom then met, along with the three SOS student team leaders and an adult SOS team member, to share their lists and to identify common themes. Together, they then composed a ‘Declaration of Integrity’. ‘Then our principal saw it, and our teachers saw it, and it had to pass everyone’s inspection’, recounted Karen.

When asked who ultimately approved the new code, Karen indicated that it was the students who signed off on it: ‘They had their input to make it… essentially their words that made it. And then once the final thing, like the order and everything [was written out], they read it and they were like, “Okay. That’s okay”. Then they had to learn it’.

Susanna described the honour code reform effort at Redwood as a ‘student-driven’ process. Karen saw it as more of a ‘collaboration’ between adults and students. She explained that although the students wrote the Declaration of Integrity, ‘our teachers typed up the actual copy of it for us… and an adult, I am assuming, put it on the letterhead’, which was then mailed home to students.
Karen and Susanna agreed, however, that the posters and the mailings sent to all students announcing the new honour code marked only the beginning of an effort to change the school’s culture. Susanna deemed it ‘a good first step’, and Karen echoed, ‘I think it’s steps, baby steps’. Karen believed that students would be more aware of academic integrity infractions now and would think twice before they copied someone else’s work, but she did not think that ‘one Honour Code is going to change everything’. Although they knew there was more work ahead of them, both Susanna and Karen were pleased with and proud of the Declaration, and the process that wrought it.

Like the team at Fairview, the Redwood team also decided to consider changes they could make to their daily schedule. A scheduling committee ‘branched off’ from the SOS group, and began to investigate block scheduling. Karen served on this subcommittee as well, and she explained, that the adults on the committee showed enthusiasm for the idea of block scheduling, but the students ‘didn’t want that at all. So we didn’t have block scheduling… I guess I was really adamant that I didn’t want block scheduling, so I thought I’d put an end to that’. When asked where the SOS team’s work might be headed next, neither Susanna nor Karen mentioned anything further about the block schedule.

Karen saw herself as an integral member of the SOS team: ‘I would say my role is like extremely important in that… the group couldn’t function without the students. We are all equally important’. She felt that the adults were ‘always extremely interested to hear what we have to say’ and that ‘they really appreciated what we were saying’.

**Glenhaven**

With its well-manicured soccer fields and clean, modern buildings, Glenhaven sits snugly in a quiet neighbourhood, adorned with elegant homes and tree-lined streets. It is an independent day school, serving 400 students in grades six through 12. The school’s website proudly proclaims that more than two-thirds of its graduating seniors have been recognized in national merit competition, and ‘one-third or more’ of its graduates are routinely ‘admitted to the most competitive institutions in the country’.

The team that Glenhaven formed for the SOS intervention included a female student, Jayne, who was a freshman during the first year of the SOS process, two parents, one of whom was also a teacher, the director of the upper school and the director of the middle school. The teacher-parent team member, Katharine, explained that four years earlier, with three colleagues, she had devised ‘a series of guidelines to help reduce student workload and stress’, but was frustrated that these initial guidelines seemed to have little effect on changing faculty practice. It was perhaps because of this longstanding involvement with the issue that Katharine emerged as a key leader of her SOS team.

According to Katharine, early in the SOS process, the Glenhaven team decided to ‘focus [its] efforts on gathering data in a more concrete fashion’. With the help of their coach, they gathered various survey instruments used
in other SOS school sites, and then developed an instrument that would provide them with information about students’ workloads, emotional well-being, integrity, and engagement in learning. Although the student stakeholder, Jayne, was not involved in the initial design of the instrument, she was given an opportunity at one of the SOS team meetings to review an early draft. She remembered asking a few questions about the survey and being pleasantly ‘surprised’ at the depth of the questions. In a cross-team sharing session, however, Jayne noted some unresolved issues that arose from the survey process:

**DIRECTOR OF THE UPPER SCHOOL:** Jayne, you tell me. But I think the students trusted we were doing [the survey] for good reasons.

**JAYNE:** I heard some people saying, ‘The info will just go back to Stanford,’ and I said, ‘No actually. It’s just for us.’

**DIRECTOR OF THE UPPER SCHOOL:** But my sense was that they took it seriously and they don’t necessarily want to know specific results by grade.

**JAYNE:** A little bit about specifics by grade level would be nice.

At this point, the conversation shifted gears to focus on parent networks, and Jayne’s concerns about possible misinformation about the nature of the survey, as well as her request that the students be apprised of some of the results, went unanswered.

SOS leaders, like Katharine, who analysed the data did find striking differences in students’ experiences by grade. To confirm these findings, faculty and administrators then conducted focus groups with approximately 20 students at each grade level. Based on these data and ‘input from faculty and staff’, Katharine explained, ‘we came up with a [revised] set of guidelines to reduce student workload and stress… We’re getting some extra feedback now, and it will be approved by our Academic Admin Council’. Katharine believed that the surveys and focus groups offered ‘proof’ to convince the faculty of the need for the new guidelines.

Katharine went on to explain that the process for faculty approval of the guidelines took so long that they ‘really didn’t have time to share [them] with the students’. She acknowledged the need to inform the students of the new guidelines this year.

Although Jayne knew about the guidelines, it is not clear if she had a hand in creating them. Katharine said that the SOS team met ‘about every three weeks’, but that they would ‘choose strategic meetings’ where they would invite Jayne, including the meeting where they revised the guidelines. Jayne doesn’t mention this meeting, nor did she attend the meeting where they presented the guidelines to the faculty—though she believes, ‘if I asked to go, I could have’. She explained her decision not to attend: ‘I think it was just more like the teachers presenting the logistics of what the teachers were going to do and [they] didn’t really need [me to explain] the “why”, because everybody knew why’.

In addition to the survey work and the revision of the guidelines, the Glenhaven SOS team focused on changing the school schedule. Because the
school had hired an outside scheduling consultant to ‘look at both our yearly calendar and our daily schedule’ before it joined the SOS intervention, Glenhaven was able to make substantive changes fairly early in the SOS process. These changes included moving exams before winter break; implementing a special four-day period in October for seniors to work on their college applications; and adjusting the weekly schedule to allow more time for students to have study hall, for teachers to hold conferences, and for faculty to meet to collaborate.  

When explaining these changes during the panel, Katharine said, ‘We just approved a new yearly calendar’, and ‘We just approved a new weekly schedule’. It is unclear whether the ‘we’ she refers to is the SOS team or the faculty; however, in an interview, Jayne indicated that she was not involved in the process of developing or choosing these scheduling changes. When asked, ‘How did the school come up with that schedule?’, Jayne recalled:

Mr. Samuelson and I think Ms. Carmichael and they also worked with the schedules. There was some special person that knew a lot of schedules, and they worked on it for a really long time. I wasn’t a part of that, but they came up with several different schedules and somehow figured out which one they liked best.

Although she liked many aspects of the new daily schedule and mentioned that she has ‘heard a lot of [students]’ talk about enjoying the ‘less cluttered’ schedule and having ‘more time to do homework’, Jayne did voice some concerns and confusion about the changes. First, she did not completely buy the argument that moving exams before break would reduce student stress:

They said that it is supposed to be less stressful having the finals before break, because otherwise you are stressed over break. But [exams] have always been late enough after break, about three weeks after break, that the teachers didn’t give you the study guides or anything [over break]. I never actually personally knew anybody who had work to do for finals over winter break. So I am not exactly sure what they were going for.

Second, when asked if there was anything she would like to change about the new schedule, Jayne explained that lunch occurred too late in the day now:

This is the big thing that people are complaining about. I think it is like the period right before lunch, … half of [the students] are sitting there going, ‘I am really hungry. I have no idea what you are talking about, because my stomach is eating itself.’

In response to a follow-up question about whether or not the teachers were aware of this problem, Jayne reflected, ‘I think that they might not know, but they probably know. I am not sure if they are actually thinking about changing it’. It seems that, to Jayne, the change-makers in her school—at least in terms of the changes described here—are the faculty and the administrators.  

Jayne described her involvement with the SOS school team by saying, ‘I didn’t do any, like, really big things. I mostly just said what I thought’. She often felt as though the other team members knew what she was thinking without her even having to say anything: ‘They knew how the students felt and what needed to be changed’. She believed that her input was taken into account; however, she wished more students were asked to serve on the school team:
Table 1. Summary of strategies used to involve students in reform

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Soliciting student input about the problems</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listening to students</td>
<td>Glenhaven, Fairview, Redwood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hand-selecting student representatives</td>
<td>Glenhaven, Fairview, Redwood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surveying student body</td>
<td>Glenhaven, Fairview, Redwood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conducting focus groups</td>
<td>Glenhaven, Fairview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Giving students an 'equal' say in</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identifying the problem</td>
<td>Fairview, Redwood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generating solutions</td>
<td>Fairview, Redwood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Determining solutions</td>
<td>Fairview*(^*), Redwood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharing with students implementation responsibility</td>
<td>Redwood</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^*\)According to the student leader.

At this school people didn’t really feel that they were really part of [the SOS efforts]. They didn’t feel bad about that, but that was just kind of how it was. At the beginning, if they had said, ‘We want one student from each grade,’ I think that would have brought more perspective to it.

**Strategies for involving students**

Each of the three school teams described above effected change in their schools. They differed, however, with respect to the targets and scope of their reform efforts, the decision processes they used to design and implement the reform, and their perceptions of the reform’s success. The three schools also differed in the techniques they used for involving students in their reform work. Table 1 identifies these strategies.

Despite the myriad differences between our three case study schools, all three show how schools can treat students as people whose ideas and opinions about educational reform matter. They also show that treating students in this way can make a difference not only to the students, but also to the reform.

**Soliciting Student Input**

The structure of the SOS intervention required school teams to listen to students. Because the intervention obliged every team to have at least one student member, her perspective was accessible to each team from the outset of their participation in SOS.

The three school teams profiled here each hand-selected its student representatives. Regardless of the motivation behind this selection process, it did seem to matter to each of the student stakeholders we interviewed that she was individually invited to be a member of the team.

All three of the teams also decided to survey their entire student bodies in order to obtain a deeper understanding of the nature of the problems their students faced. This strategy demonstrated the school’s commitment to
soliciting student voice as well as its recognition that a handful of student stakeholders could not possibly represent the experiences and perspectives of all the students in their community. Although Redwood’s survey was most inspired by students’ perceptions of important questions, we cannot say that involving students in the design of the survey instrument necessarily makes it a better tool. For instance, Jayne recalled being surprised by some of the questions that the Glenhaven survey contained because they were ‘questions that I would really like to answer that I didn’t necessarily think to ask’. By the same token, schools that design surveys without student input might overlook certain areas of inquiry that students would point to as vital to understanding their experiences.

*Giving students an ‘equal’ say*

Used by two of our case study schools, the strategies of ‘Giving students an “equal” say’ in various aspects of the reform development process may seem problematic on two fronts. First, the act of ‘giving’ implies that the power or the authority is the adults’ to give, and therefore, something that the adult can reclaim at any moment. However, because students so rarely have any real voice in shaping school policies, and because the traditional hierarchical structure of schools still assumes that students will defer to adult authority, the act of ‘giving’ seems not only appropriate, but also critical to legitimize any transference or redistribution of power within the school context.

Second, a question of validity arises when we use the word ‘giving’. Alice and Karen both felt as if they had ‘equal’ say in shaping the work of their SOS team and both believed that having such say was important. Alice, however, did not seem to know about either the subcommittee of teachers working on the scheduling issue or the faculty’s vote to approve the change to a block schedule. The assistant principal at her school indicated that one of the challenges of the SOS reform effort was figuring out ‘how we were going to do this so people felt they were involved but that the educational community would be the ones making the final decisions’. Although Sally doesn’t clarify what she means by ‘educational community’ here, it is clear that not all stakeholders at Fairview would have an equal say. Sally’s comment raises questions about the benefits and drawbacks of allowing some stakeholders to think they have more power than they actually do. It also raises questions about the feasibility of involving all stakeholders equally, particularly when they do not have equal knowledge of the issues and the alternatives.

*Sharing implementation responsibility*

The decision to share implementation responsibility for a school reform with students is rare; however, we did see this strategy employed at Redwood, where Karen felt that students shared the responsibility for both developing and implementing the new honour code with adult stakeholders. Both
Susanna and Karen recognized roles for themselves in talking about the new honour code with students and in enacting it by upholding its guiding principles in their own actions.

Though the implementation of an honour code may seem more amenable to student involvement than the implementation of a block schedule, we agree with Corbett and Wilson (1995) that any reform that expects a different kind of behaviour or outcome from students requires students to redefine their roles, and that such role redefinition demands explicit training and support. For the reform to truly change student behaviour, students must do more than comply with its dictates; they must understand and embrace its intentions. When students and adults share implementation responsibilities, they can begin to facilitate mutual role redefinition. It is beyond the scope of this article to assess how student behaviours or attitudes changed at our three case study schools in the wake of their reform efforts; however, we do recognize places where Fairview and Glenhaven could have involved students in the implementation of the new schedules as a way of preparing them for their changing roles.

The SOS schools profiled here have illustrated the use of many different strategies to involve students in the work of school reform. We believe that all of these strategies honour and empower students. We also believe that each of these strategies has the potential to affect both the reform and the students involved. In the next section, we observe that the more strategies a school employs to involve students in the work of school reform, the easier it is to see the effects not only of the students on the reform, but also of the reform process on the students.

Leaving fingerprints and developing leadership

The student’s fingerprint

Whether they are consulted about the reforms the school should make or charged with implementing the reform, when they are involved in such an effort, students leave a fingerprint. These fingerprints may be light or dark, big or small. They can come from any of the strategies we outlined in Table 1. These fingerprints can affect either the shape of the reform or the process by which change happens at the school. They can result in reforms that are more responsive to students’ needs, and they can help galvanize support and generate buy-in to the change process, among both students and faculty.

At Fairview, the fingerprints of Alice and her fellow student stakeholders on the SOS/WASC committee can be seen most clearly in the list of demands they made for the new schedule. At Redwood, students’ fingerprints are apparent in the style and substance of the new Declaration of Integrity they wrote. Karen’s fingerprint is also visible in her (alleged) stymieing of the discussions about block scheduling. At Glenhaven, the students’ fingerprints are fainter; however, without the student voice captured in the survey results, change might have not occurred in this school site: Katharine used the survey data to persuade her colleagues that a schedule change was necessary. In this way, the students left their mark on the
reform process. School leaders who want to involve students in the work of school reform should think carefully about the students’ potential to change either the reform itself or the process by which change happens at the school before they engage students in such efforts.

Emerging leadership

The three students in our case studies revealed that being involved in reform work affected how they saw themselves and their schools. These changes occurred along three dimensions, which we associate with emerging leadership skills. Alice and Karen showcased these changes to a greater extent than did Jayne.

First, Alice and Karen gave voice to many more assertions of efficacy than did Jayne. Jayne felt that she ‘didn’t do any like really big things’, whereas both Karen and Alice expressed the belief that without their involvement, the reform effort would not have been successful. They saw themselves as integral members of their SOS committees, and both used the word ‘equal’ to describe the importance of their contribution relative to that of the adults on their team.

We also noticed that Alice and Karen both expressed a sense of responsibility to their schools and their classmates. Karen described herself as a ‘student advocate’, and explained that she tries to be ‘informative to people’ by sharing tools and knowledge she has gained through her involvement with SOS. Alice spoke about her determination and desire ‘to help make Fairview a less stressful environment’. Neither Alice nor Karen missed an SOS related meeting; however, Jayne did pass up some opportunities to participate in the SOS work. When the girls were asked about where they saw their schools going next with their SOS work, both Karen and Alice indicated that they saw a continuing role for themselves in the efforts. Jayne, on the other hand, does not seem to know if there will be a role for her on the team this year, even though she says she would like to remain involved.

Both Alice and Karen also showed more in-depth knowledge of the processes by which change came about in their school communities than did Jayne. Where Alice and Karen could offer detailed descriptions of procedures, choices, and contributions, Jayne was less certain about who chose the new schedule, why they designed it as they did, and ‘what they were going for’. Jayne’s uncertainty about the change process, like her relatively weaker senses of efficacy and responsibility, presumably resulted from her lower degree of involvement in the SOS work. Certainly, she was less involved than Karen and Alice. She was also less supported. At Redwood, Susanna held meetings with the students who were charged with heading up the revision process, to ‘help them to understand their leadership roles as the process went forward’. At Fairview, Alice was invited to participate in a daylong retreat, for which she was allowed to miss school. Both Fairview and Redwood made investments in their student stakeholders, and this investment seemed to make a difference to the commitment as well as to the growth of the individual students. The potential effects of participation for Jayne may also have been dampened because she was excluded from
some meetings, because she was not granted an equal say in determining either the problem or the solution, and because she was the only student stakeholder on the team.

School leaders who involve students in the work of school reform should consider how such factors as the number of students on team, the age of students on the team, the support and training students receive, and the messages they are sent about their value affect their leadership development. To maximize the potential benefits to students of involvement in school reform, schools may need to do more than simply appoint them to a committee and ask them to react to the work that adults do.

**Conclusion**

In this article we explored Fullan’s question about what happens when students’ opinions about the introduction and implementation of reform are taken seriously. Although Redwood may have been the only school to involve students in the implementation of school reform, all three schools treated students’ ideas and opinions as if they mattered, and in all three cases, the student and adult leaders were generally pleased with the results of their work. Alice and Sally were both thrilled with the new block schedule at Fairview and voiced no complaints. Karen and Susanna both took pride in and had great hopes for the new honour code at Redwood, though they knew more work lay ahead. And Katharine and Jayne both regarded the new schedule favourably, though Jayne did voice some concern about the lateness of lunch.

In addition to the answers provided, these cases raise some interesting questions:

1. What will be the effectiveness of these reforms in changing student attitudes and behaviour? Would any of these reforms have been more effective if students had been granted more say in their design or more responsibilities in their implementation? What would having more say and greater responsibilities have meant for the students’ leadership development?

2. How can schools best balance whole student voice with individual student voice? Would having more students on their SOS teams have made a difference to the reform or to the students involved in our three schools?

3. Who gets the final say in reform work, and what are the advantages and disadvantages of making that authority transparent?

Involving students in the work of school reform can mean using any number of strategies, each of which adds complexity to the school reform process, but offers the potential to generate real effects. Treating students as people whose ideas matter is an important first step; however, we believe the next consideration must be involving them in ways that will be most meaningful to both the reform and the students. Rather than asking what would happen if students were treated as serious members of the school community, we
wonder: How can schools involve students in the introduction and implementation of school reform in ways that best serve them as learners and potential leaders?

References


