

My Voice: Event Synopsis

Media partners New Mexico PBS, KUNM and Generation Justice held listening sessions in August 2017 at the Youth Employment Summer Institute (YES) convening. Roberta Rael, executive director of Generation Justice, identified the YES convening as an opportunity to reach a diverse group of students. She led the facilitation of the listening sessions. YES supports paid summer internships in community organizations and all of the participants were interns with groups like the Southwest Organizing Project (SWOP), Working Classroom, La Plazita Institute, Partnership for Community Action, New Mexico Asian Family Center, New Mexico Black History Organizing Committee, El Centro de Igualdad y Derechos and Generation Justice.

Nearly 80 young people participated. They were organized by grade level in groups no larger than ten. Our goal was to identify common frustrations, barriers, and identify opportunities for systemic change in the education system. Moderators used the same 6 questions about experiences in school. Each table had two moderators and a note taker to record comments verbatim and anonymously.

Several priority areas emerged in the sessions including community, relationships with teachers, and culture in schools. The young people spoke about the need for a strong support system, either in school or outside of school, which can also include family and community organizations. Participants in the listening sessions also expressed a desire to be able to explore their interests and incorporate culture in their education. Many also expressed goals that weren't just about themselves - they spoke about wanting to use their education to help others and engage in their community in positive ways. Teachers and school staff who are genuinely invested in students can have a significant impact, but many students observed that teachers and staff are often unavailable or seem disengaged from their work.

The following selected comments reflect what we heard in the listening sessions:

Community: Young people in the listening sessions expressed a need for strong community in every age group. Many spoke about a need for an integrated approach to learning that both brings community members into schools and gives students a chance to engage with organizations and businesses. Younger students voiced a need to be more inclusive and involved.

Here are some ideas we gathered on increasing community involvement in schools:

“Volunteer or work at the school, or volunteer after school.” (grades 9/10)

“For people who got in trouble, they can do community service, like work at Mr. Candelaria's farm.” (grades 11/12)

“We need partnerships between community organizations and businesses, cooperative relationships.” (age 18+)

“Each one, teach one—we need mentorship back into the community, and we need more!” (age 18+)

Younger students (9th and 10th grade) tended to provide less specific goals and needs at school, suggested they hoped to graduate or have a “good GPA” whereas older students expressed a desire to develop life skills and connect with mentors “to learn, be an innovator, not a slave” in order to succeed in their post-school lives.

Teachers: Relationships with teachers hit a deep nerve, as many young people conveyed their frustration about a perceived disconnect between many teachers and students. Teachers were often cited as either disappointment or a lifeline at school.

Many students pointed to systemic issues, like testing, that keep teachers from helping students connect with the material in a meaningful way:

“I just want to learn something. I feel like I go to school just to be in school, just so they tell you what to do.” (grades 11/12)

“It comes down to the teachers. They treat the advanced classes nicer.” (grades 9/10)

“Teachers don’t teach us how to think, they teach us what to think.” (18+)

“Relationships outside of the classroom (friends, boss) are more supportive than teachers.” (18+)

“School needs to help kids that are getting bullied. Teachers should notice when students don’t talk.” (grades 9/10)

“Teach everyone to challenge an idea, not each other.” (18+)

But some participants said meaningful relationships with teachers helped them:

“It helps when teachers make it relatable, [having] teachers from the reservation.” (grades 9/10)

“My teachers support me. I see being in certain classes, that they may not want to be teaching them (they bash PARCC testing, systematic oppression, trying to education us on a higher level than they are supposed to).” (grades 11/12)

“All of my teachers support us at my small school. There are 35 in a graduation class at Health Leadership. They really keep track of us, ask us how we are doing on assignments.” (mixed ages)

Students also expressed concern for their teachers:

“Being a teacher in NM is hard. Communication could start with teachers by having more training.” (18+)

“Teachers need to work several jobs. My math teacher has another job on Thursdays, another teacher works during lunch. Pay teachers what you are spending on substitutes.” (grades 11/12)

“Teachers don’t get respect. We’re with them all day, not giving them what they deserve. They’re other parents to us. When they are not respected, they don’t have passion and give up on students.” (grades 11/12)

Culture: All age groups emphasized the importance of incorporating culture into the education system. Many conveyed a desire for culture to be infused within their school experiences to provide a more meaningful school experience, one that acknowledges their backgrounds and cultural connections in the community.

“La cultura cura.” (grades 9/10)

Having teachers who come from the community and can relate to students was also an issue raised in several in the listening sessions:

“Teachers should make classrooms more inclusive. They don’t know our community. For example, teachers from the Heights don’t know the South Valley or how to address all different types of students.” (18+)

[from a student who said they attend a school that is not very diverse] “My dance teacher. She is one of the most interesting people. When I’ve struggled with racism, I’ve gone to her. She grew up similarly. (grades 11/12)

“Cultural exchanges make me feel more engaged. It is motivating to all students to have a cultural connection.” (grades 9/10)

And participants noted broader systemic issues in how race and culture are addressed in curriculum:

“The staff offers US History instead of Chicano studies (which is an elective). It doesn’t make sense they should highlight different cultures.” (grades 11/12)

“That’s the colonial system; they want you to have a certain mind. It is up to us to stop and think—why don’t they want us to learn African American, Chicano identity?” (grades 11/12)

Conclusion:

The goal of our project is to use the concerns and potential solutions identified by young people as the starting point for reporting on education in New Mexico in 2018. We will now share both the raw data and our summary report with organizations that sponsored YES interns and participated in the listening sessions at the YES conference.

New Mexico PBS, KUNM and Generation Justice are pursuing reporting on these issues and providing young people from the sessions with the opportunity to engage in our reporting process – either as observers or participants in covering the concerns raised in the listening sessions or the potential solutions identified by the participants.

KNME/New Mexico PBS

New Mexico in Focus is utilizing data from the listening sessions to inform our education reporting in 2018. We are particularly focused on examining potential policy solutions that address the questions raised in the sessions about mentorship and better incorporating culture in the classroom. *NMiF* provides weekly analysis on key issues across the state and facilitates dialogue among a range of community members, from elected officials to grassroots community organizers. There are several ongoing opportunities for students to work with NMIF and learn media production skills. The contact for this project and future education coverage is Sarah Gustavus (sgustavus@nmpbs - 505-750-8049)

KUNM

We're looking forward to creating relationships with students who participated in the listening session and the organizations with which they participate. Students will have the opportunity to plug into news-making activities at KUNM in a variety of ways according to their interests and availability including: pitching stories, choosing sources, interviewing, recording and editing audio, and/or observing and assisting with live broadcasts. News Director Elaine Baumgartel is the point person for this project at KUNM – elaineb@kunm.org, (505) 450-2342.

GENERATION JUSTICE

Generation Justice (GJ) is a multi-racial, multi-cultural project that trains youth to harness the power of media and give rise to narratives based on truth, analysis, and hope. GJ's mission is to inspire youth to become media makers committed to social transformation. In New Mexico, Generation Justice has been recognized as the premier youth media group, and locally and nationally, has been the recipient of numerous awards.

In 2017, GJ served more than 395 organizations, through over 149 activities, trainings and multi-media productions (this includes 52 hours of radio/144 segments, many of which have addressed education issues in New Mexico). GJ had meaningful interactions with more than 448 New Mexicans in media stories, trainings and collaborating on local and national campaigns. Additionally, 25-30 GJ youth members received anywhere from 15-180 hours of hands-on training in all areas of GJ's capacity building efforts.

Established in 2005, Generation Justice uses a positive youth development approach to facilitate social change and media justice. Through the domains of racial equity, civic engagement, media literacy, academic achievement and career development, young people build skills and agency to heal internalized oppression and speak, act, create, and stand against structural racism and systemic and internalized oppression. Through its strategies, Generation Justice continues to develop future wave of journalists of color and New Mexico leaders who harness the power of media and, in time, shift the future of media and leadership of New Mexico. Youth producers integrate these tools to report on education equity and many topics that have real impact on their daily lives like, net neutrality, immigration, racism, and more