

Another revolution starts in Boston

High school students in Boston transform conversations on teacher evaluation and succeed in having their voices heard.



Seven years. A lot can happen in seven years: The first African-American president was elected in the wake of the worst recession since the Great Depression, “Avatar” shattered box office records, ousting “Titanic,” the Arab spring brought down decades-long monarchies, and somewhere in Boston, students found a glaring issue within their own education system. Seven years. That is how much time has passed since students began the ongoing battle for student

feedback in teacher evaluation. There were struggles, there were triumphs, and it has been a long battle that has yet to finish.

Beginning with homework

Student feedback in teacher evaluation was not the initial idea envisioned by many Boston Student Advisory Council (BSAC) members. BSAC is a citywide body of student leaders representing most high schools in the Boston Public Schools. One Monday afternoon in 2006, BSAC members gathered to discuss various issues plaguing their schools — everything from school safety and racism to lunches and sanitation.

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Because BSAC represents the entire district, students had to be strategic and find a common goal that each member would be willing and eager to work on. A similar concern shared by everyone was the abysmal quality of homework.

The quality of homework prompted Boston students to examine the quality of teacher evaluations.

There are two types of homework: good homework and bad homework. Good homework enriches students’ educations. It not only reinforces what they learned for the day, but also builds on the groundwork laid by the day’s lesson. Bad homework, on the other hand, does nothing more than force students to grind through more of the same thing they already spent hours on in school. Although there is a saying that practice makes perfect, there is a limit to how much practice one can do. Twenty to 30 algebra problems a night is manageable; assigning 100 of them does not help the student. Busy work only forces students to divert valuable time from more productive endeavors, such as sports and extracurricular activities.

BSAC members agreed the quality of homework was not as good as it could be, but they needed more evidence. So, BSAC surveyed 777 high school students

and found that students believed that homework too often failed to enhance their education.

Constructive feedback

One more question had to be answered: Why were teachers assigning bad homework? After flipping through contract books and student manuals, BSAC concluded that teachers were not being held accountable for quality homework, among other things. Administrators evaluated teachers infrequently, and rarely did the reviewers see the true side of the classroom since they came in for only one period per year at best. Students agreed that they could contribute to evaluations because they were in the classrooms longer than administrators and, as a result, they had more information about the student-teacher relationship. With many students contributing to teachers’ evaluations, there was also a greater chance of ensuring that teachers would receive more accurate feedback than those who relied on a single evaluator’s visit. With students contributing to evaluations, teachers can only benefit from multiple perspectives. Thus BSAC decided to work on two issues: a policy that advocated for better homework and student involvement in teacher evaluations.

Thus began a long, fierce battle. At the center of our teacher evaluation campaign were the concepts of building relationships and student voice in the classroom.

A decade ago, the idea of students evaluating teachers was revolutionary, even radical. In 2006, BSAC members met with the

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president of the Boston Teachers Union (BTU) and the superintendent of the Boston Public Schools (BPS). The BTU opposed the initial proposal but the BTU had always been supportive of student voice. This was our opportunity to work together and develop a holistic system. The superintendent suggested BSAC first work

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on a more modest form of student input in teacher evaluation. This tool would have no weight in a teacher's performance evaluation, but would allow students to provide feedback on classroom management and instruction. Dubbed constructive feedback, BSAC agreed on this course of action.

BSAC worked with students, teachers, administrators, and a Pennsylvania State University professor to develop a tool for students to give teachers feedback. BSAC's tool allows a student to give teachers feedback on areas from homework to classroom management. One of the most noteworthy components of the survey is a section that allowed students to assess their own learning. The student self reflection part of the survey gave students the opportunity to think about their own behaviors in the classroom. Do you pay attention in class? Do you complete your homework? Do you get to class on time? This is just a sampling of the questions students are asked to think about before filling out the sections on classroom management and instruction. It helps students take responsibility for their own learning before they commend or criticize teachers. After developing this tool

and piloting it in a small group of students, BSAC felt they had something ready to use across the district.

With the support of union and district leadership, BSAC officially administered the survey in BPS high schools in 2010. We released the tool with a step-by-step implementation guide for schools. In its newsletter, union leadership encouraged teacher participation. Teachers praised the feedback, with many saying they learned new things about their teaching. Students, protected by the anonymity of the survey, also were empowered to say what worked and what did not without fear of backlash. In a teacher survey completed afterward, over 65% of teachers reported finding the tool useful. More than 40% of teachers reported they will implement changes in the classroom based on student feedback.

Refining the process

Our first year of implementation taught us many valuable lessons and created the space for us to revise the process for future years. Our peers shared challenges with administering the survey. Fortunately, we heard many more success stories. With an overall success of constructive feedback, BSAC felt ready to tackle student feedback in official teacher evaluation. Even more great news came as preliminary findings from the Measures of Effective Teaching project on teacher evaluation said student perception data is one of the most reliable ways to measure teacher effectiveness. With these two pieces of information, BSAC turned to the district to further the work. Thanks to the guidance of Superintendent Carol Johnson, BSAC then approached the state task force created by the Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education and charged with developing recommendations on new educator evaluation regulations. We shared our tool with the task force and received positive feedback on the tool's design as well as an affirmation of the importance of student feed-

back.

To further garner public support and build excitement among youth, BSAC held a rally in May 2011, in front of Boston's city hall under the slogan, "We're the Ones in the Classroom, Ask Us!" More than 250 people attended, including the student representative on the state board of education, Michael D'Ortenzio. He urged BSAC to testify before the board, and many members gladly did. In June 2011, the Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education unanimously agreed to adopt new regulations requiring all districts in Massachusetts to include student feedback as a form of evidence in educator evaluations by the 2013-14 school year.

An important part of our fight is to keep the conversations alive. Even with the student feedback component of educator evaluations, we want to make sure teachers can still see our feedback and can still have conversations with us about instruction, classroom management, homework, learning styles, etc. It is ultimately about supporting teachers in the classroom and creating environments where students can achieve academically. Youth voice needs to be at the center of these conversations. **K**



"The dog ate my lesson plan."