

When Students Have a VOICE

Student Success

Student Success

have teachers feel more approachable by students

STUDENT SUCCESS

How do teachers influence student success, in a good or bad way?

Do you think improving the classroom atmosphere would increase student success? How?

Mental Health

How can schools support students get help for health stress?

Can there be anonymous Mental Health?

How can student success be better than health during Mental Health?

Student Success

How can teaching methods transition into better grades? How to change the curriculum? Should get rid of FINAL?

Student Success

How can educators instill a drive to succeed?

More flexible elective options.

What is the standard set for student success?

More info about post-secondary

What is your definition of "Student Success"?

Does bullying contribute to student success?

How does the community motivate students?

How do people influence your definition of success?

Should career advisors? How do we give the career into the students need in order for them to find their passions?

In the academic world are the students learning material that is helpful for their future? i.e. many students don't know taxes, mortgages, investment banking

Student Success

Teachers should be more understanding, positive about teaching. Makes them more professional in their field of study?

How to measure

Should schools start teaching good social skills (assertiveness, small talk)?

Student Success

Should students be required to take at least one school extracurricular? Just to make them more well-rounded.

Student Success

How can students adapt to a new environment? Grade 7-8 isolation from seniors and peers.

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As adults in schools, we talk a lot about what we think is best for students and schools. We overhear a lot of what students say, we hear from parents, catch the comments from our colleagues and, over time, we formulate our own opinions. We think we know what students are experiencing and what they are thinking. We think we are justified in generating our own solutions to the challenges our students face, and the challenges that our students pose for us. The more we say it and the more we hear it, the more we believe we have ‘the’ answers. The truth is, too often we make decisions without considering what students have to say. And all this does is reinforce the perceived power imbalance that exists between adults and students. If you were a student, wouldn’t you feel discouraged from speaking up knowing that adults are making choices for you while allowing you to have little to no input?

Ultimately, our students are the most important stakeholders in education. We need to show an interest in what they have to say. We need to listen to their concerns and consider their ideas and suggestions. Their voices, albeit sometimes unpolished, MATTER.

When we provide an opportunity for students to speak up, when we truly listen to what they are saying, when we accept their cautions and

embrace their ideas, it informs our decision-making and provides students a sense of validation. They become empowered as learners and more engaged in their learning and more active within their schools.

Back in October 2019, I was fortunate to join three students from my school at the BCPVPA’s BC Student Voice Fall Forum. Over two days, they joined approximately 40 student leaders from different regions of our province in order to network, share perspectives and exchange ideas about student success, mental health and wellness, and vaping. After a couple of days of focused conversations, my students returned to school eager to organize their own forum and to engage others from their region in similar discussions. These three Grade 12 students knew that they would be graduating shortly: in order to create a succession plan that would allow for these important discussions to continue into the future at a local level, they wisely recruited some student leaders from younger grades to join them in planning their Regional Forum. With their five-member team in place, we met weekly over the next two months to plan for the Forum that would be held at North Delta Secondary.

Fast forward to January 28 and, instead of the 100 participants that they had initially hoped for, the team welcomed closer to 200 students from Delta, Surrey,

Langley, Ridge-Meadows and New West School Districts. In addition to the Grade 8-12 participants, a dozen Grade 7 students from Hellings Elementary, a feeder school of North Delta, also joined the Forum. The energy was immediately evident as students gathered in the cafeteria to begin the day. Although students were, for the most part, new to each other, introductions happened naturally and there was an unspoken understanding that everyone in attendance was present for the right reasons: to listen, better understand, share and contribute. The theme for this year’s Student Voice Forum was ‘Let’s Poke the Bear’, encouraging students to step out of their own comfort zone when discussing topics and asking questions.

In an effort to encourage conversation focused on the specific topics of interest to students, the team decided to use an ‘unconference’ format for the Forum. In their school groups, participants were encouraged to brainstorm potential discussion topics related to student success, mental health and wellness, vaping and student transitions. The level of engagement exceeded anything that the team could have predicted, as an overwhelming number of topics were proposed. Students were then given stickers in order to vote on the session proposals that most interested them. While some members of

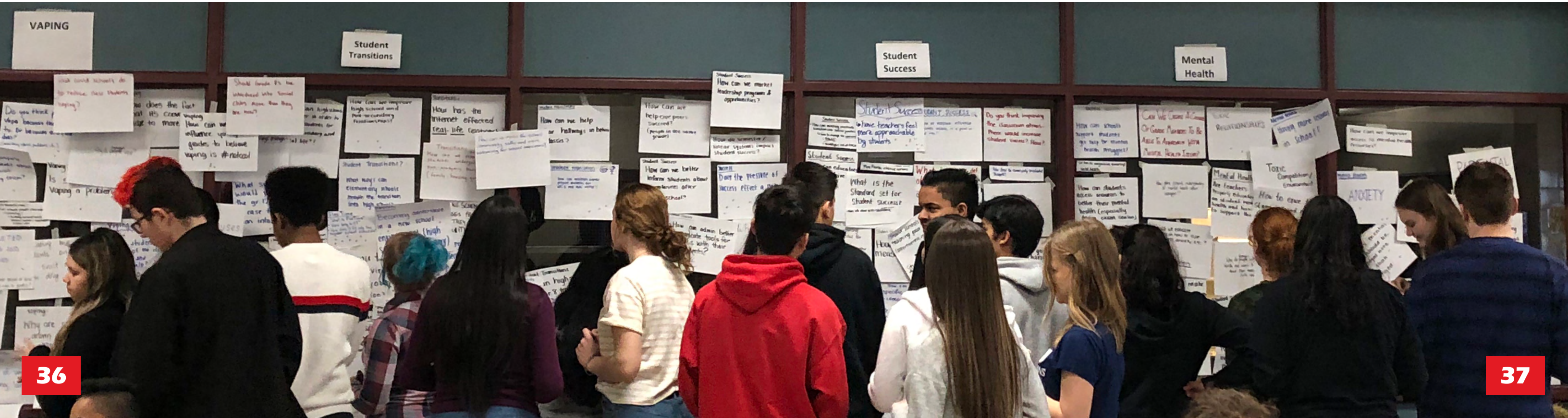
the team quickly used this information to organize a schedule of breakout sessions for the day, others led participants through a live online poll that was used to reveal students’ beliefs and opinions on questions related to the major themes of the forum.

Sessions began after a brief break that allowed participants to find their way to the breakout room where their topic of interest was being discussed. Although some sessions included a small number of educators in the room as listeners, the most impressive aspect was that all sessions were facilitated by students. They created a respectful environment for open dialogue and ensured that all students had a chance to voice their opinions, ideas, questions and suggestions. Leadership students from North Delta Secondary acted as scribes in each of the sessions to ensure that there was a record of the day’s conversations.

What came of the day was an incredible collection of thoughts. What follows is a summary of views and recommendations that have been prepared by the team from North Delta.

Youth & Vaping

Vaping amongst youth is happening everywhere: in schools, on school grounds, at home and in the



community. While schools try to police student vaping at school, it isn't realistic to think that this can be accomplished. In order to slow down this unhealthy trend, students must be educated about the implications of vaping. Students can feel bored or disinterested when learning about vaping through a presentation. They then turn to the internet where a wide range of perspectives are shared, especially through social media. The online world is full of fake news, clickbait and advertising, which overtakes the truth about vaping and often presents conflicting information. Listening to people share real life stories about nicotine addiction and health-related impacts to their body caused by vaping may prompt students to take the issue of vaping more seriously. Schools and administrators should be proactive by educating students about the risks involved with vaping before they enter high school, because students new to high school who do not have accurate information about vaping – and those who are entering a new environment – can be influenced. Peers and older students can easily persuade students to just 'give it a try'. This is often where addiction begins.

Schools should present students with resources when they ask for advice on how to curb addiction. Vaping literacy should also be incorporated into the curriculum so that students become aware of the chemical composition, risks and health consequences.

Rather than facing suspension when students are caught vaping, they should be required to meet with addictions counsellors and participate in workshops focused on stopping addictions. Counsellors and presenters need to approach learning from the point of view of youth in order to truly have a positive impact. Parents also play a critical role in educating and influencing their children. Instead of repeating the familiar 'don't do drugs' line to their children, parents will likely have a greater influence if they are non-judgmental and empathize with their children.

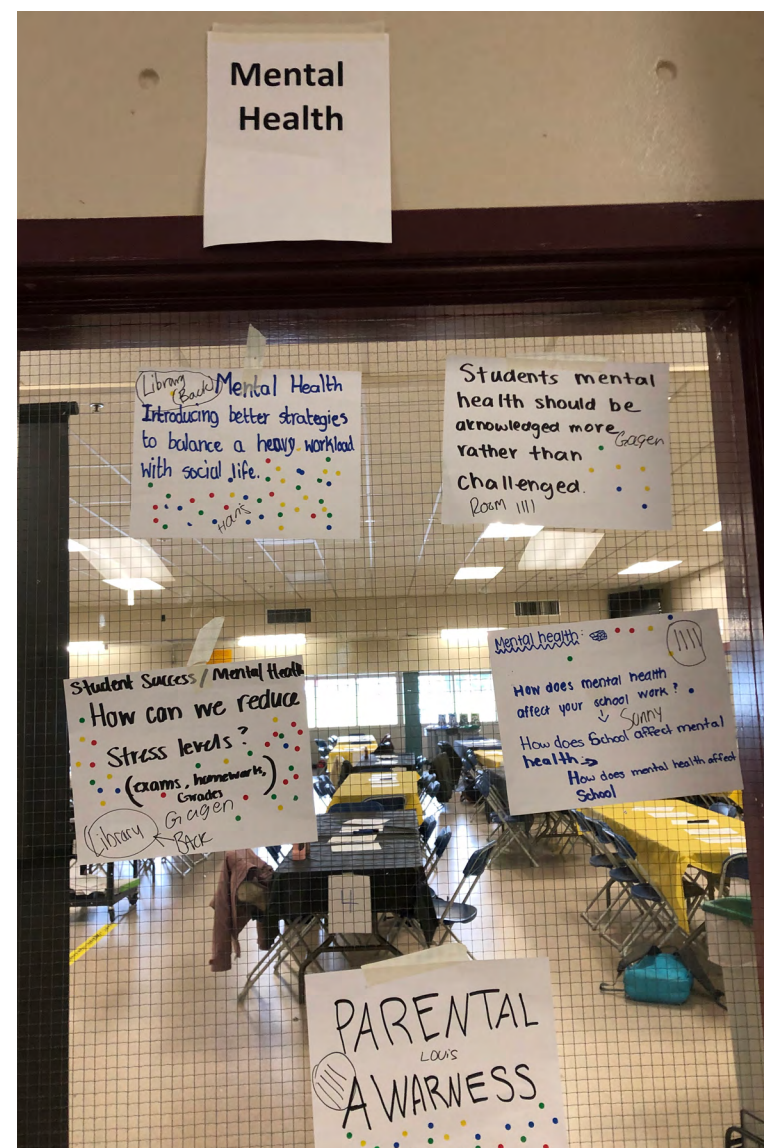
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Parents should make themselves aware of the tell-tale signs of youth who vape; inform their children about the effects that vaping can have on a person's health; and support their child who is addicted to nicotine and who is attempting to quit.

Student Transitions

Transitions can be a stressful time for students, whether it's a transition from elementary to secondary school, or secondary school to post-secondary. During the discussions that took place at the Student Voice Forum, participants shared feedback about the challenges these transitions pose, and suggestions that could improve these transitions for learners. A major shift for learners entering high school is the increased number of teachers who teach them, and the overall freedom and independence they suddenly experience. Some learners adapt to these changes smoothly, while others struggle in absence of the guidance they received from a key adult in elementary school. Students commented that they did not receive the personalized support that could equip them for this transition. Schools tend to focus their guidance on a student's adjustment to the structure and organization of secondary schools through course options and bell schedules. Students suggested that a greater emphasis on navigating both social interactions and an increased workload is necessary. Students suggested that these topics, many of which relate to the Core Competencies, could be addressed through Career Education courses. Furthermore, they indicated that having an ongoing opportunity to discuss their questions would lead to a greater sense of comfort.

The upcoming transition to life beyond high school also proves to be stressful for many Grade 12 students. Students indicated that they rely heavily on advice from older siblings and family members, but that sometimes the advice is inaccurate or outdated. And for students who are the eldest child in their family, or whose family members do not have experience with the local school system, they are often left to do the planning for their immediate life beyond high school on their own. Students look to



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adults at school for advice and suggestions, and it is those adults who more often share their personal and academic experiences who students feel most comfortable in approaching.

For too many Grade 12 students, the pressures of ensuring they have the required number of credits for graduation and are enrolled in the specific courses they need to access their chosen post-secondary program tend to overshadow the fact that many

of these students also have other questions and concerns about post-secondary life. Participants suggested that students would benefit from listening to a panel of adults share their academic experiences and personal stories while addressing the students' questions and concerns.

Mental Health & Wellness

Often, young people find it difficult to discuss mental health and wellness, especially in a setting like high school. Generally, participants felt that promoting trusted student-adult relationships within schools should increase the likelihood of students accepting guidance from adults, and will help address many student mental health concerns early on. The Forum enabled participants to 'poke the bear' and openly share the challenges students face in being able to address their own mental well-being at school. Students highlighted the large caseloads and heavy workloads of counsellors that limit the time they have available to form strong relationships with students.

Reducing counsellors' caseloads would allow them to have more opportunities to build relationships with students. Participants identified two often-competing responsibilities assigned to counsellors: course planning and course changes, and social-emotional and mental health support. Participants emphasized that a student's social-emotional or mental health concerns should not have to be put on hold because a counsellor is engaged in course planning with another student. Students also shared that being seen visiting a counsellor or – even worse – waiting in line to speak with a counsellor can elicit feelings of self-consciousness. Peer judgment can sometimes lead a student to feel intimidated and reluctant to be seen in, or near, the counsellor's office. The important point that students made is that there must always be supports available to address the mental health concerns faced by young people.

Furthermore, students discussed the important role that parents and guardians have in their child's mental wellbeing, and how parents' lack of knowledge about mental health concerns may affect the way

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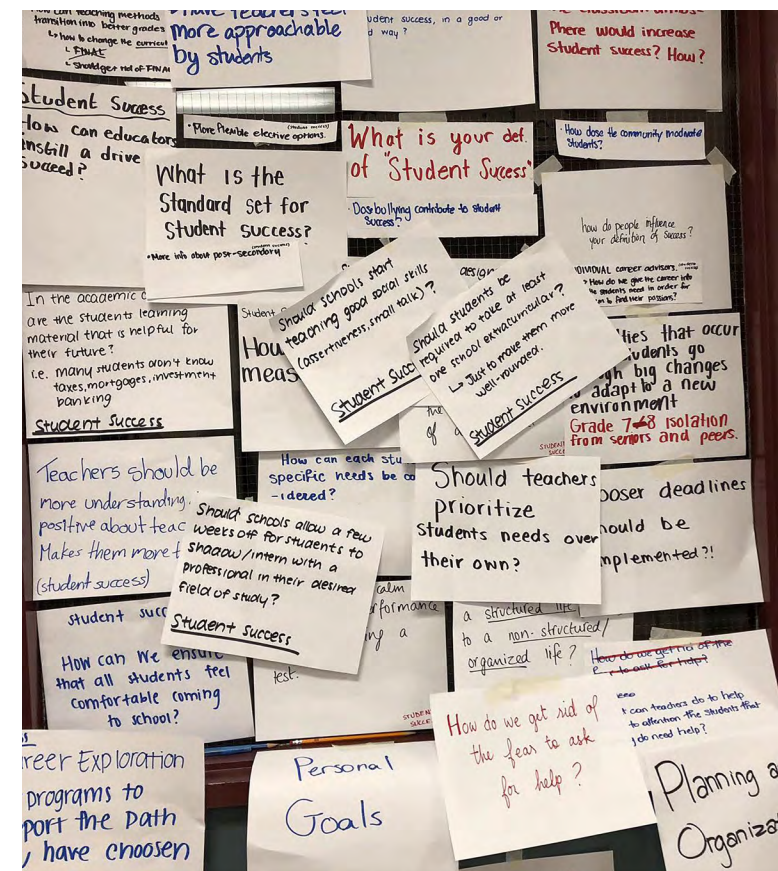
they approach mental health with their children. Students shared that the fears and stigma some adults have regarding mental health often negatively impact a student. Many parents also shy away from discussing the topic with their children because they are uncomfortable talking about a subject that they know very little about. Increased parent education can help, and participants suggested that schools provide resources for parents and adults to better understand mental health. This could include workshops, seminars and open discussions about mental health and how it may be affecting students. Students shared that it would be useful to both promote resources on District websites and social media pages, and to provide opportunities for adults in the school community to engage in positive conversations about mental health.

Greater student education on mental health is also required. 80% of student participants at the Forum were unaware of the difference between being 'anxious' and having 'anxiety.' Many students shared the challenges of overcoming their own personal struggles, and considered themselves ill-equipped to support a peer. It is important for students to know how to manage their own personal stress and help peers who feel anxious or troubled. Participants indicated that the occasional keynote presentation at school is insufficient, and stressed that mental health literacy needs to be implemented in a comprehensive manner across school curricula to help them address the current and future mental health challenges students may face. Students raised the importance of educating all teachers about student mental health to ensure that they are well informed and prepared to help students. Participants also suggested that schools explore the possibilities of creating peer support groups for younger students in order to help decrease the stigma associated with mental health.

Student Success

The student success sessions that ran at the 'unconference' were full of silent nods, raised hands, a few tears, and a lot of laughs. Participants quickly realized that their personal thoughts and perspectives about 'success' were similarly shared by others.

In an attempt to define “student success”, participants’ conversations focused on three key areas: academics, self-confidence and balance. Students quickly identified the interconnectedness of the three areas. If a student is not feeling good about their academics, their self-confidence decreases. Students who lose confidence in their academic abilities tend to shift their focus away from school towards life outside of school where they may feel a greater sense of self-efficacy. As a result, students’ academics continue to suffer, and students feel caught within this downward spiral. In some instances, students are unable to see themselves falling deeper into this spiral and are therefore unable to get themselves out of it. To some extent, all participants acknowledged that they have had experience with this ‘spiral’.



Students shared that two main factors impacting the spiral are parent influence and school culture. Many parents have ingrained in their children that achieving better grades will allow them access to better post-secondary opportunities, which will in turn lead them to highly regarded professions. This parental pressure and the mindset associated with it is unsustainable in the long term, and creates significant stress. Participants shared that this mindset leads students to focus on attaining grades rather than furthering their learning. Students who focus on learning give themselves permission to take risks, fail occasionally, reflect and try again. Some participants indicated that because of the pressure from their parents and pressure they place on themselves to maintain post-secondary options, they found that gradually their focus had shifted away from 'learning' to a heavy emphasis on achieving marks and grades.

Students went on to discuss the impact that student and adult relationships have on student success. Participants shared that when students have a few strong relationships with an adult at school, whether it be a teacher, counsellor, or administrator, they saw these adults as people they could lean on and turn to when needed. Students stressed that the role of the adult with whom they shared a strong relationship is not important but, rather, the degree of connection is. Participants emphasized that these types of relationships are not easily built and require time to develop. Adults who reveal a little about their personal experiences create trust, open up space for communication and break down the traditional hierarchy of 'teacher' and 'student'.

Students felt that when an adult is approachable, genuinely cares about them and believes in them, they contribute significantly to that student's success. Participants shared that adults who are willing to help students with course work outside of class time,

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sponsor a club or coach a team are often perceived as those who have a genuine interest in their growth and believe in them.

The same perceptions hold true of Principals and Vice-Principals. Although participants acknowledged that the role of Principals and Vice-Principals is changing, some students commented that their Principal or Vice-Principal continue to perpetuate the traditional role of manager, because of their perceived focus on building relationships with staff and an air of unapproachability for students. As an example, students in some schools felt that they need to provide a 'reason' to speak with their Principal or Vice-Principal, and that an appointment needs to be scheduled. Participants also noted that Principals and Vice-Principals who engage with students communicate openness and a sense of accessibility. Students highlighted that as schools attempt to place greater emphasis on the growth and success of students as a whole, never has it been more important that Principals and Vice-Principals be connected to their students, and that through the connections they build with students they have the ability to shape their school's authentic culture.

A Pause for Reflection

The challenges and struggles revealed by the student participants at the Forum are faced by learners everywhere. When we are intentional about building relationships with students, we increase the chances that they will express their thoughts to us. By truly listening to and valuing their perspectives, ideas and suggestions, we engage them in their learning and communicate to them that they are our primary stakeholders and we are there to support their growth. Hopefully the voices of these participants create a pause for reflection and pave the way for future action and change.

BC Student Voice is a BCPVPA initiative that empowers students to address their needs, interests and concerns by strengthening the links between students and their partners in education.