



# Youth Voice In Community Schools: Youth Stories

Institute for Educational Leadership

# Youth Stories



## **Batesville Public Schools (AR)**

In a small, rural town of less than fifteen thousand people stands a school known for its academic and athletic excellence named Batesville High School Charter (BHSC). Established in 1915, BHSC has grown tremendously, now enrolling 934 students in grades ninth through twelfth. The school is constantly growing, with the number of students in each grade increasing yearly. As of the 2021-2022 school year, there are 221 students in 12th grade, 225 in 11th grade, 236 in 10th grade, and 252 in 9th grade. Additionally, the diversity at BHSC has grown over the years. School demographics include 66.6% White, 23.7% Hispanic/Latino, 5.8% African American, 1.0% Asian, 0.7% American Indian, and 2.0% two or more races. BHSC works very hard every year to ensure that students get the best education possible and opportunities to continue their education after high school as well. To give students opportunities to engage in activities outside of the classroom, BHSC has 23 clubs available to join. These clubs allow students to develop leadership skills and build a voice for themselves.

A school's wellness is composed of many factors, but the most important is the performance and happiness of the students. At Batesville High School Charter, the administrators regularly consider student thoughts before making decisions. To ensure the youth has a voice, BHSC has a student council that is very involved with school events and EAST that develops projects that benefit the school and the community. In addition to these clubs, the school sends out a survey needs assessment at the start of every year for the students to fill out.

The annual student needs assessment is the biggest way that the school administration gets the students involved. This survey is composed of questions that are related to programs designed to support the students in the district. Survey questions address topics related to available student resources, recognition of achievements, and how administrators include students in the decision-making process. The responses are then used by BHSC's Community Schools Model Site Team to develop a strategic improvement plan.

The EAST program is involved in many projects that promote change across our district. Some allow them to enhance existing events, while others attempt to improve experiences for BHSC students. A recent project, Help Every Pioneer Get Home, entails surveying students to see how many would join clubs, sports, and other extra-curricular activities if transportation home was provided. The project team surveyed 6th-12th graders to compile data. They are now working with the transportation department before presenting the school board with a proposal and bus route map. EAST wants to help every student be as involved as possible, no matter how they get home.

The student council is the most active and influential club at BHSC. They plan teacher appreciation events every nine weeks, work at freshman orientation every summer, plan and host homecoming dances, and help with the annual Special Olympics along with many other events. Besides school events, the student council meets with the superintendent monthly to discuss what is happening in the district and any concerns for the high school.

These organizations at BHSC are all structured differently. The student council is composed of 30 students from 9th-12th grade who are recommended by teachers. The council meets biweekly to discuss and plan school and community events and is sponsored by a teacher at the high school. In contrast, BHSC's EAST program is a four-year class that any student can take. There is one teacher in charge but no elected officers in EAST. Instead, each student has an equal opportunity to lead their own project.

Student involvement is the most important aspect that a school can have. Participating in school events and clubs keeps kids interested in attending school. It also gives them opportunities to implement their opinions regarding the school. Our EAST program is a great example of this. The Help Every Pioneer Get Home project illustrates student leadership perfectly. The team involved interacted with the district's transportation department and the school board to propose and implement their plans to make a change. This not only provided the team with a voice but will soon allow many students to join clubs that will give them a voice as well. The skills these students acquire by taking action in their own school will develop them into great leaders.

## **University Pathways Public Service Academy (CA)**

University Pathways Public Service Academy, also known as “The U,” is located in the Florence-Firestone neighborhood of South Los Angeles, California. We are co-located with the Charles Drew Middle School campus and share some facilities. Firstly, the school has 24 staff members. The school has 9-12th grades, and there are 284 students. Freshman, there are 50, and for sophomore, there are 88. For Juniors, there are 79; lastly, for seniors, there are 67. Our school is a part of the local district south (LDS) and is a part of a smaller regional network called the Rivera Community of Schools. This network is represented by ten elementary schools, 2-middle schools, 7-high schools, and 4-early education centers. At University Pathways, student diversity comprised 74.2% Hispanic, 23.2% Black, 2.0% White, and 0.7% of two or more races.

At University Pathway, student voice and leadership are crucial to help students become confident, visionaries, dedicated, and charismatic individuals. As they become more confident in themselves, they can use that confidence to influence others into becoming Change Agents, which is the mascot of the school. The students do this by following the school's 5 core values which are “U Love,” “U Respect,” “U Work-Hard,” “U Follow Through,” and “U Get Results.” When you follow all five core values, “U Boom.” Although there are no school bylaws, the principal and his team encourage the holistic development of students. On-campus, several programs, resources, and partnerships provide students with a platform and opportunities to develop and find their voice. A lot of the staff collaborate with students to include them in meetings and events with district leaders and community partners. Teachers are welcoming and encourage positive relationships, allowing students to build trust with and support one another. This is how we see students becoming engaged with the school community and being open to becoming a leader and speaking up about their needs and concerns.

At University Pathways, spaces are created for students by bringing community members to nurture and teach students about different walks of life. For example, EmpowHer is an all-girls program for young women to learn about courage and support surrounding issues in the community. They also promote women's social and emotional well-being to improve their confidence and value their self-worth. This is one space where youth develop a voice to show resiliency during difficult moments. Champs Up is another program that helps students at our school to find purpose in their personal and academic lives. A highlight of this program is that students learn how to pursue their goals by learning how to advocate for themselves and become leaders in expanding their own business idea. Students show leadership by planning and executing a business plan with other students to gain professional experience from their own interests. The school also has a FireFighter Cadet Program that provides students with the knowledge and skills to become a firefighter after graduating high school. This program reflects youth engagement by introducing different career pathways for students to explore and develop a specific public service mindset.

Other ways that youth voice, leadership, and engagement are created are through the school's House system and governing Associated Student Body (ASB.) Every Monday morning, the principal hosts "FAMILY," which helps provide students the opportunity to come together through advisory or Kinship. The school is made of four Houses, or small learning communities, that connect students to their community. During advisory, students unite and work together on things they need to improve. There are four houses, KAP (Kapernick), Mobama (Michelle Obama), AOC (Alexandria Ocasio Cortez), and Hussle (Nipsey Hussle). The house system exists to unite students together to improve their own community. Several student spaces are student-led and supported by staff. Students have the opportunity to volunteer and vote for a leadership position. This includes a house lead and hype squad for the entire school year. The class supports the house lead-in events by getting materials. Students can initiate or create their own clubs and recruit students during a club rush event. Club rush is to promote student spaces and extracurricular activities. Club leaders are in charge of setting meetings with club members. The teacher sponsor supports the decision they make.

As the students become more confident, dedicated, and charismatic individuals, schools should open up and give students opportunities and experiences like programs that could not only help them learn and grow but help them think of their future career choices.

## **Robert F. Kennedy Community Schools (CA)**

Located in the heart of Los Angeles, California, UCLA Community School is home to 976 students, with 448 in high school. It is established in a diverse community of 83% Hispanic, 12% Asian, 2.4% African American, and 1.5% White. Interestingly, our school has a very rich history and a unique background. UCLA-CS is one of six Community Schools established on the RFK Community Schools campus, which was built on the former site of the Ambassador Hotel, the site of Robert F. Kennedy's tragic assassination in 1968. Visitors who enter through the gate and into the campus are greeted by multiple murals, including one of RFK located at the center of our school. These murals not only honor the memory of Robert F. Kennedy, but these murals are also a part of the students' experiences. Many of the murals surrounding our classroom hallways were painted by the students, whose artworks were inspired by their growth and development here as they attended school at UCLA-CS from kindergarten to graduation. Walking through our school is like walking down all of our memory lanes.

Being able to express youth voices and opinions is something that UCLA-CS values and prioritizes. Students in our school have many opportunities to engage and participate in these roles, including being leaders in classrooms, sports, and even councils. Students who show high leadership and engagement in decision-making are often given more opportunities to further their personal development in these fields. These can include internships at our Immigrant Family Legal Clinic — learning about immigration law firsthand and the chance to run for the School Site Council, a form of school government. Furthermore, our school often provides opportunities for youth to conduct research in classes such as AP Research. Our school's environment also allows for student growth, where teachers often encourage students to seek assistance. Teachers would stay after school, make accommodations for their office hours, and be students' emotional support. Our community cares for one another, and our motto is "A place where we grow together."

A vital leadership role students can work toward is the School Site Council (SSC). SSC at UCLA-CS is devoted to focusing on ways that our school can improve. The students who earn a spot in SSC are the ones that have the highest role in leadership. SSC emphasizes student input when making big decisions, including adjusting a new school schedule. The input and opinions of all students are gathered through surveys and questionnaires and taken into account in decision-making. Other leadership roles are offered to students through an afterschool program called EduCare. It provides students with opportunities to explore new experiences and aids in developing leadership as students are encouraged to complete schoolwork, helping them to have better time management and responsibility. EduCare also offers teamwork opportunities, as students can participate in sports, encouraging youth engagement.

Our School Site Council includes the principal, school officials, teachers, UCLA partners, parents, and five student representatives who meet once a month on Wednesdays from 3:45 p.m. to 5:15 p.m. Student representatives in SSC have helped provide orientations for incoming high school students and have helped parents navigate our campus. This semester, the student representatives helped voice Junior students' opinions that have been urging for field trips and achieved the goal of field trips for this semester and the next. EduCare is an everyday after-school program, and all RFK high school students, including UCLA-CS, can participate. EduCare provides student enrichment programs, including the Take Action Leadership, and this helps students develop problem-solving and leadership skills. EduCare also provides after-school sports, including basketball, soccer, volleyball, and dance along with art programs such as mural painting and fashion design. These activities increase student participation and youth leadership in the school community.

UCLA-CS believes the students attending will be the future leaders of our community and, therefore, allows for leadership opportunities in our school. Although UCLA-CS can allow more opportunities for students to participate in youth voices, the two main spaces our school provides excel in considering ways to support students and gathering student opinions as input for school decisions. This encourages growth and leadership development that prompt students to develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Ultimately, all schools should strive for an environment where youth voices are heard, so the future of our community and all communities can be one step closer to a perfect union.

## **Mann UCLA Community School (CA)**

Mann UCLA Community School is located in Los Angeles, California. Mann is a 6-12 school serving approximately 600 students. In 2020-21, the student population was predominantly Black (48%) and Latinx (50%). We are four Youth Voice members: three seniors and one junior; a mix of African American and Latinx youth; a small sample of students that represents the demographic of the student population at Mann. The culture surrounding Mann is one of resilience. The aftermath of the country's largest instances of civil unrest left our community powerful, worn down, and still striving to overcome its challenges. The history of our community has inspired us to take matters into our own hands and to take roles in our community and school leadership.

Youth voice, leadership, and engagement play an important role in our school. Mann is excellent at building connections that lead to the practice of youth leadership. We have an Associated Student Body (ASB), Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR), and sports teams. We also have partnerships with UCLA, museums, and various nonprofit organizations. These opportunities enable students to shape their learning experiences and the school environment.

We have many ways for students to engage in decision-making and advocating for the culture and climate of the school. For example, students elect peers to represent their interests at Governance Council meetings. These meetings determine how the school operates. Also, at our school, we have a variety of clubs where students get the opportunity to explore issues of social and emotional learning: including a Students Deserve chapter—a group whose entire goal is to bring the Black Lives Matter movement to our campus. Through Students Deserve, students create a safe space to combat issues they wish to change that directly affect their daily lives. We also have an Anime club that students started at Mann.

The college center on campus focuses on helping students prepare for college and academics. College readiness counselors are prepared to aid anyone who might need guidance in the college center. Since the Los Angeles School Police was defunded, LAUSD has adopted alternative practices and hired people that introduce new restorative justice systems, specifically at schools that serve predominantly Black and Latinx students. Our mental health advisor also has her office open to students who might need advice or guidance. This has made a difference in our day-to-day lives. There is a noticeable difference in how students react to difficult situations knowing they have counsel and help from someone who has their back. This was something that was requested many times by students since the partnership was established. Having these new counselors is one of the many ways our school has made students' voices feel validated and heard.

As a Community School with many partnerships, there are certain things we feel are working well. For starters, having student-led programs seems to help students come out of their comfort zones and provide a sense of belonging. Secondly, having many opportunities to converse with school leadership and administration gives many of us the confidence to speak up. For example, this year, students voted for several sports selections that the school provided. This improved our school life greatly and gave us a better sense of community, from students playing on the team to those cheering in the stands. It has been heard on several occasions that many students want to stay at Mann just to join the teams established this year.

Family and local involvement are the most important aspects of having a Community School. Many people in the community seem more than happy to give us opportunities to help and get involved. One instance of this is a canned food drive led by ASB. This allowed us to work with new people and show how a Community School can be respectful, powerful, and fun while giving back to our community directly. At this event, we met community members who gave us advice and encouraged us to make good choices and remember where we came from. This is the power of belonging to a Community School. This is what we hope the future of education looks like for all young people. School should be a place where you not only learn but create connections with your peers and the community. These connections last a lifetime and remind us that we are not alone on our road to success.

## **Atrisco Heritage High School (NM)**

Atrisco Heritage Academy is a public school located west of Albuquerque, New Mexico. Jaguars walk onto a spacious campus overlooking Albuquerque, with a view of the beautiful sandias, and “golden hour” rays of sunshine. As Jaguars walk onto campus, they are greeted by groups of people they feel supported by. This space motivates us to succeed. Atrisco is Albuquerque’s largest high school, with approximately 2,211 jaguars attending the school. Nine hundred twenty are in ninth grade, 641 in tenth, 450 in eleventh, and 500 in twelfth. There are about 1,116 males and 1,095 females. The student body is ethnically diverse, reporting their race/ethnicity as follows: 2,010 Hispanic, 99 White, 41 American Indian, 26 with two or more races, 24 African American, 6 Asian, and 5 Native Hawaiian.

Atrisco believes youth voice is important and demonstrates this by allowing students to share their thoughts freely and encouraging involvement in their community. Jaguar Nation feels students should have a safe space in their school to express themselves and protects the right to express their ideas in the student handbook. Atrisco staff works hard daily to push Jaguars to express their views in class and on campus because they want them to strive for the best education. As a community, we allow students the space and prompt them to share their ideas in class debates, through clubs, and in discussions with friends and teachers. Jaguars continue to evolve by voicing their thoughts, receiving feedback from their peers, and processing it. This cycle allows Jaguars to find not only their voices but also gain knowledge.

Jaguars make ideas come alive by sharing them with the activities' office, where a team of dedicated staff members coordinates most of the student events. Atrisco is full of amazing groups and organizations, like numerous clubs, athletic teams, and student councils. The student council is one of the biggest groups found in our school. It includes an activities director, student body officers, class officers, and committee chairs. Student Body Officers follow laws passed down each year from prior classes. Jaguars are chosen to be part of the student council by running yearly elections. Anyone can run to represent their class by campaigning and showing they are qualified. The student body is divided into four committees.

These committees all have different tasks and activities. The Activities Director is in charge of organizing projects, an action plan is made, and tasks are evenly distributed to the student body. This system makes sure everyone is participating. Members of the student council meet every other day during class time. Since the student council makes up a large part of school organizations, they have a lot of power when deciding movements and events. The Student Council recently initiated the "See something, Say something" movement. This movement was created to help students who feel unsafe on campus advocate for themselves. There are flyers around the school with a scannable QR code to anonymously report any troubles seen. So far, we have seen positive outcomes like higher attendance rates in class.

With more than 35 clubs, Jaguars have gained confidence and left a legacy for future Jaguars... a legacy of why it is important to share their thoughts and voice them in a way that helps others listen. Jaguars work to set an example for the community by using teamwork to build pride in academic excellence. Most clubs do community service and look to spark special interests in members. Jaguars for positive change (JPC) allows students to uplift one another and maintain positivity. Any student can be a part of JPC. Members meet weekly.

Students of JPC team up with organizations to better the environment by drafting plans and gathering as a group on weekends to finish their tasks. This year members of JPC were able to visit Valle de Oro. There they planted trees to continue work to protect our wildlife. If other events need additional volunteers, the JPC sponsor recruits from the community by word of mouth and flyers. Adolescents should prioritize their involvement in their community and school grounds to improve personally. Developing leadership and decision-making skills allows the youth to be well prepared for their future. At Atrisco, we make sure everyone's voice is heard by building an open environment for new ideas by growing our student-led programs. Youth opinions and beliefs matter. Let your voices be heard and share your thoughts as we do at Atrisco!

## North Division High School (WI)

North Division High School is a school with rich tradition located in the Milwaukee Public School District. As of the fall of the 2021-22 year, there are 450 students enrolled at our school. 91.5% of our students are African-American, 6.2% Hispanic, and 1% are White. Ninety percent of students receive free or reduced lunch. That means at least 90% of our students are considered “economically disadvantaged.” Like many schools in the city, North Division has its struggles, but it is a great school for students who want to learn and grow. NDSHS’s legendary alumni list includes figures like Congresswoman Gwen Moore, Golda Meir, and The Honorable Vel Phillips. NDHS also produced the first African-American Acting Mayor, fire captain, and police chief in the city of Milwaukee. North also has a very nice building. We have a brand-new Green School Yard, basketball courts, football fields, and repaved track. Many actions that have been made to improve the community at North Division have led to more student engagement and have uncovered better ways to involve students.

Youth voice, leadership, and engagement are very important at North Division High School. The administration supports any idea that students have. Students and parents are always invited to the meetings where decisions are made. NDHS also has all kinds of clubs that are focused on students. We have clubs like Youth Rising Up, Gay Straight Alliance, Green Club, Youthology, Sisters Club, 414life, Violence Free Zone, and the Community School Leadership Group. Students’ voice is so important at North Division that it was a student who created the school hashtag #legacystrongfutureready. The hashtag refers to the school’s rich history and is meant to encourage students to make history next.

There are clubs at NDHS that serve all kinds of purposes. Groups like Sister’s Club and 414Life work with students to have a voice and behavior struggles. Youth Rising Up is youth lead and fights for student voice, social justice, and equal rights. YRU has protested and fought for our school to fix several issues. Many YRU members were also a part of Youthology before the pandemic. Youthology is a student-led podcast where students discuss the topics that are most important to them. While school staff makes sure that the content on Youthology is appropriate, they allow students to be creative. These groups create a safe space where students gain confidence and comfort during their journey. Community Conversations are held every year where the Community School Coordinator hosts conversations with students to gather their opinion about the school culture and climate.

Youth Rising Up and Youthology are the only groups that are student-led. In YRU, students create their own bylaws and agendas and make decisions. They decide what issues are important, acceptable and unacceptable, and other things. Other groups are run by staff members who care. Neither YRU or Youthology have ever turned a student away. Any student who wanted to be a part of these groups was allowed to. Once they are a part of groups like YRU, it's up to the group to decide what type of decisions they will make and what they will fight for. Youth have fought for issues at NDHS, including better school lunch, proper water fountains, a better schedule, and many other issues. By being a part of these groups, students learn how to advocate properly for the changes that they want. Instead of choosing violence, students learn to choose their voice.

Overall, North Division is a school that cares about student voice. North must work to recruit more students who want to attend our school and are going to care enough to use their voice. If all of the groups have the same students in them, we aren't going to get very far. North also needs to do a better job telling our story on social media and in the real media because people have very negative opinions about the North division. If the school can commit to raising student voices, then the community will have more people willing to speak positively about the school instead of outsiders. North Division always has and continues to produce some of the most talented people in the city of Milwaukee. It is now time for that talent to speak up!

## Connect with us!

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