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Activist South Bay students secure computers for schools, save teachers

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It's one of the ironies of public education: Students get steeped in lessons about democracy, but when it comes to running schools, they have no role, little voice and seldom are their opinions solicited.

Sometimes, students see the stakes as too high to remain quiet.

At various South Bay schools, they've launched their own campaigns to get better technology, to change school calendars and to save favorite teachers from layoff lists.

They've rejected the notion that students should be seen and not heard. And they insist that as the people most affected, they need to raise their voices.

"We are not whining, not moping, just trying to get what we deserve and need," Emily Spacek, 14, blogged in the fall when she and fellow eighth-graders at Renaissance Academy began to look at the inequity of technology resources, and how that hinders their education.

The students launched a project to lobby, research and secure money to better equip their East San Jose school — even though, if they're successful, those resources will arrive after they graduate.

At Gunn High School in Palo Alto, one student's opinion survey influenced a school board vote to change the school-year calendar.

And at College Connection Academy in San Jose, students campaigned, albeit with mixed success, to save pink-slipped teachers' jobs.

Technology inequality

The Renaissance project took off when students were reading about how black students in the segregated South of the 1930s made do with white students' castoff books. The Renaissance eighth-graders realized some parallels as they thought about doing a multimedia project but lacked the tools.

“What you’re supposed to do when you don’t like something is change it,” said student Jasmine Marquez, paraphrasing author Maya Angelou.

They divided into teams and set out to change things.

One team researched what devices and software they needed, testing gadgets at an Apple store. Student Kathy Lam created a video on her home computer detailing the needs. Another team surveyed other South Bay schools about their technology. Karina Vazquez sent out newsletters, booked speakers and wrote administrators and elected officials. The student finance team approached potential donors, getting a grant toward cameras and an iPad from the Alum Rock Education Foundation, and created an online giving site. Another group created a newsletter.

Students found that only 12 of 41 Renaissance laptops were usable. And while they found other schools with outdated, broken and slow computers, there is one difference: At Renaissance, student Christopher Dang, 13, said, *“A lot of students do have computers at home, but they’re not like the ones kids in Palo Alto have.”*

All along, Emily’s blog chronicled the progress. *“The first time we told (school) board members about our project and saw how excited they were, I thought, ‘Wow! This is a big step.’”*

English teacher Saneer Ibrahim guided the students, but also stepped back. *“It required a lot of giving up control,” she said. “Everything has been student done.”*

If the iPads and iPods they seek materialize, Jasmine said, *“we help future students have a better education.”*

Influencing opinion

When the Palo Alto Unified School District considered changing its school-year calendar, it surveyed teachers and parents, but not students.

Palo Alto High School senior Nadav Gavrielov decided to conduct a survey, sent out during history classes and published in the student newspaper. *“I was worried students’ opinion wasn’t getting communicated to the school board,”* he said.

Gunn junior Jesse Zwerling was upset when he heard about parents railing against change at a school board meeting. Some claimed the proposed change would ruin families’ summer vacations and complicate fall semester.

Feeling students weren't being heard, Jesse also devised a comprehensive student survey, administered through classes. It showed 65 percent favored an earlier start for school and finals before winter break, to get a homework-free vacation and more time to prepare for advanced-placement tests in May.

He presented the results on the evening of the school board vote. Trustee Barbara Klausner cited the Gunn survey as among the factors influencing her to join a 3-2 majority favoring a student-preferred calendar.

"I'm just glad that students' voices were heard," Jesse said.

Rescinding layoffs

At College Connection Academy, Marco Cabrera, 13, made sure student opinion was heard.

When he found out two months ago that three of his teachers had received preliminary layoff notices, he took a logical step for a kid: He created a Facebook page to save their jobs.

Then he took an un-kidlike step. He emailed John Porter, superintendent of the Franklin-McKinley School District. *"A superintendent has a lot of power,"* Marco said. He emailed him again.

"We took them very seriously. We really listened to them," Porter said. Marco and classmates Celeste Pineda, Andrew Arellano and Janet Cardenas explained how teachers are like family at the small middle school.

This month, as retirements opened up positions, Franklin-McKinley rescinded some of its roughly 50 layoff notices, including two of the three College Connection teachers.

Marco, Porter said, is *"a very determined young man. He's polite, respectful and he lets you know what his position is."* He added, *"I don't know what office he's going to hold someday, but we should all take notice of him now so we can say that we know him."*

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RENAISSANCE
OPEN HOUSE

Renaissance Academy will hold an exhibition night, including a report on the state of technology at the school, from 6 to 7:30 p.m. June 2 at 1720 Hopkins Drive, San Jose.