



# Imagine the perfect school...

ANTHONY DEWITT, CENTRAL HIGH SCHOOL, '07

Imagine a high school where the class size was perfect, the teachers were interested in the individuality of every student, and everything you learned was of the highest interest. Designing a school of this caliber would be quite an endeavor. The ability to make sure every student succeeds and thrives behind the walls of every high school is not an easy thing to do. Where would you start?

You may consider writing to the Arizona Department of Education, but they can't see what is happening on our level. The only place to start is with us, the students. Our generation has technological knowledge far exceeding those who are teaching us, and we do not hesitate to let them know a teaching method is not working as we rest our heads on our desk for a nap. If you want to know how to change our education system,

just ask! In late January of this year, the Rodel Community Scholars did just that. Bringing together high school students from across Arizona to meet on the campus of Arizona State University West, teens were given the chance to come up with lasting solutions to Arizona public education system.

On January 30, 2007, azTeen helped sponsor the first ever Arizona High School Teen Hall. The teen-run town hall brought together high school students from all over the state to discuss what's going on in Arizona public schools and what needs happen to decrease the devastating rate of high school drop outs. ASU students—specifically the Rodel Scholars in the College of Teacher Education and Leadership—facilitated the Teen Hall, organizing activities and hosting the high school representatives who participated over two days.

The first day began with reports about the state of high school education in America. Participating teens were briefed on the alarming facts about high school dropouts and education. We learned that the largest dropout rates occur in southern Texas, where as many as 65 percent of high school students don't finish. We also learned that the 23 million teen dropouts are costing a staggering \$50 million loss in federal and state funds. Public agencies such as TANF (Temporary Assistance of Needy Families) are spending \$6.7 billion and welfare programs such as food stamps are spending \$3.7 billion.

Keynote speaker Marjorie Zatz, the Vice President of ASU West, stated with vigor: "We want to create innovative solutions, to create new initiatives for Arizona students." This is easier said than done, and the Teen Hall

was the first step in creating these initiatives. Education is such a touchy issue because it is closely related to issues of race and class. Solutions that serve everyone are hard to find. An education system that allows no one to slip through the cracks would be of superior design, but is it possible?

Dr. Marie Korner, Dean of the College of Teacher and Education Leadership at ASU West, said: "I think young people are increasingly alone. It's up to adults not to write teens off and stay connected to find real solutions."

To ensure lasting change, stereotypes and labels must be left at the door. Teen Hall organizers divided the participating teens into four groups to examine four specific problems:

- \* WHY DO STUDENTS DROP OUT OF HIGH SCHOOL?
- \* WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES OF BEING A HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT IN ARIZONA?
- \* HOW DO YOU CREATE A POLITICAL, EDUCATION, AND BUSINESS CONNECTION?
- \* HOW WOULD THE PERFECT HIGH SCHOOL LOOK?

Students continued in their assigned groups for the two-day event and explored ideas and opinions. Attending the workshop on behalf of azTeen, I was impressed to see that these discussions were heated and extremely productive. Discussions focused on the individuality of each student in addition to the education system's increasing need to cater to all students—not just the ones who do the work or have socioeconomic support.

At times the teen representatives were highly critical of teachers' methods, their failure to respect students and a lack of encouragement from adults. Issues such as peer pressure, stereotypes, and drug/alcohol abuse also arose from discussion. In Arizona, employment and teen pregnancy are the two most common reasons that students drop out of high school. Clearly, the instant gratification that students receive from earning paychecks makes it harder for them to focus on school. Pregnancy, on the other hand, was a reflection of poor sexual education and failure to practice safe sex. Looking at all of these issues facing students, the drop out phenomenon can seem daunting and hopeless.

Participating students suggested solutions to the issues at hand. On the topic of work and pregnancy, students living with this reality need more options. School schedules need to change. The possibility of night school and online courses were discussed, along with the idea that the education system should move away from using textbooks and start making class more applicable to real life. This will boost interest and it will seem worthwhile to students.

As for the AIMS testing as the basis for many teachers' curriculums, many students felt that we should be in school to become more prepared individuals—not just to learn how to pass a test. Students universally agreed that AIMS scores should not be weighted as a key to success in higher education and high school graduation.

When hiring teachers, students thought new hires should be rigorously interviewed and hired only if their true passion is teaching. Moreover, how does it help students if a teacher isn't paid enough or doesn't want to be there in the first place? Someone who is teaching a favorite subject is going to do a better job than an instructor who is not specifically prepared to teach in that field.

At the end of the Arizona Teen Hall, Rodel Scholars will present student suggestions and concerns to the office of Arizona Governor, Janet Napolitano. The Rodel Scholars seemed impressed with the quantity and quality of information that they received from Arizona teens and look forward to next year's gathering of Arizona high school students.

Rodel Scholar Andrew Buttery said, "These events will really get good information; [teens] will see what they can do." Greg Hickman, director, and Michael Vialpando, key advisor, of the Rodel Scholar project, both agreed that this is the best way for students to express themselves without fear of retribution.

Thanks to the Rodel Community Scholars first annual high school Town Hall, policymakers and government officials will become aware of the changes that high school students want to see in the education system. Revolutionizing this system to benefit teens will entitle a better future for American schools and students. Δ



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