At Harwood Union High School, students help shape every aspect of school life, including instruction.

By Catherine Gewertz

Moretown, Vt.

On a winding road in rural New England, students are pushing the boundaries of their power to shape the way they learn and how their school runs.

Unlike most American high schools, student leadership at Harwood Union High School isn't limited to campaigns for cleaner bathrooms or better cafeteria food. Here, teenagers are deeply involved in shaping the pillars of school life, from the daily class schedule to the styles of teaching and learning that work best for them.

Aided by community groups that have trained them in leadership techniques, young people and adults at Harwood have forged an unusually strong and equal partnership over the past eight years. They developed decisionmaking processes that put students at the heart of the biggest school decisions. When new teachers are hired, report cards are redesigned, or honors classes are revamped, students are at the table, debating, sharing research, listening, and voting. That work has made this unassuming school in Vermont's Green Mountains a national model for educators who believe students deserve the right to play a central role in creating their school experience.

"It's definitely empowering," said Cole Lavoie, a senior who's on the school leadership team, working with teachers and administrators to figure out how honors classes should be restructured in the proficiency-based system that Vermont is phasing into its schools.

"Harwood is ahead of the curve because of the number of different ways they've institutionalized student voice," said Catharine Biddle, an assistant professor of educational leadership at the University of Maine, who studied the school's relationship with Up for Learning, a community group that provides leadership training for its students and staff members. "Involving students as deeply as they have, in as many ways as they have, helps avoid a common mistake of seeing student voice as monolithic: that as long as we get a couple of kids giving us feedback,
that's student involvement."

**Students as Change Agents**

At Harwood, governance works like a mini-democracy. Students or faculty members can propose a bill to change an aspect of school life, and it is circulated, discussed, revised, and voted on. Students who have learned leadership skills in the Up for Learning training, known as YATST, or **Youth and Adults Transforming Schools Together**, lead many of those discussions.

Proposals typically arise from research: Issues of concern surface through surveys and school meetings. Recent rounds of that research showed that students wanted to give teachers feedback about their instruction. The proposal passed, and now students and teachers are working in committees to design feedback forms.

"Some teachers are better than others, and it's important for us as students to be able to say what's working well for us and what isn't," said Anna Van Dine, a senior who's a member of Harwood's student government.

One of the big issues at Harwood lately has been revising the school schedule to support the new proficiency-based approach, which is supposed to allow students to customize their learning and to demonstrate competency in a variety of ways. Many students wanted to add an eighth block to the seven-block schedule, to make space for independent projects, teacher consultations, or added classes, and they brought their proposal to the administration.

Anneka Williams, a junior, said that trying to get their idea approved offered her a living education in civics. In meetings with administrators and the town's school board, she learned about the complicated web of factors that go into changing a school schedule, like bus transportation, class-size mandates, and fixed budget line items.

"I found out that it's not as simple as we thought," she said.

Anneka and her peers on the scheduling committee were frustrated by how few of their fellow students were willing to attend meetings to offer input on the proposed schedule change. So they tried another way to gauge student sentiment: The committee asked the administration to stage a mock registration for the not-yet-approved 8th block. To the committee members' surprise, few of their peers even signed up for an 8th block.

"It was disappointing to see that we thought we represented the rest of the students, but we didn't," Anneka said.

The net result was a sobering dose of compromise. The school board approved the 8th block but not for credit-bearing classes, as Anneka hoped. It will be used for independent study, to take online courses, or to consult with teachers.

**An Eye-Opening Experience**

Even though the end result was disappointing, Anneka is glad she helped make room in Harwood's schedule for new things.
"It's important for students to realize they can have a big influence on their learning," she said. "It's frustrating when you use your voice and you don't get what you want, but we got a lot out of it, and it's been a big learning experience."

A spring afternoon offered another example of Harwood's inclusive style of governance. Two teachers and 15 students met during an extended block to plan an upcoming "all-school dialogue," an event that involves all 665 students in grades 7-12 and 120 faculty and staff members in small-group discussions about key issues in the school. Snacking on almonds, coconut, and oranges, they brainstormed to craft four guiding questions for the event, which aims to elicit school sentiment on how teachers should—or shouldn't—use technology in their classrooms. The topic came from a survey that showed deeply mixed views on how teachers use iPads and other devices in their lessons.

Some of the meeting focused on process: How should the talks be structured? With pairs of students and teachers talking, and then rotating throughout the afternoon, like the daylong all-school dialogue held last spring? Several students objected to that format. "It gets really awkward when there's downtime. You're just staring at the other person," said one girl. Another student suggested groups of four. Instead of sitting and talking, another girl suggested, what if we rotate around to four different stations, each featuring a unique question to discuss?

With those ideas in the air, the gathering broke into two groups, each facilitated by a teacher, to focus on writing the guiding questions. In one, students began by sharing their experiences when teachers incorporated iPads into their work. Some enjoyed it, while others worried that it disadvantaged students who lacked computers or Internet access at home. Some students felt that using technology in their assignments should be a choice, not a requirement.

"I should be able to write a paper, or do a project, whatever will let me convey my understanding of the topic," said a boy in a gray T-shirt.

**More Asking, Less Telling**

Ellen Berrings, a career-education teacher and student-government adviser, listened and took notes. "You're talking about your experiences. And I hear that getting the right balance is important to you. What about if we ask a question like, 'Tell us about a time [technology] worked for you, and a time it didn't, and why.' Are we on the right track?" Most students nodded yes. She, like Marcus Grace, the world-languages teacher facilitating the other group of students, led by asking questions, rather than making statements or giving instructions.

After an hour of these discussions, the two groups reconvened and compared notes on their draft questions. There would be more meetings in the coming weeks to refine the event plan.

Berrings said after the meeting that working in the Harwood style can demand a big shift for teachers, from being the classroom leader to being a facilitator. As one of the small group of Harwood staff members and students who have participated in Up for Learning's YATST training, Berrings said her biggest lesson was how to stop talking and create space for students to talk. Now, she sees herself not as the "disseminator of information" but as someone who provides "tidbits that move students to
"There is certainly a fear factor to it, but for me, it felt liberating," she said. "Before, it was like, every minute I have to be doing something, and what if it bombs? Sometimes, you should come in the classroom and say, 'Wow, that didn't work yesterday, what are we going to do now?' We're all in it together, figuring it out."

Amy Rex and Lisa Atwood became co-principals four years ago, when Harwood was already working on giving students a bigger voice. That idea needed to seep into the leadership structure, though, and they've been working on it ever since. Students now occupy five of the 14 spots on the leadership team. They research topics under discussion, gather feedback from their peers, and imbue discussions with those viewpoints.

**Tolerating 'Messy'**

Rex acknowledged that the school's signature style of distributed leadership "is definitely slower" than a top-down, adults-only approach. Proposals from the student body, or from faculty members, can take weeks of consideration and revision before they're put to a vote, she said. But the payoff is big.

"You have to be in the mindset of letting go," Rex said. "But I've seen the benefits for the students. And it's made me a more reflective educator. Driving home at night, I'm still thinking about what a student said."

"We know it's messy," said Atwood. "There is hard work on each aspect of each thing, getting everyone in the same boat. We know we're not going to have it all worked out tomorrow."

Rex and Atwood, who have also been through the YATST training, acknowledge that the bid for inclusive leadership is a work in progress. Not all the adults have become skilled at making way for students' views.

At a recent leadership-team meeting, for instance, Chuntao Lin, a junior, sat silent while the adults around him talked nonstop. His subcommittee was working on a policy for how late assignments should be handled in the proficiency-based system, where the content of assignments, not their timeliness, is what's graded. Noticing his silence, Rex aimed a question at the teenager as a quiet reminder to her colleagues. Right away, he opened up with ideas, prompting an exchange of views with teachers around the table.

Viewing students as equal—or near equal—partners isn't comfortable for all teachers. Therisa Rogers came to Harwood this year, after 20 years teaching English in other cities, and saw right away that Harwood is a place where students feel comfortable questioning teachers about their instructional choices. She's heard decidedly mixed feelings about that from her colleagues.

"Some are really excited by the dialogue with students, and some are like, 'OK, could you just learn the material?'" Rogers said. "I like it. It can be more difficult than if students are passively receiving the material. But it's also more rewarding."

Helen Beattie, the executive director and founder of **Up for Learning**, which trains Harwood students and staff members in leading change together, said that the partnership requires a big change in adults' attitudes.

"It's moving to the point where the adults say we can't do this without them," she said. "That's the culture shift."

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