



***My Voice* at the Dayton Early College Academy: A Case Study**

Presented by the Pearson Foundation



© Pearson Foundation 2011



Introduction

This is one in a series of case studies presented by the Pearson Foundation to examine results achieved by schools using the *My Voice* Student Survey developed by the [Quaglia Institute for Student Aspirations](#).

During the 2006-07 academic year, the *My Voice* Survey was administered at Dayton Early College Academy (DECA), a high school with notable success in serving inner-city students. After reviewing the survey results, school staff recognized numerous existing strengths. They also developed enhanced approaches and methodologies to address areas they identified as in need of improvement. In subsequent years, the *My Voice* Survey was re-administered at Dayton Early College Academy. Results from the survey indicated remarkable improvement in key areas that foster student success, including students' sense of accomplishment.

A detailed explanation of changes made in response to the initial *My Voice* Survey results at Dayton Early College Academy is provided below. More information about the *My Voice* Survey is available online at myvoice.pearsonfoundation.org.

About the Dayton Early College Academy

The Dayton Early College Academy is a nontraditional charter high school that serves inner-city students in Dayton, Ohio. As of the 2010–11 school year, enrollment was 397 students. Dayton has a significant low-income population, and in such communities, students generally do not go to college unless they are academically or motivationally exceptional. Fifty-six percent (56%) of students at DECA qualify for free or reduced lunch. Eighty-two percent (82%) of DECA students are “first generation students” (neither parent has a bachelor’s degree). Despite the odds stacked against these students, DECA boasts a ninety-seven percent (97%) attendance rate and a one hundred percent (100%) college acceptance rate.

“The Dayton Early College Academy is singularly focused on preparing urban learners from the Dayton Public School District to go to college and be the first in their families to graduate.”

—Mission statement, DECA website



About DECA (continued)

The Dayton Early College Academy was founded on an educational philosophy that advocates “personalized, rigorous, and relevant learning” (DECA Annual Report, 2009). Adult mentor-teachers, called “advisors,” oversee this learning and provide a support network that students might not otherwise receive in their home life. The academy attracts teachers with an entrepreneurial spirit and allows these teachers significant input in how the school is run. Instead of a traditional grade promotion, students are required to pass “gateways.” Gateways are reflective of academic performance and adoption of college readiness behaviors identified by David T. Conley, director of the Center for Educational Policy Research at the University of Oregon. This educational philosophy, along with the academy’s overall focus on college readiness, helps students succeed at DECA.

My Voice at DECA

“Students achieve more when someone cares about them.”

—DECA Superintendent Judy Hennessey

During the 2006–07 school year, DECA received the *My Voice* Student Survey as part of the academy’s participation in the International Center for Leadership in Education. Judy Hennessey, DECA’s principal at that time, recognized that *My Voice* had the potential to engage dedicated faculty in grounded discussion about administration, student voice, and curriculum. Staff administered the survey to students in grades 9 through 12.

When Hennessey asked DECA faculty to analyze the results, which were provided in relation to the [8 Conditions that Make a Difference®](#) in student aspirations, she urged them to answer the following questions during their staff meetings and to make a list of concerns that needed to be examined further:

- Why is this Condition important?
- What in the student responses gets your attention?
- What is the overall tone of the student responses?
- What are the strengths of our school? Are they relative or remarkable?



Results of the DECA 2006–07 Survey

Following are the results from the DECA survey administered in the 2006–07 academic year, listed as aggregate percentages.

Strengths

Of the DECA students surveyed in 2006–07:

- 88% said that teachers thought they (the students surveyed) could be successful
- 94% said that they believed they could be successful
- 92% said that their parents care about their education
- 7% said they were afraid that their friends wouldn't like them if they did well in school

To DECA staff, these results implied that students perceived the school as a place where they could excel. The low percentage of affirmative responses to the statement expressing anxiety regarding peer perceptions confirmed for them that, within the DECA environment, it was OK to be smart and do well in school.

Areas for Improvement

Some staff concerns included the students' responses to questions about being recognized for their achievements; a significant number of students said they were not recognized for doing anything well, and this number varied by gender: male students scored less favorably than female students. In addition, students did not respond as positively to statements regarding the Condition of Fun & Excitement, or to the statements pertaining to the Condition of Curiosity & Creativity.

Results from the Fun & Excitement, Sense of Accomplishment, and Curiosity & Creativity statements prompted targeted interventions: DECA faculty attended trainings on teaching strategies, implemented a coaching program for new teachers, and identified and promoted core values for the school.



DECA Core Values

The DECA staff work to instill core values that help students recognize themselves as:

- A community of lifelong learners
- Critical and creative thinkers
- Capable of achieving success beyond measure
- Respectful of themselves and others, including the differences among them
- Bound for college...and beyond

Through their analysis, DECA staff recognized that the “entrepreneurial” (i.e., independent, self-starting) teaching spirit promoted by the school’s structure was detracting from consistent pedagogical delivery. In addition, students voiced the need for more social activities.

Fun & Excitement

Of the DECA students surveyed in 2006–07, when responding to the following selected statements that pertain to the Condition of Fun & Excitement:

- 67% said they enjoy being at school
- 46% said teachers make school an exciting place to learn

The low percentage of positive responses to statements pertaining to the Condition of Fun & Excitement caused DECA faculty to focus on this Condition. Traditionally, the faculty heavily emphasized academics in preparation for college, which is not always viewed as “fun,” even though staff also felt that their school should be fun. In addition, students did not engage in regular social activities in school. In response, DECA decided to implement “Nerd Night” on Friday evenings. Nerd Night rewards students for studying for exams. After an intensive three-hour study session on Fridays before exams, students stay at school into the evening hours, playing Wii video games, dancing, and socializing.



Sense of Accomplishment

Of the DECA students surveyed in 2006–07, when responding to the following selected statements that pertain to the Condition of Sense of Accomplishment:

- 72% said that teachers recognize students who are kind and helpful
- 66% said teachers recognize them when they try their best

Across the survey results, it was apparent that male students were submitting fewer positive responses than female students, and this was particularly evident in the statements pertaining to the Condition of Sense of Accomplishment. Immediately, faculty decided to reward students who made gains by sharing information with each other via email, then reinforcing those positives across classes. For instance, if John studied for an exam and did well, the teacher of that class would let other staff know. They might, in turn, make a comment to John in the hallway. This method of rewarding students worked with more subtle accomplishments as well. For DECA staff, communicating with each other in this fashion was a simple way to keep track of positive behavior and reward students for their accomplishments.

Another new method of reward that DECA implemented was allowing a variety of students to participate in events that recognize “leadership,” which had previously been reserved only for students with high academic performance. One of these activities, leading visitors on a tour, allows DECA students to engage with high-caliber visitors, such as a governor or senator. Another activity, seminars, enables students to interact with “famous” people who give career talks and offer inspiration. Instead of solely rewarding high academic performers with these activities, staff began also to reward those students who showed improvement in other ways, so all students have an opportunity to shine. In addition, staff organizers always make sure a male is invited to be a tour lead.



Curiosity & Creativity

Of the DECA students surveyed in 2006–07, when responding to the following statements that pertain to the Condition of Curiosity & Creativity:

- 77% said they learn new things that are interesting to them at school
- 86% said that what they learn in school will benefit their future
- 73% said that at school they are encouraged to be creative
- 85% said they enjoy learning new things

In reaction to these figures, and to responses across the Conditions, which varied with cohort groups, another area that DECA staff focused on was addressing the diversity of what was being taught in the classroom. Because DECA strongly supported the “entrepreneurial” nature of faculty, the way staff members taught content differed greatly. DECA staff tended to believe students would be more creative the longer they were at DECA, but the responses were not as strong as they expected.

Hennessey saw this as an opportunity to focus on professional development for DECA staff. Teacher evaluation was exempted by DECA statutes, so instead she proposed the concept of coaching. As part of a program offered by Jobs for the Future, an organization dedicated to creating educational opportunity, two of her staff went to University Park High School in Worcester, Massachusetts, to learn how to be coaches. These teachers were trained in six very specific teaching strategies, and they became coaches for the other DECA teachers. This has been particularly helpful for new teachers, who work with and observe coaches.



Improved *My Voice* Results

The combined efforts of administration, staff, and students produced the following measurable results in a re-administration of the *My Voice* Survey in the 2008–09 school year:

- 90% felt they were learning new things that were interesting to them at school (13% increase)
- 58% said teachers made school an exciting place to learn (12% increase)
- 72% said they enjoyed being at school (5% increase)
- 76% indicated that teachers recognize them when they try their best (10% increase)

In Closing

As of the 2011 publication of this case study, DECA continues to use techniques developed in response to the *My Voice* Student Aspirations Survey, and school staff have expressed interest in administering the survey again in the future. Since the school's inception in 2003, DECA students have earned 4,500 college credit hours while in high school, earned \$3.6 million in scholarships and grants, and completed 14,000 volunteer service hours.