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Two Year Long Youth Equity Stewardship Program Concludes With Student-Lead Projects Showcase

[Compassionate Listening - Dr. Frank Napier, Jr. School of Science & Technology](#)

Students and faculty from five schools gathered at Rosa L. Parks High School to wrap up a two-year program aimed at addressing equity in school communities. Funded through ESSER II, the Youth Equity Stewardship (Y.E.S.) program was initiated at Eastside High School, Kennedy High School, The Rosa L. Parks School of the Fine and Performing Arts, the Dr. Frank Napier, Jr. School of Science & Technology, and the Charles J. Riley School in October of 2021 to bring young people's perspective, vision, creativity, and passion to the forefront of policymaking for schools in the 21st century. The day was a reflection on the students' two-year journey towards this goal.

The Y.E.S. program, as implemented for Paterson Public Schools (PPS), consisted of five meetings per year, called Y.E.S. Days, in which students and their advisors would meet with program founders Wade Antonio Colwell and Benjie Howard of Corwin Press, a division of Sage Publications, to explore culture, creative expression, community awareness, and social justice. There were 100 students in the program in grades six through twelve, divided into five cohorts, one from each school. Participating students were invited by principals and school counselors to participate in the YES program. There was no academic requirement, allowing middle school students to collaborate with high school students, and a wide range of participants, from English language learners to special needs students, that worked together with mutual respect regardless of age or ability. The five participating schools were selected based on their previous use of restorative justice practices, the principal's interest in the YES program, and the availability of teachers and other staff to participate as advisors.

The PPS iteration of the Y.E.S. program differed from other school districts in that it culminated in two student developed and lead initiatives: Professional Development (PD) sessions for teachers and peer equity projects for students. Some PD sessions included suggestions and constructive strategies from students to teachers to build empathy and effective communication. The sessions consisted of conversations, surveys, a short film and other informational exchanges. Peer equity projects included improving school culture through the creation of Social Emotional Learning spaces and anti-bullying workshops. For this tenth and final Y.E.S. Day, the cohorts presented their school's initiatives to each other.

Speaking to the students, Superintendent Eileen Shafer said, "I just have to say, as your Superintendent, just how proud I am of each one of you. I always knew that the students in Paterson were the best, today, you're going to see the proof of that." She would add later, "You're going to see your peers from across the city that did great work over the two years. I only ask that you take this into your school and spread the word." She then thanked Assistant Superintendents Cicely Warren and David Cozart for setting up the program, the advisors for helping the students with the projects, and the participating students for being leaders in the program.

Assistant Superintendent Cicely Warren would praise the students' projects, relaying some of the positive feedback that the school faculties have shared with her about the student-created PDs. Addressing the students,

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she told them, “You are in our schools everyday, you experience our schools everyday; so you should have the most to say about it, and the most to teach about what it’s like being a student in this district.” Adding that, “You have done something incredibly powerful.”

Assistant Superintendent David Cozart said to the students, “This whole vision was about giving you an opportunity to stake your claim in your district and your future. Advocacy coming from the grassroots, from the kids in the community has always been a way to make change happen.” He continued, “Now you have taken your place in making Paterson great. You are part of Paterson’s new renaissance. Take that with you wherever you go.”

Looking to the future, the District has plans to partner with Mindful Schools to expand the program to a total of ten school for next year. The initial five schools, with an additional five new schools, will continue the program as clubs. Mindful Schools, which already provides mindfulness programs for District staff, will help faculty process feedback received from students. Cigna Healthcare will fund the expanded program, pending Board of Education approval.