



# RSVP

NASC's Raising Student Voice & Participation program provides a method for student leaders to engage their peers in working for solutions to the problems they see in their school and community.

► KATHLEEN WILSON SHRYOCK

## FOR STUDENTS AT

Thibodaux HS in Thibodaux, LA, the last few years have brought sweeping changes. Student council adviser Beth David classifies the period since Hurricanes Katrina and Rita ripped through the Gulf Coast as a time of transition. Many of the schools in her home state are still closed and some will never reopen. As a result, students may be especially sensitive to the needs within their school and community. They have also witnessed the power of a voice in promoting positive change. For these students, the introduction of the Raising Student Voice & Participation (RSVP) program has been timely. The program has provided them with an organized outlet for combating the chaos and allowing their voices to be heard.

# The Power of the Student Voice in Action

David and student leader Hollie Barrios were participants in the initial RSVP training session in the fall of 2005. According to David, the session taught them a systematic method of problem solving. Upon their return to school, David and Barrios recruited a leadership team including faculty, student council representatives, and interclub council members to assist in the implementation of RSVP.



The team's main goal was to encourage the participation of all students in a series of summits utilizing key RSVP concepts. David believes that the ideas and ground rules presented in the summits help students feel at ease. "Students like to believe that their opinions are important and the RSVP program gives each member the chance to interact. The more the students participate, the more they become involved," she says. "The program offers students a way to get changes in action."

The use of summits at Thibodaux HS has resulted in the implementation of several new programs including student and teacher of the month, recognition of high test scores, and changes to the school lunch program. Summits have also helped to plan a fundraising activity and determine the most effective use of Homecoming money. The summits have been so successful that the RSVP team has introduced the program to the freshman studies class and plans to use similar concepts with other school clubs and parent groups.

David indicates that the school is still dealing with the effects of the recent hurricanes and that the team has had to take the RSVP program one step at a time. Still, she believes that the program benefits the school and, ultimately, the entire community by providing students with real world strategies. "We are a small town and many of our students become members of our school board, council, and city government. Hopefully, the materials and steps they learned will allow them to initiate the RSVP program in solving community problems," says David.

## Political Action Committee

Irma Prinic from Heritage HS in Littleton, CO, was another educator selected to attend the initial RSVP training session. Like David, Prinic believes that RSVP provides tools that help students not only to voice their

opinions but also to ensure that problems are adequately addressed.

Prinic explains that the Political Action Committee (PAC), a subcommittee of the student government, is the primary organization for promoting student voice and civic participation. The PAC uses RSVP to help students organize their thoughts and determine key issues. The process begins during an annual all-school leadership conference in October when the 30 PAC members begin training RSVP facilitators. Because the program has been in place for two years, the school now has more than 70 trained facilitators. With trained leaders in place, the PAC utilizes each student's advisory period to begin the summits as outlined by RSVP protocol.

At Heritage HS, the first summit held during the 2005–06 school year was an opportunity for the PAC to ask the student body “What’s on your mind?” The question was posed at three different levels: topics within the school, community concerns, and national or global issues. Throughout the summit, facilitators used ground rules to encourage all students to speak out about the issues that were most important to them.

Following the first summit, PAC members compiled a list of 10 issues that were vital to the student body, and then posted the findings on bulletin boards throughout the building. Students brought a variety of topics to the table including arena scheduling, the quality of cafeteria food, and parking lot safety.

During Summit Two, students broke out into smaller advisory groups consisting of about 20 students. The groups reviewed the initial 10 issues and selected the three key initiatives that they would most like to tackle. Groups also discussed possible solutions and recommendations for each topic.

As soon as the target areas were clearly defined, the PAC divided into research groups led by Mert Martens, U.S. government and social studies teacher. The goal was to create a civic action plan by researching the history of each issue, identifying stakeholders, and inter-

viewing key players. “Dr. Martens guided the process of who to interview, where to find sources, and how to deal with the objections and resistance to change that are often met,” Prinic explains.

With facts and figures firmly in hand, the PAC prepared a written plan of action for each topic to be presented at Summit Three. One of the plans outlined the suggestion that students receive credit toward graduation for their participation in marching band and team athletics. The plan detailed the specifics of this topic including the ways that other area schools were handling this issue as well as the reasons why students believed this to be a valid concern. The plan recommended that some credit be awarded to students participating in a complete season and also set a maximum limit to the number of credits each student could be awarded for defined activities. A detailed list of pros and cons was also part of the presentation.

During Summit Three, the facilitators presented drafts of each action plan to the students. Attendees were given the opportunity to critique each plan and to offer suggestions for improvement. Facilitators also reviewed potential timelines for implementing the suggested changes.

Prior to Summit Four, PAC members considered student input and fine-tuned their policies. During the final summit, students voted on the recommendations, helped to determine the best strategies for achieving their goals, and also volunteered to assist with project implementation.

Prinic reports that the Political Action Committee presented the results of the first series of summits to school administrators last year. Because of major construction at the school, administrators have been busy dealing with other priorities but have promised that final decisions will be made after construction is completed in early 2007. In spite of the delays in implementing the first year's goals, students were excited to begin a second series of summits in November of 2006.

Prinic acknowledges that while student interest in RSVP remains strong, they will need to see the results

### Overview of RSVP Summits

#### **Summit 1: Voice**

In this summit, students answer the question “What’s on your mind?” and generate a list of issues and concerns that are important to them.

#### **Summit 2: Recommendations**

In this summit, students answer the question “What should we do?” and make recommendations for action.


#### **Summit 3: Response**

In this summit, students answer the question “What is your response to this plan?” and provide feedback to improve the plan.

#### **Summit 4: Implementation**

In this summit, students answer the question “How can we make our plan a reality?” and volunteer to be involved in carrying it out.

(Source: RSVP School Implementation Guide)



of their efforts to remain engaged in the process. She does believe that RSVP is resulting in greater student involvement and will ultimately benefit all groups within the building. “The process allows students to express their concerns and frustrations. The additional benefit is teaching the students to thoroughly research the pros and cons to every issue,” she says. Prinic also believes that the process is accomplishing a key objective by teaching students that they have the ability to effect change in political systems.

## Empowered Students

At Livonia (NY) HS, adviser Terry D’Imperio has witnessed significant changes since students were empowered through a series of RSVP summits. After attending training sessions in 2005, D’Imperio put the wheels in motion by forming an RSVP team consisting of council members and students from leadership class. The leadership team gained support by first introducing RSVP benefits to the faculty and to a group of 60 facilitators selected by homeroom teachers.

Facilitators used RSVP concepts to teach students the importance of taking an interest in school and community related issues. The value of each individual voice was stressed by establishing a clear set of ground rules for all summits. The rules enabled everyone to have a chance to speak and prohibited bashing and name-calling. Teachers were encouraged to let the students take the lead in the process and to remind students to focus on the issues that were important to them.

Upon completion of the four summits, student leaders drafted a civic action plan for presentation to school administrators and the Board of Education. D’Imperio reports that six of the seven issues included in the March 2006 plan have been completed according to specifications. As a community, students were able to select issues that were important to them and then follow up with key groups or service providers to carry out appropriate resolutions.

The following issues addressed by the Livonia HS Civic Action Plan were diverse but were each ranked high in importance by the student body.

- Students wanted more variety in the food and drink choices offered by the school cafeteria. Researching cafeterias in other schools along with a meeting with the head of the food services department helped students to

understand the reasons for the current menu and also to format some viable alternatives.

- A public relations/media club was formed and has installed measures to improve the effectiveness and clarity of morning and afternoon announcements.
- Students were dissatisfied with the speed and reliability of school computers. The leadership team met with the computer services department to determine the feasibility of phasing out old equipment and to find ways to better advise students of what they could expect in regards to technology.
- Upperclassmen expressed interest in creating a comfortable student lounge for seniors. The junior class proceeded with locating and maintaining an area for this purpose.
- Students were concerned that many parts of the school building were too cold. A leadership team met with the buildings and grounds crew to research and resolve this issue.
- A committee of students met with the assistant principal to develop a consistent list of rules regarding the use of electronic devices at school.

D’Imperio believes that successful RSVP summits resulted in immeasurable benefits by showing students that they truly have a voice in student government. She believes that the program has spurred students to talk about issues that are important to them and has increased interest in civics and student involvement. “At least 10 new members (have joined) student council as a direct result of students seeing that student government is not just about dances and Homecoming,” she says. D’Imperio adds that according to the results of a survey sent out by administrators, student satisfaction and morale increased with the use of the RSVP program.

The civic action plan created by D’Imperio’s students provides evidence that RSVP is achieving its intended purpose by placing the power of the voice directly in the hands of the students. The plan reads, “Throughout the past year, we the students have participated in a program called RSVP where we were given the opportunity not only to voice our opinions but to have a say in the way our school is run. Because of our efforts, there have been many positive changes.” ✎

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# Training Workshops Enable RSVP Pioneers to Share Their Skills

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In the fall of 2005, teams from 11 different states were selected to participate in an NASC-sponsored training program designed to increase civic awareness. RSVP (Raising Student Voice & Participation) teaches students valuable lessons about citizenship and democracy. Most importantly, the program stresses that everyone has a voice.

Upon completion of their RSVP training, the 11 teams—each comprised of an 11th-grade student and an adviser—returned to their home states to share what they had learned with members of their own communities. They also began training leaders from other schools in their state. The goal was to equip educators and students across the country with the skills necessary to effectively implement RSVP.



By providing a process that allows students to expand involvement in school and to become an effective voice for creating visible changes, RSVP is a program with wide-reaching benefits. Not only can students experience increased satisfaction, but they can also serve as a voice of reason and a catalyst for positive change in their schools, communities, and beyond.

Hogan Medlin, a senior at J.M. Morehead HS in Eden, NC, was one of the students who attended the initial RSVP training session. As a result, he has shared his experience with breakthrough high schools from across the nation, the North Carolina Association of Student Councils, and at the NASC National Conference. As an RSVP pioneer, Medlin has had numerous educators within his region and state show interest in the process. "My main role is to enlighten as many people as possible with the ability to conduct a positive RSVP experience in their school," he says.

During a typical training session, Medlin provides an overview of RSVP processes and the reasons why the program is an important NASC initiative. Most of Medlin's workshop is devoted to the summit process, the heart of the RSVP program. While adults can add to the discussion, Medlin explains that the focus is on the students. "My main goal is to get the students familiar with what it feels like being both a facilitator and a group member," he says. To achieve this goal, students are divided into smaller groups and asked to participate in a series of mock summits. Medlin illustrates the value of the process by creating a mock civic action plan and stressing the benefits of teamwork.



Medlin also advises trainees about the importance of supportive school administrators in achieving RSVP goals. He recommends that student leaders outline the procedures and benefits involved with the program and then present the highlights to administrators prior to beginning the process. He also reminds delegates that RSVP is for everyone and encourages them to recruit students who are not currently active in student government to join the leadership team.

Medlin believes in the benefits of the program and attempts to pass this enthusiasm along to others. "The delegates are appreciative for what they learned, and are very excited about getting the ball rolling with this project," he says. As a result of the training provided by Medlin and other trainers, RSVP is effectively raising student voices in schools across the nation.