PROJECT STUDENT AUTONOMY

By Kids For Kids
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Introduction to the Problem

Autonomy, or the ability to control one’s own actions, was considered by our founding fathers to be an unalienable right. Both the Declaration of Independence and the United States Constitution refer to autonomy, or liberty, as something that is god-given, and that should not be taken away by a government or society. The decision to add autonomy into the framework of our country was not an arbitrary one, but was done so that eventually every person could share the right to self-determination, for without that right people become apathetic and lose their individuality, as well as motivation to change the world around them. However, despite the hope of our forefathers, our social system has not been able to guarantee autonomy to every person, and the dilemma is most strongly represented within our school system. This problem of lack of autonomy in our schools is hurting students and decreasing their personal motivation to learn. When we asked a class of 9th grade U.S. history students if they felt like they were part of a school community, not one person said yes. We then went a step further and asked them if they felt like leaders in school, again no one said yes. One student even sarcastically added, "It's hard to feel like a leader when you don't even feel like a person." Currently our school system is set up as an economic and expedient way to move students into the business world, with little regard for their personal development. As our 12th and final year of compulsory education comes to a close, it becomes increasingly evident to us that not only is the average student apathetic about school, but the lack of autonomy and power in school has managed to drive much of the individuality, motivation, and hope from its pupils.

Currently when we students walk into school we are immediately stripped of all power. Not only does the average student not have adequate say in school climate and school rules, but we are actually legally denied each of the civil liberties afforded to us in the Constitution. We are then forced to enter and exit classrooms based on teacher’s permission. We can be searched, told to be quiet, told when to sit, told when to stand, told when to eat, told when to speak, and even told when to go to the bathroom. Our grades dictate our future, and while we may have certain power over our grades, ultimately a teacher can hold it over us whenever they want our cooperation. Some have managed to escape the bearing of grades, yet there is still always the threat of suspension to
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make sure we do as they say. What we argue is that under these circumstances, in which they do not trust us with autonomy in our education or personal well-being, it is very hard for a student to feel respected and appreciated by teachers and administrators. When students do not feel respected and valued as individuals, they begin not to care about their education as well as their school in general. We as students must begin to take back the power in the classroom and begin to take back our education.

The fact of the matter is that the current situation is breeding an environment that compromises student individuality, does not motivate them to perform, and drives them towards delinquent behavior. According to Carl Simpson, a respected education researcher quoted in Susan J. Rosenholtz’s paper, "The Effect of Classroom Structure on Shared Perceptions of Ability", as "task differentiation" decreases (basically the number of choices a student has) so too does the multi-dimensionality of student performance. In effect, as students receive fewer choices, they become more conformist and less original. How often have you wanted to take a class project into your own hands, but have been denied that right? When we asked students about how they felt when they were actually given autonomy in an assignment, one girl described that she spent longer on a 20 point Peace Studies project then any other assignment all year. She stated that she actually cared about what she was doing,
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and felt passionate about her subject and so was driven to spend such large amounts of time perfecting her final product. How often has your teacher said it would be too hard to grade everyone’s individual assignment if each one was different? Yet, isn’t that the purpose of individuality? Sacrificing originality for ease of grading is a huge consequence in our education system that has been caused by our adherence to strict curricula and national standards/standardized testing. It is also true that students without power lack motivation and without responsibility in their education often act out in frustration. These are the major problems we look to address with an increase of student autonomy in our education system. Every year we receive a packet on student rights and responsibility; what we are saying is that we now understand our rights as individuals, we are simply taking responsibility and getting them back.

Due to the apathy we have seen in students, we set out with the research question:

“How do varying levels of student autonomy affect a student’s motivation to learn?”

This is what we found, along with potential obstacles to the attainment of autonomy and how one might get around said obstacles.
The Benefits of Student Autonomy

Our Thesis:

A wise man once wrote that "the self is not something that is ready-made, but something in continuous formation through choice of action." That man was John Dewey, one of the most influential education reformers in American history and someone who understood that education should teach students how to think instead of what to think. Unfortunately Dewey's vision of education as the realization of self is often thwarted by the extremely limited autonomy students experience in the classroom. By not allowing students to have some say in the direction of their studies along with some choice of activity within the course work, they become apathetic about school and their personal growth is stunted. Some private schools give student's "full" autonomy, in an attempt to combat these realities; these are often dismissed as too radical or unruly, and perhaps rightfully so. So where is the solution? What is clear is that by giving students more autonomy, we will create confident, independent thinkers, who will be motivated leaders in this ever-changing global society, benefits that astronomically outweigh the potential problems of changing the outdated status quo.
Perception of Self

One of the most outstanding benefits of giving students more autonomy is the positive effect it will have on their perception of self as well as how they view their peers. Social theorist Carl Simpson conducted a study comparing sixteen third-grade classrooms, eight having very autonomous student bodies, (dubbed multidimensional) and eight with more traditional and far less autonomous student bodies, (dubbed unidimensional), to see how the students differed. The surveyed unidimensional teachers reported grading students' work "always" or "usually," using "one set" of materials or "two or three sets," normally ordered by ability level, and allowing students to choose their own materials or timing of work "seldom" or "never." The multidimensional teachers, in contrast, reported grading students' work "seldom" or "never," individualizing materials or providing "four or more sets" of materials during any given subject. They reported using non-language media "frequently," and allowing student autonomy "usually" or "often." Simpson states that the "narrowness of the performance structure in the uni-dimensional classes will force students to differentiate themselves, and to distribute their academic self-concepts as often into the "below average" range as into the "above average" range. His survey results agreed with this hypothesis: While only 14 percent of the multidimensional students saw themselves as either "a little worse" or "a lot worse" academically than their peers, 29 percent of the uni-dimensional kids did.(1) Simpson's observations show that when a student is put in a multidimensional environment, he or she will be less likely to have a pre-determined judgment of his or her own ability or his or her peer's abilities. This means that by allowing students to have some choice and control, they will be less likely to label each other and more likely to appreciate themselves and their peers as individuals, each with strengths and weaknesses.

——29% of the students in the less autonomous classes labeled themselves as either "a little worse" or "a lot worse" academically than their peers, more then twice the number of students in the more autonomous classes.
Motivation and enthusiasm are crucial to the success of any student. There seems to be a strong correlation between autonomy and motivation, as multiple experiments have shown that when people are given control of their lives they are happier and more motivated. One such experiment, dubbed the "Nursing Home Experiment," observed two wards of a nursing home. The first ward was given very little autonomy, having their meals, activities and bed times chosen for them. The second ward was given more autonomy, being able to choose what they ate, what they did and when they woke up. The more autonomous group reported being a lot happier, independent and on average lived for a year to a year and a half longer than their more restricted peers. (2) Another benefit of having control in your life is emotional stability; few things lead more reliably to depression and other forms of psychological distress than a feeling of helplessness. (3) The idea of happier, more enthusiastic students must be an enticing one to any teacher who has ever looked up from his or her lecture only to see kids sleeping or uninterested. Most students are excited by some aspects of school, but unfortunately when they aren't given sufficient control they may not be able to follow these intellectual impulses, and they consequently lose interest. Students given choice and autonomy will become more interested in learning and then be more enthusiastic towards broadening their horizons.

"Few things lead more reliably to depression and other forms of psychological distress than a feeling of helplessness."

—Alfie Kohn
Autonomy and Independent Thought

Perhaps the biggest advantage of giving students more autonomy in the classroom is that students will become more assertive and independent thinkers. The explanation for this comes from simple logic: If students are always being told what to do and how to do it, they will become experts at following directions and not thinking for themselves. If, however, the students are allowed to make choices and exert control throughout their young lives, they will become independent thinkers, and decision makers who are assertive and confident in their own judgment. School must teach you to think for yourself, and often this entails the teacher not wielding all the power. Respected education reformist Alfie Kohn wrote, "The way a child learns how to make decisions is by making decisions."(4) Kohn advocates for greater student input in the education system and a more even distribution of power between student and teacher. He criticizes that "schooling is typically about doing things to children, not working with them."(4) By building a curriculum around both student and teacher input, both parties will learn mutual respect, teamwork, and motivation. It is important that both students and teachers be stakeholders in these areas. According to Kohn, "If we want children to take responsibility for their own behavior, we must first give them responsibility, and plenty of it,"(4) a sentiment that seems to agree with the results of the aforementioned studies. Not only is greater student autonomy the key to molding independent thinkers, it is also the antithesis to the blind obedience that is being programmed into many students today.

"The way a child learns how to make decisions is by making decisions."
—Alfie Kohn

Every great advance in science has issued from a new audacity of imagination.
—John Dewey
Obviously if you suddenly gave students full autonomy in a classroom, you’d create something of a chaotic scene. But intellectuals like John Dewey and Alfie Kohn aren’t suggesting we just let kids run loose, but rather that we better balance the power within the classroom and actually teach our youth how to think instead of what to think. Right now students are submissive to the authority of the teacher and administrator, only motivated by rewards or punishments instead of a true yearning for knowledge. The time has come to modernize our education system if we are to stay competitive in this innovative twenty-first century. By deciding the curricula, rules, and activities through both student and teacher input, teachers will retain their role as the students’ leader and guiding force, but now students will feel self-motivated. Along with being motivated, the students will be making decisions for themselves, preparing them for a lifetime of independent and innovative thought. Students will also become more inquisitive and confident. As seen by the third grade study, students will be more open-minded and less quick to label each other. All of these benefits of greater student autonomy will combine to create leaders. Leaders need to be confident, independent thinkers, who are extremely driven and motivated for their cause; by giving students more autonomy these qualities can be brought out in today’s youth.

“Teach our youth how to think instead of what to think.”
A Student’s Guide to Taking Back Power in the Classroom

Teachers should consider some of the ways in which they can lead a more autonomous student body, like having multiple assignments for the students to choose from, or not having the students compete with each other as frequently through less emphasis on grades and more on thought. Whenever debating educational philosophies, one must ask: What is the ultimate goal of education? I asked myself, and realized that it shouldn’t be to get the best GPA or the highest SAT score, it should be the same as the ultimate goal of adolescence, to figure yourself out. To gain a clear, confident understanding of who you are and what you believe. Of course you should fill your brain with knowledge, but more importantly you should arm yourself with the ability to think for yourself and gather new knowledge that doesn’t come from a textbook. School should teach us to be leaders, team players and individuals, not how to bubble in the answer we frantically memorized the night before. The means of realizing this dream is cooperation, a newly forged alliance between teacher and student; in short, greater student autonomy.
AUTONOMY LEADS TO...
- Motivation
  - Increase student interest
  - Increase student confidence
  - Self-reliance

ABSTRACT THINKING
- Confidence
- Open-mindedness
- Creativity

COOPERATION
- Teamwork
- Acceptance of others' ideas

LEADER
NO LONGER WILL
EDUCATION CREATE
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THAT LEAD

Do You?

Takoma Mowers
Class Activity

The more we learned about the philosophy of greater student autonomy, the more convinced we became that it was the answer to student apathy, but we wanted to talk to other students and see what our peers thought. So we arranged to visit several classes and conduct an activity simulating a more autonomous learning environment, after which we would have an informal discussion with the kids about their own experiences with school and power.

The Activity: After introducing ourselves, we divided the class up into four or five groups (depending on the class size), generally with five or six kids per group. We wrote down three well-known social issues on the board, and the groups were instructed to choose one and come up with three actions they could take and three actions the government could take to solve the problem. The point of the activity was not to evaluate what they came up with, but to observe how they came up with it. Two of the groups were given a “group leader,” while two were not, dubbed the “leader groups” and “leaderless groups” respectively. One student from each of the “leader groups” was pulled out into the hallway and told that he or she had complete power to dictate the group discussion, power to decide who spoke when, what question would be answered and the power to reject anyone’s input, essentially, the power of a teacher. The “leaderless groups” were given no such instruction and left to figure things out on their own. We walked around as they discussed and observed some very interesting results:

Observations from the Activity:

1. Often we noticed that one or two of the students in the “leader groups” were not participating, while, in general, the “leaderless groups” seemed to all be engaged.
2. The answers of the “leader groups” were always complete but seemed to lack the creativity and diversity of the “leaderless groups.”
3. Sometimes the “leader groups” seemed to run more efficiently and finish faster.
4. Often groups would go beyond the requirements of six answers; more often these groups were those without leaders.
Class Activity

5. In virtually every class experiment, the “leaderless groups” finished last. While this proves groups with leaders can be more efficient, there was an enormous amount more discussion and thought that went into the leaderless group’s answers.

Class Discussion: One major factor we had when figuring out which classes we were going to talk to was diversity. We wanted to talk to AP kids, ESOL kids, regular kids, honors kids, black kids, white kids, kids who loved school, kids who hated school, kids cherished by the school system and kids who have fallen through the cracks. We did, and found that while different kids have different priorities, a lot of us are frustrated by the same problems. Kids from all backgrounds told us that they had little power in school and often lost motivation from the frustration this causes. They explained that when a teacher didn’t respect them or treat them as equals they felt resentment and lost confidence. They described excitedly, the few instances they remembered in which teachers had shared their power and respected them, but these hopeful anecdotes were too often drowned out by the endless horror stories we heard about teachers not respecting kids and abusing their authority. Many kids seemed desperate for change but doubted their ability to make anything happen. Many kids were so overtaken by the pressure to succeed by the school’s standards instead of their own, that they feared change, doubted us and seemed unable think outside of the box. One girl noted, “We’re only in school a few hours a day and we really don’t care that much anymore, they’re not gonna listen to us, so why even bother.” Sad words which articulated perfectly the backlash of our education system and the frustration of a disenfranchised generation of students.
Obstacles

When one examines the argument for student autonomy, its benefits are obvious. However, as many know, implementing it in our classrooms can be a challenge. In this section we will describe the various factors that prevent students from engaging in a more autonomous education and exactly what stands between students and power over their educational lives. We first want to note that we are not going to entertain the idea that the reason schools don’t pursue student autonomy is because they don’t want students to think for themselves. While this argument is not totally unsound, the purpose of our project was not to destroy the system, but rather help students take back power within its existing framework. That being said, these are the major obstacles to student autonomy we have found.

Money- This may be one of the largest obstacles, for an autonomous classroom cannot operate in sizes of 30-35 students. An autonomous classroom would require smaller class sizes, which would in turn mean more schools and more teachers. Additions of this magnitude would be extremely costly, and with budget cuts every year, the likelihood of the school system being able to cover them is low.

Change in teaching philosophy- Current public school teaching philosophy is geared towards teacher authority. In an average classroom, the teacher holds almost all the power; whether it is to decide class rules, the content of an assignment, or rubric for grades in the classroom. For autonomy to be effective in schools, teachers would have to give up some of this power, which is contrary to what many teachers have been trained to do.

Large Class sizes- With current class sizes of 30-35 students, it would be very hard for students to be autonomous. If certain students needed help from teachers in learning how to implement structure for themselves, a teacher may not be able to get to the needs of other students. Likewise, if a teacher shares all of their time equally between students, some may flourish with increased freedom, yet others may suffer from not getting the in-depth help that they need.
Obstacles

Lack of accountability

**For teachers**- With increased autonomy there will not be as many assessments, which will make state tests a lot harder to administer. This may allow bad teachers to go undetected and student needs unfulfilled.

**For students**- In an increasingly competitive world, it becomes more and more necessary for students to prove themselves through objective assessments. With more autonomy, it will be harder to classify students through grades, which may in turn make students less accountable for the work they have to complete.

Many students will not be faced with autonomous careers- Many students will end up working in careers in which they do not have to think for themselves. If students are used to controlling their work environments, they may have a hard time adapting to a less autonomous workforce.
Taking Action: Moderate Approaches

Now comes the difficult part, actually getting more autonomy. Many kids are afraid to take action towards changing their education, due to the enormous pressures of standardized tests and grades. Likewise, many teachers are afraid to take action towards changing the status quo, for fear of losing their jobs or not meeting county testing requirements. But this fear must be balanced. There are countless ways in which students and teachers can better share the power in the classroom, and still be hugely successful. The most powerful of these are:

1. **Communication:** The best way to get anything done is through good communication. Most teachers are not irrational, and if student’s disagree with something, they will listen, but only if you voice your disagreement in a constructive way. Say a teacher wants to assign seats, instead of moaning and groaning, the students need to object peacefully and offer another suggestion. Ask, “Why don’t we sit in a big circle, that way you can see everyone and we can still sit with who we want to sit with and then if that doesn’t work you can assign seats.” Communication leads to mutual respect, which will lead to more trust and then more power. If you’re frustrated with the power structure in school, odds are other kids are too; talk to them and then together talk to your teacher, assertively and without fear.

2. **Be Proactive:** We need to take an interest in our education. You’d be surprised how receptive some teachers will be to your suggestions regarding future assignments and class conduct. Think how much more apt to do an assignment you would be if it was one that you suggested, rather then another boring book report. For most of us, work isn’t the worst thing in the world, it’s work that seems redundant or unnecessary that makes us apathetic. An important way to have your voice heard is to present your ideas with other students, to show the class is behind you. Student solidarity is crucial for regaining power from the teacher.

3. **Protest:** If a school rule or policy seems unjust, a teacher’s behavior unwarranted, an administrator’s actions unfair, then by all means protest. You can work with student advocacy groups within your school as well as the Student Government to organize students, and let the powers that be know that the students will not be stepped on. From petitioning to organizing walk-outs, the power in numbers of the student body at any school is major.
Taking Action: Radical Approaches

Ideally, one would hope that teachers exhibit willingness to cooperate with students, and that all the ways to take back power described in the moderate section of "Taking Action" would help create a more autonomous learning environment. The truth is, however, that no matter how much one tries, there are plenty of teachers as well as administrators who are not willing to listen to students. While they may nod their heads in agreement while we voice our opinion, they do not care what we say and they will never listen to us or take our advice. This can be extremely frustrating, especially when it seems there is nothing you can do. There are two main ways to use radical action in taking back power.

The first strategy is to simply show how little control administrators and teachers have over the school. While they have power to discipline students, they get incredibly nervous and scared as soon as they do not have complete control over the school. This is because they are well aware that if something were to ever happen in large numbers there would be no way they could control it. Therefore, creating chaos in the school can be a great way to disillusion fellow students about the administration's lack of control.

Food Fight: One great strategy is organizing a food fight to take place during the middle of lunch. If you set up 5 small groups of people, and have them all start throwing food at each other at the same time, eventually everyone will get involved. This is a great way to show the lack of control that administration actually has over the students. Security guards will flip out, yet they won't be able to exert much control if a large group is participating.
Taking Action: Radical Approaches

**Music:** Another way to take back power and create ruckus is through playing music loudly through the hallways during lunch or in between class. Kids love it and it brightens their day, and it is not in any way destructive, but it is a reminder to teachers and students alike that the teachers and administrators do not have as firm a hold on the school as they would have you believe.

The second way to use radical methods to take power back is to demonstrate the power that the students have in numbers. Administrators constantly try to create rifts among students. They encourage them to tattle on one another, and to compete against each other. However, anytime in which students show solidarity, it demonstrates that we are not simply blindly obedient sheep, but rather are a cohesive group willing to fight for each other.

**Flyers:** Flyers can be used in many ways. One way is to make a statement about unjust principles of school, whether it be lack of respect from teachers or the lack of power students have in their own schools. Another way is to simply make jokes and get fellow students to laugh, maybe a funny picture of an administrator or a funny slogan. Either way it is important to show that students have a right to choose what goes on the walls.
Taking Action: Radical Approaches

School-wide games- There are various games that can be played school-wide. If massive amounts of students participate in games such as Owl Eyes or Killer, it is just another way to create student solidarity and autonomy within school.

Boycotting Assignments- One of the most frustrating things about school is the assignments in which students can discern no worth. One way students get through to the teacher that they need to change an assignment or their teaching style is by boycotting the assignment. If so many students express displeasure, a teacher has no choice but to change the assignment, otherwise it will bring unwanted attention to them from administrators and will appear as if they do not have control over their class.
Conclusion

Our demand for increased student autonomy is not simply a cry for students to have complete control over their classes, but rather a cogent argument for cooperation between students and teachers. The current state of public education has bred extreme apathy and distaste for school, therefore, while we agree that students cannot hold all the power in a classroom, things must begin to change, immediately.

The biggest obstacle seems to be the unwillingness of people to take responsibility for the change they want to see. When we talked to students, they blamed teachers for not respecting them. They argued because they didn't get respect they didn't feel motivated. Then, teachers argued that most students don't work hard, but rather just cared about grades, therefore justifying a teacher's power in the classroom. Finally, both groups then blamed administrators, for not treating them like equals, and not giving either group any power. In truth, everyone plays their role in the apathy and distrust that exists in school. It's easy to point the finger at someone else; much harder, but vastly more rewarding, is to take the first step towards change and assume responsibility.

Almost every person we talked to agreed that increased student autonomy is a good thing, yet almost every person we talked to was also skeptical of its pres-
Conclusion

ence ever making its way into public schools. How can it be that something so many people fundamentally support is seen as so impossible to achieve? The truth is, it isn’t. If students begin taking control of their education and teachers loosen the reins a bit, we will see drastic change. It is time we stopped blaming each other; it is time we stopped hiding behind the authority of a higher power. Students want to learn, teachers want to help us learn, so enough: Embrace your individualism, your creativity, your curiosity, and regain your motivation in school!

FURTHER READING:

The Case Against Homework by Sarah Bennett and Nancy Kalish

Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your High School History Textbook Got Wrong by James Loewen

The Homework Myth by Alfie Kohn

Teaching as a Subversive Activity by Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner

Deschooling Society by Ivan Illich

Teenage Liberation Handbook: How to Quit School and Get a Real Life and Education by Grace Llewellyn

Deschooling our Lives by Matt Hern

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http://dothisallday.org/

Anti-politics.net/

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