

“My school starts discussing options for my future in the 9th grade.”

39.5% agree
Comprehensive High School Students

71% agree
Magnet High School Students

—From SEPARATE & UNEQUAL

YOUNG PEOPLE: *Separate and Unequal?*

BY JESSICA BYNOE

U.S. EDUCATION AND WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT GROUP

AED Center for Early Care and Education

AED Center for School and Community Services

Educational Equity Center at AED

AED Disabilities Studies and Service Center

AED Educational Research, Evaluation, and Technology Center

AED Higher Education Management Services Center

AED National Institute for Work and Learning

Zuki Modunkwu is currently a sophomore at Nashville State Tech. A few years ago, the prospect of college and success seemed unattainable to him. Then he got involved with the Youth Innovation Fund, a program AED developed and managed to encourage self-sufficiency and civic engagement through projects that are designed, operated, and overseen by young people.

“AED believes that young people—especially those who traditionally lack economic and political power—can and must play a significant role in creating more vibrant, equitable, and healthy communities,” said Kenny Holdsmen, director of the AED Youth Engagement Team. “By providing leadership on initiatives such as the Youth Innovation Fund, AED is building on more than 30 years of work supporting young people in their efforts to address pressing local problems.”

STUDY YIELDS ALARMING RESULTS

While working with the fund, Modunkwu helped conduct an action-research study that

was published as a report, called *Separate and Unequal*. The survey, which was released in 2007, revealed that graduation rates at magnet schools were significantly higher than rates at the city’s comprehensive schools, which have much higher proportions of low-income students.

Opportunities for the future were discussed in magnet schools as early as ninth grade for most students. In the city’s comprehensive schools, however, only 30 percent of students felt they received information about their opportunities for the future during their high school careers.

In addition, students who reported that they were unsafe, unprepared, and disrespected in comprehensive schools were predominantly from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. The survey also revealed that, regardless of school type and economic background, all students cared about learning.

Modunkwu was one of those students. Although he was committed to his studies, he

“...opportunities to participate as active, engaged citizens.”

KENNY HOLDSMAN
Director, Youth Engagement Team
AED Center for School and Community Services



To be successful, young people in the United States need voice, value, and visibility in their schools, communities, and the larger democracy. They can achieve this through opportunities to participate as active, engaged citizens. These opportunities must appeal to their various interests, so that their talents and hopes are appreciated and fostered.

The most effective opportunities to engage as active citizens offer young people the space to learn about power, community issues, the various strategies they can use to improve their communities, and, most important, their own assets. Through all of this, young people must have the support of adult allies.

Young people most often succeed when they partner with adults who recognize and support their ideas and abilities. Adults must maintain their support of youth engagement, even when young people’s suggestions and plans raise difficult and contentious issues.



What do you think they need to succeed?

Join the conversation at www.aed.org/aedconnections



Zuki Modunkwu helped conduct a survey that led to widespread discussion about inequitable education in Nashville.

Photograph by Peyton Hodge

felt inadequately prepared for college. In the tradition of student activism in Nashville dating back to the civil rights movement, Modunkwu knew that the *Separate and Unequal* findings had to be made public.

And go public he and his peers did. They used research, media, community organizing, and high-profile partnerships with local organizations—all skills they learned from AED’s Youth Innovation Fund—to call attention to the issues. As a result, inequitable education became one of the most talked-about issues in the city.

MAJOR, LASTING IMPACT

Young people were able to leverage this newfound urgency to develop school and city-wide programs for college access, improved school climate, and broader youth activism. This was no longer only about the inequities in a school district; this was about young people expressing

their voice, value, and visibility.

The experience Modunkwu and his peers had in Nashville typifies AED’s approach to working with youth.

“From service learning and youth organizing to youth media and philanthropy, AED gives young people the chance to make a real difference in the world,” said Holdsman. “In the process, lasting partnerships are built, youth are viewed as valuable contributors to local social change efforts, and additional opportunities for engagement are created—all of which provides future generations with a path to become, and remain, involved in civic and political activities.”

Jessica Bynoe is a program officer for youth engagement in the AED Center for School and Community Services.

Learn more at www.theyouthfund.org