BOSTON STUDENT ADVISORY COUNCIL SPARKS DIALOGUE WITH WELLESLEY STUDENTS
The Wellesley College Education Department co-sponsored “Taking Back Education: Boston Youth Organizers Speak Out” held in Pendleton Atrium. | Photo by Lien Dao ’20, Assistant Photo Editor.

On Feb. 21 a panel of six high school students from the Boston Student Advisory Council (BSAC) gave a talk in the Pendleton Atrium in which they discussed issues within the public education system in Boston. The event, Taking Back Education: Boston Youth Organizers Speak Out, was part of a larger series of lectures on urban education organized by the Education Department at Wellesley this year.
Established in 2003, BSAC consists of student leaders who work towards educational improvement and educational justice. Their mission is to ensure that students have an active role in education reform, whether it be in terms of policy making, hiring teachers or budget cuts.

Professor Soo Hong from the Education Department invited BSAC to present at Wellesley. She has been connected to BSAC for several years, and many of her students have worked with them in the past.

Serenity Hughes ’18 reached out to Professor Hong because she and others at Harambee House wanted to host an event for Black History Month focusing on the crisis in black education. Since Professor Hong had already invited BSAC to speak, they decided that Hughes would help set up the reception at Harambee House.

“The reason that I wanted to bring BSAC here is that I really think we talk a lot about school reform, but then we often don’t speak to young people at all. Those who are the most impacted are the least included, primarily because we have a sense that young people don’t really know how to tell us what’s wrong, or be part of the solution. I believe that the opposite is actually true,” Hong said.

The students from BSAC represent different high schools in the Boston Public School system, and each of them are involved in different subcommittees of BSAC. For example, one subcommittee focuses on including more student voices in administrative decisions, another focuses on climate change and a third centers on dismantling the school-to-prison pipeline.

The school-to-prison pipeline is the tendency for young people in the Boston Public School system, especially African-Americans, to go straight from high school to prison. There are several different aspects of their education that contribute to these high rates of incarceration, and the members of BSAC explained that standardized testing was one of them.

During the event, the students introduced themselves and spoke about why they got involved with activism, what inspires them to continue fighting for educational equity and what they thought were the biggest problems in public education. For example, one student expressed her concern for teenagers who do not show up at school, either because they do not feel welcome there or because they no longer see the point. Due to the pressing matter of this issue, she wants to be a school counselor.

One of the most prominent problems that arose from the discussion was the lack of empathetic teachers. Many of the students on the panel came from low-income neighborhoods in Boston, where educational opportunities are slim. They said that their teachers often did not understand the difficulties they faced on a daily basis and did not work with them to establish a relationship.

Another issue was the lack of teachers who were people of color. Many schools have a predominantly white teaching staff and a student body made up of minorities; this disparity frames the way history is taught in public schools.

“I questioned things like that too when I was their age, but they’re taking it so much farther,” said Génesis Barrios ’17, who came to the event due to an interest in learning more about educational reform.

Along with Barrios, Brianne O’Donoghue ’17 attended the event because she believes in the importance of educational reform. Both of them were surprised to see how young the speakers were.
“The Boston Public School system actually pays a lot of attention to these students. I just thought it was so incredible that they are getting involved in all this work at such a young age. In my town, no one ever really cared about students’ opinions,” O’Donoghue said.

“I kept imagining older people. When I saw them, it really helped me change the image I had in my mind of an activist. I’m glad the Education Department invited them instead of adults. These students were real with you, they didn’t beat around the bush,” Barrios said.

After the panel, Harambee House hosted an informal reception, in which members of BSAC and the audience at Pendleton Atrium had the opportunity to speak with one another over dinner.

At the reception, Hong chatted with some students from BSAC about the importance of college-readiness. “There is a culture around higher education that allows certain to be successful. The students on the panel had some really good questions about college, a lot of curiosity, and there is no reason why they shouldn’t have those questions addressed before they touch down on their campuses in the Fall,” said Hong.

For aspiring teachers, the most important advice that BSAC offered was to know your students. Speakers urged future teachers to show their students that they care and that they’re willing to listen to them and be emotionally invested in their lives.