



# Engaging the Voices of Students:

## A Report on the 2007 & 2008 High School Survey of Student Engagement

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*“A good engaging teacher makes all the difference between a pass or a fail.”*

— HSSSE 2007 Student Respondent

### INTRODUCTION

The state of high schools in the United States could adequately be described as having reached crisis level, in terms of persistence and graduation rates. Despite decades of attempts by educators, researchers, policymakers, and even foundations to raise achievement and stem the tide of dropouts, a September 2009 report from the Institute of Education Sciences of the US Department of Education reveals that the on-time graduation rate (ninth graders who graduate high school in four years) for the class of 2005-2006 within public schools in the United States was 73.2%. More than one out of four public high school students did not graduate in four years, a drop from the previous class - the class of 2004-2005 - which graduated on time at a rate of 74.7% (Cataldi, Laird, & KewalRamani, 2009).

The costs of dropping out for both the individual and society are high (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2009). These costs come in the form of lack of opportunity for advancement, reduction in income opportunities, unemployment, incarceration, and lack of financial contribution to society (Sum et al., 2009). As a result, ameliorating the dropout crisis has become a pressing policy issue. Most solutions to the dropout problem revolve around punishment for dropping out (for example, withholding of a driver's license, disincentives to employers for hiring dropouts) rather than incentives for remaining in school.

Perhaps surprisingly, the aspirations of students for their schooling are high. On the High School Survey of Student Engagement (HSSSE), in both 2007 and 2008, 91.4% of respondents expected to receive at least a high school diploma, with most aspiring to attainment of college or advanced degrees, while only 1.2% expected to leave high school without a diploma.

With so many documented incentives for getting a high school diploma and so many negative consequences for dropping out, why does the dropout rate continue to grow and what accounts for the gulf between aspirations and graduation?

Student voices from the High School Survey of Student Engagement provide insight. While adults often focus on the consequences of dropping out, the students focus on their experiences within high school. In response to the last question on the survey, in which students were asked, in an open-response format, if they would like

to say more about their answers to the survey questions, the most frequent comment from students was some variation of the idea that these surveys are “pointless,” because “nobody cares” and “nothing will change.” Further, only 54% of respondents in 2007 and 2008 agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, “I am an important part of my high school community.” There is a palpable sense from high school students that many feel unheard, unimportant, and virtually anonymous within their school environment.

Earlier this year, a colleague working in a large urban middle school in the Northeast related a story from a children's health study for which she was doing in-school observations. Her observations took place just after lunch in a classroom down the hall from the cafeteria. Over the days and weeks she was in the school, she noticed that students were arriving in class later and later after lunch, despite the proximity of the classroom to the cafeteria. One day, this researcher went to the cafeteria to see why the students were taking so long to get to class. What she noticed was that students were exiting the cafeteria through a far door and taking the long route around a back hallway in order to get to class. Curious about why these students were taking this indirect route to class, she followed them around the back hallway. What she observed was a teacher, whose classroom was on the back hallway, standing outside his door greeting every student who walked by during hallway passing time with a handshake, a “high five,” a slap on the back, or a “Hey, how are you doing?” These students, having discovered this teacher's actions, took the long way around to class after lunch just for the purpose of receiving the moment of personal attention.

This observation by a researcher reflects many stories from high schools across the country, in which students look for a connection with an adult or peer, express a desire for engagement through relationship, and want to be acknowledged as an important part of their school community. The voices of student respondents to the High School Survey of Student Engagement provide great insight into the experiences, thoughts, perceptions, and beliefs of students across the country, as well as both their skepticism and hope that adults will pay attention to what they have to say. One HSSSE 2007 respondent wrote, “I do not believe anyone will read this and actually care,” while another wrote, “I hope everyone takes this survey and actually expresses their opinions. Please act upon these surveys.”

## WHAT IS HSSSE?

Studies of student engagement have often focused on the traditionally “measurable” (i.e., countable) aspects of student behavior, and, consequently, report primarily on time on task, attendance/truancy, and suspension/discipline rates (Brewster & Fager, 2000; Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; McMahon & Portelli, 2004; National Center for Student Engagement, 2006). The High School Survey of Student Engagement (HSSSE) conceives of student engagement as a deeper and broader construct, one that allows us to capture a variety of ways in which students may or may not be engaged in the life and work of a school.

HSSSE is a research and professional development project directed by the Center for Evaluation and Education Policy at Indiana University in Bloomington. The project has three primary purposes: (1) to help high schools explore, understand, and strengthen student engagement, (2) to work with high school teachers and administrators on utilizing survey data to improve practices, and (3) to conduct research on student engagement.

HSSSE investigates deeply the attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs of students about their work, the school learning environment, and their interaction with the school community. The data from the survey help schools explore the causes and conditions that lead to student success or failure, engagement or “dis-engagement,” persistence or dropping out. HSSSE data are important in guiding both immediate action on school improvement initiatives and long-term planning of larger reforms, providing insight into ways of reaching every student, raising achievement, improving graduation rates, and strengthening teaching and learning in schools.

Growing out of the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), a survey project of the Center for Postsecondary Research at Indiana University (directed by Dr. George Kuh) focused on postsecondary students, HSSSE has been available to schools since 2004. Previously directed by Dr. Martha McCarthy, HSSSE has been based at the Center for Evaluation and Education Policy (directed by Dr. Jonathan Plucker) since the 2005-2006 school year.

The central component of the project is the survey instrument, which takes about 30 minutes for students to complete. Survey questions investigate the levels and dimensions of student engagement in the life and work of high schools, providing schools with rich and valuable data on students’ beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors. Since 2006, more than 300,000 students in over 40 states have taken the survey.

Currently, there is a survey administration each fall and spring. Schools choose to participate in HSSSE, and administer the survey to their students. Each participating school receives a comprehensive data report detailing and summarizing the responses of students in that school to questions on the survey, as well as providing comparisons to the whole pool of HSSSE respondents. Participating schools also receive access to technical assistance from HSSSE staff in understanding and using the data.

## PURPOSE OF REPORT

HSSSE issues periodic reports on issues related to student engagement, and an overview report on each year’s aggregate data. An earlier report, *Voices of Students on Engagement*, focused on the HSSSE 2006 data. The current report focuses on HSSSE 2007 and 2008 data.<sup>1</sup> The next report, due for release in March, 2010, will focus on HSSSE 2009 data. These reports, after being released, are available on the HSSSE website (<http://ceep.indiana.edu/hssse/>).

Participating schools use their student engagement survey data in efforts to improve both the academic performance of their students and the teaching and learning environment in their schools. Some schools are looking to gather data — other than performance and achievement data — that can help them with reform efforts. Some schools are making efforts to strengthen their school community. Their school data reports provide the foundation for making improvements.

This report is designed to provide an overview of the data so that educators, researchers, practitioners, and policymakers, beyond the group of HSSSE participating schools, have access to the picture of student engagement generated by HSSSE and insight into the thoughts, beliefs, and perceptions of the 134,706 students from a variety of schools across the United States who participated in HSSSE 2007 and 2008. First, the report provides profiles of schools and respondents from HSSSE 2007 and 2008, then highlights key selected findings from the data, and concludes with strategies and recommendations for strengthening student engagement and engaging the voices of students for effective school improvement.

## PROFILE OF HSSSE 2007 AND 2008 PARTICIPATING SCHOOLS

In Spring 2007, 104 schools from 30 different states participated in the High School Survey of Student Engagement. The average (mean) student enrollment at a HSSSE participating school in the spring of 2007 was 937; the smallest participating school had an enrollment of 20, and the largest participating school had an enrollment of 3,273.

In Spring 2008, 119 schools from 27 different states participated in the High School Survey of Student Engagement. The average (mean) student enrollment at a HSSSE participating school in the spring of 2007 was 1,047; the smallest participating school had an enrollment of 15, and the largest participating school had an enrollment of 3,151.

### *Schools by Region*

All five regions of the country — Northeast, Southeast, Midwest, Southwest, and West — were represented in the pool of participating schools in spring 2007 and spring 2008. In spring 2007, nearly half of the participating schools were located in the Midwest; in spring 2008,

<sup>1</sup> The data presented in this report were gathered in Spring 2007 and Spring 2008. In both Fall 2006 and Fall 2007, a small cadre of schools participated in HSSSE for various reasons: to obtain beginning-of-year baseline data, to gather data for accreditation reports, and/or to measure student engagement at various points throughout the school year. As the fall survey administration grows to include a critical mass of schools and students, fall survey data will be included in these reports as well.

more than two-thirds of the participating schools were located in two regions: the Southeast and the Midwest. Table 1 presents the participating schools by region, delineating the states that had participating schools within each region and the number of participating schools within each region.

### ***Schools by Classification***

The Institute of Education Sciences of the US Department of Education, in the Common Core of Data, categorizes the location of schools based on their proximity to areas of particular population levels. Based on these community classifications, HSSSE 2007 and 2008 participating schools were located in a variety of contexts: urban, suburban, rural, and town. In Spring 2007, 35% of participating schools were located in urban contexts, 28% in suburban contexts, 27% in rural contexts, and 10% in town contexts. In Spring 2008, 42% of participating schools were located in urban contexts, 31% in suburban contexts, 18% in rural contexts, and 9% in town contexts.

Public schools comprised 92% of the pool of Spring 2007 participating schools, and 93% of the pool of Spring 2008 participating schools. Private and independent schools comprised 8% of the participating schools in Spring 2007, and 7% of the participating schools in Spring 2008.

### ***Schools by Size***

HSSSE Spring 2007 participating schools ranged in size from 20 students to 3,273 students; the mean student enrollment of participating high schools was 937. Forty-two schools had enrollments of 500 students or fewer, 22 schools had enrollments between 501 students and 1,000 students (inclusive), 25 schools had enrollments between 1,001 students and 2,000 students (inclusive), and 15 schools had enrollments of 2,001 students or greater.

HSSSE Spring 2008 participating schools ranged in size from 15 students to 3,151 students; the mean student enrollment of participating high schools was 1,047. Forty-two schools had enrollments of 500 students or fewer, 18 schools had enrollments between 501 students and 1,000 students (inclusive), 43 schools had enrollments between 1,001 students and 2,000 students (inclusive), and 16 schools had enrollments of 2,001 students or greater. Figure 1 provides the percentage of schools in each size range for each survey administration year.

## **PROFILE OF HSSSE 2007 AND 2008 PARTICIPATING STUDENTS**

In Spring 2007, 68,644 students participated in the administration of the High School Survey of Student Engagement; these students accounted for 70% of the students enrolled in participating schools. In Spring 2008, 66,062 students participated in the administration of the High School Survey of Student Engagement; these students accounted for 73% of the students enrolled in participating schools. On the survey, students reported information on a range of demographic characteristics, creating a profile of a diverse pool of respondents.

### ***Students by Grade Level***

In Spring 2007, 28% of HSSSE respondents were in grade 9, 28% were in grade 10, 24% were in grade 11, and 20% were in grade 12. Most of these students - 84% - began attending their current high school in grade 9. In Spring 2008, 27% of HSSSE respondents were in grade 9, 29% were in grade 10, 21% were in grade 11, and 23% were in grade 12. Most of these students — 84% — began attending their current high school in grade 9. Figure 2 presents the participating students in 2007 and 2008 by current grade level.

### ***Students by Sex/Gender***

In both 2007 and 2008, HSSSE respondents were almost evenly split between males and females, with slightly more females than males comprising the pool of respondents. In 2007, 51.03% of respondents were female and 48.97% of respondents were male. In 2008, 50.98% of respondents were female and 49.02% of respondents were male.

### ***Students by Race/Ethnicity***

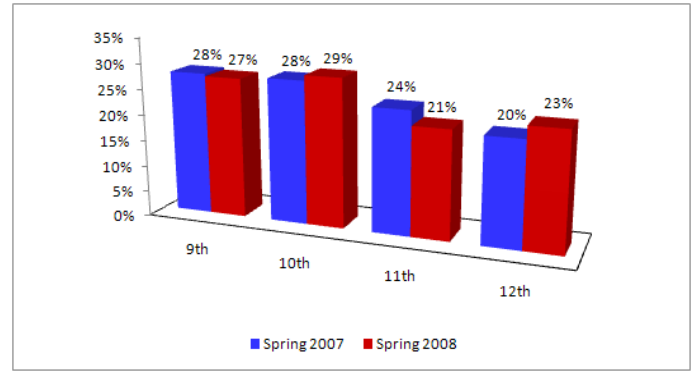
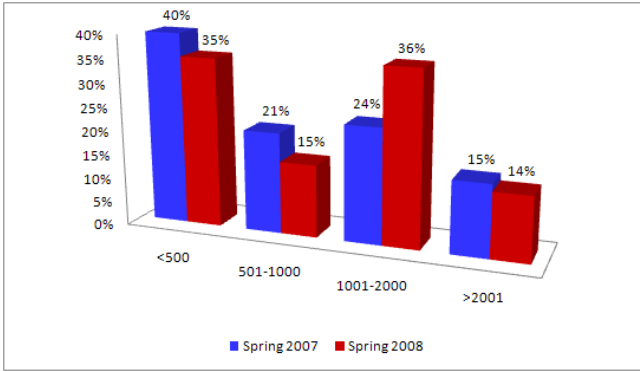
Survey respondents were asked to identify themselves by race and/or ethnicity. There were six choices: (1) American Indian, Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian, or other Native American; (2) Asian, Asian American, or Pacific Islander; (3) Black, African, African American, or of Caribbean origin; (4) Latino, Hispanic, or of Spanish origin; (5) Middle Eastern; and (6) White, White American, or European. Students who did not want to identify themselves by race/ethnicity could choose a seventh option: “I prefer not to respond.” Respondents could identify themselves by as many race/ethnicity categories as they believed were applicable; students who identified themselves within two or more categories were classified as “Multiracial.”

**Table 1: HSSSE 2007 & 2008 Participating Schools by Region**

<b>Region</b>	<b>States with HSSSE Spring 2007 Schools</b>	<b>Number of Schools</b>	<b>States with HSSSE Spring 2008 Schools</b>	<b>Number of Schools</b>
Northeast	CT, MA, ME, NH, NJ, NY, PA, RI	12 (11.5%)	CT, NH, NJ, NY, PA, RI	8 (6.7%)
Southeast	AL, FL, LA, MS, NC, VA	18 (17.3%)	AL, AR, FL, LA, NC, TN, VA	44 (37.0%)
Midwest	IL, IN, KS, MI, MN, MO, NE, OH, WI	50 (48.1%)	IL, IN, MI, MN, MO, OH, WI	38 (31.9%)
Southwest	AZ, TX	2 (1.9%)	NM, TX	8 (6.7%)
West	CA, HI, OR, WA, WY	22 (21.2%)	CA, HI, NV, WA, WY	21 (17.6%)

**Figure 1: HSSSE 2007 & 2008 Participating Schools by School Size**

**Figure 2: HSSSE 2007 & 2008 Respondents by Grade Level**



In 2008, the pool of respondents was made up of greater percentages of students of color than in 2007. The percentage of students identifying themselves as White dropped by 4.5 percentage points from 2007 to 2008, while the percentage of students identifying themselves in each other race/ethnicity category was greater in 2008 than in 2007. Particularly noticeable differences between 2007 and 2008 were in these race/ethnicity categories: Asian (1.3 percentage points), Latino (3.4 percentage points), and those students identifying themselves as multiracial (1.2 percentage points). Figure 3 presents the 2007 and 2008 participating students by race/ethnicity.

know if they were eligible or preferred not to respond to the question. Of the HSSSE Spring 2008 respondents, 22% reported being eligible to receive a free or reduced-price lunch at school, 57% reported that they were not eligible, and 21% did not know if they were eligible or preferred not to respond to the question.

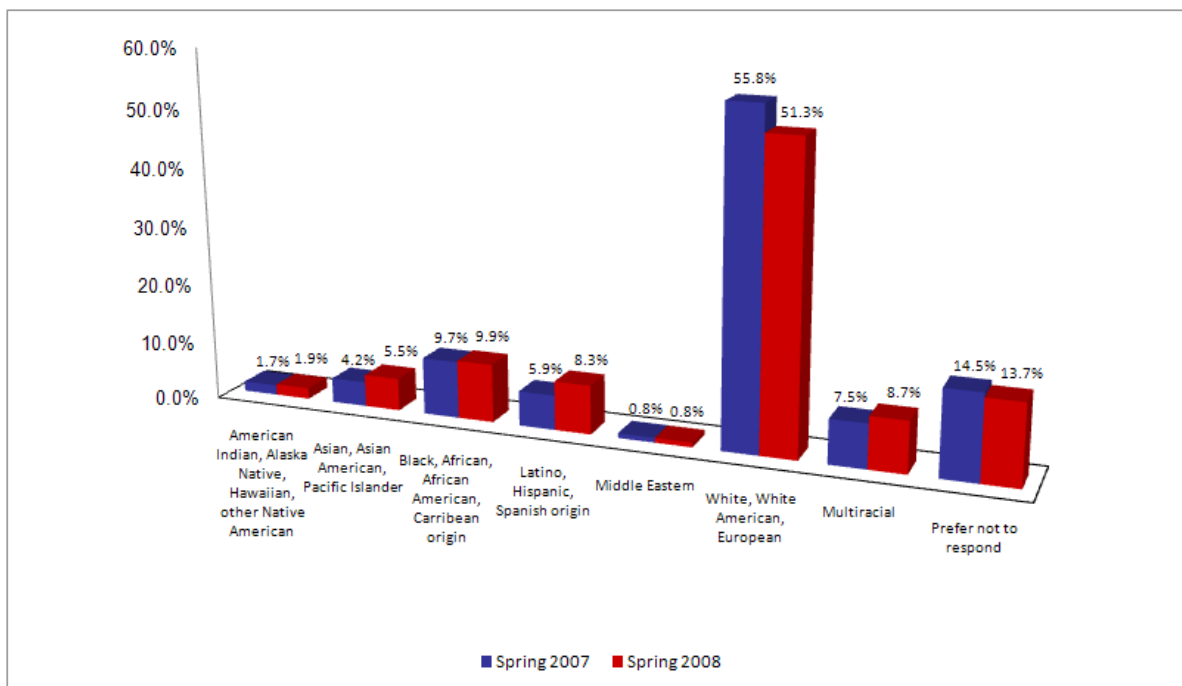
***Students by Free/Reduced Lunch***

***Students by Primary Language Spoken at Home***

Eligibility for the free or reduced-price lunch program in high school is an indicator of the socioeconomic status of the student and the student's family. Of the HSSSE Spring 2007 respondents, 22% reported being eligible to receive a free or reduced-price lunch at school, 60% reported that they were not eligible, and 18% did not

In both 2007 and 2008, 84% of HSSSE respondents reported that English is the primary language spoken in their homes. In 2007, 12% of respondents reported that a language other than English is their primary home language. In 2008, 14% of respondents reported that a language other than English is their primary home language.

**Figure 3: HSSSE 2007 & 2008 Respondents by Race/Ethnicity**



### ***Students by High School Grades***

In both 2007 and 2008, more than half of the respondents (56%) reported that they received either “Mostly As” or “Mostly As and Bs.” Additionally, 30% of respondents reported receiving “Mostly Bs and Cs,” while 10% reported receiving “Mostly Cs and Ds” and 3% reported receiving “Mostly Ds and below.” Only 1% of respondents either do not know their grades or attend schools where grades are not utilized.

### ***Students by Academic Track***

Survey respondents were asked to identify which of the following categories describes their academic track or most of the classes that they take: Career/Vocational, ELL/ESL/Bilingual, General/Regular, Honors/College Preparatory/Advanced, or Special Education. Respondents also had the option of choosing “Don’t Know.” Four out of five students in both 2007 and 2008 identified their academic track or most of the classes they take as either “General/Regular” or “Honors/College Preparatory/Advanced.” Figure 4 presents the 2007 and 2008 participating students by academic track.

## **FOUNDATIONS OF ENGAGEMENT**

The “Foundations of Engagement” describe questions in three areas, the cornerstones upon which engagement can be built: why students go to school, how often and why students are bored in school, and if, how often, and why students have considered dropping out of school. Students need to be in school to be engaged; understanding why they go to school and why they might consider dropping out of school can provide insight into making schools more engaging learning sites for students. Addressing student boredom, an enormous and widespread obstacle to engagement, begins with understanding the scope of the problem and the reasons why students are bored in class.

### ***Why Do Students Go To School?***

As a way of understanding what gets students to school each day, students were asked, “Why do you go to school?” Responses were very consistent from 2007 to 2008. Though the expected answer would likely be, “Because it’s the law,” that response was only third most common, noted by 58% of respondents in each year (students could give as many responses as were applicable to this question). The most common responses were “Because I want to get a degree and go to college” (74% in each year) and “Because of my peers/friends” (67% in 2007, 68% in 2008).

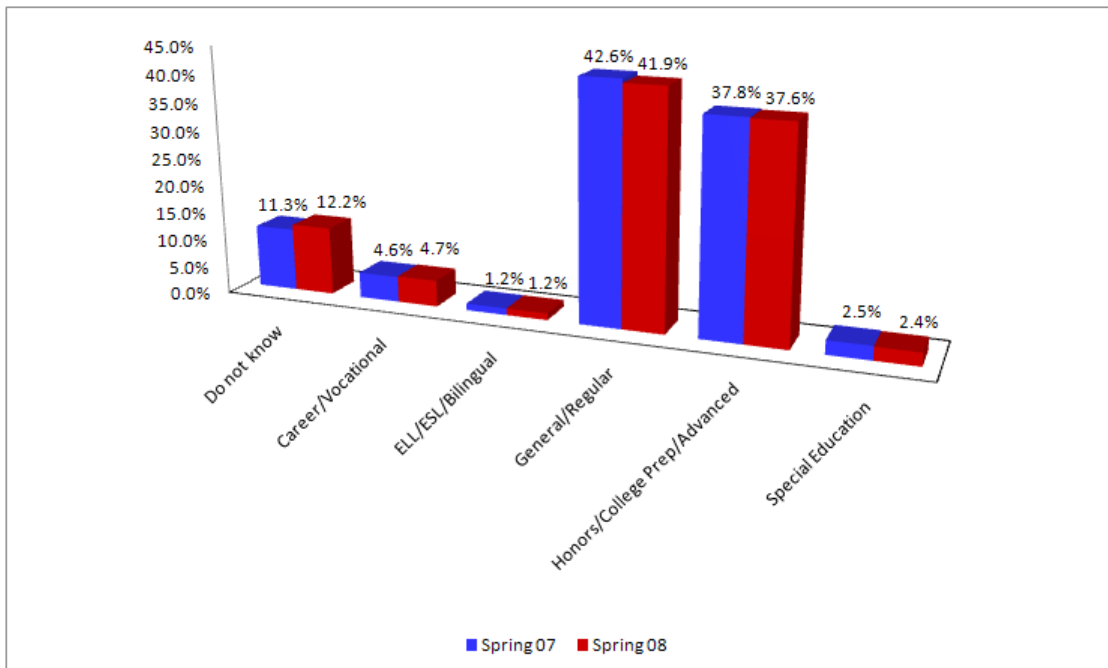
Clearly, the message about the academic purpose of schooling — getting a degree and pursuing further schooling — has gotten through to a great majority of these respondents, as that is a reason that three-fourths of these students go to school. It is important for schools to recognize as well the social purpose identified by students here, and to be able to capitalize on these understandings in the design of work and programs in school.

School-based and classroom-based responses to this question were noted by fewer than 40% of the respondents as reasons for going to school: “Because of what I learn in classes” (39% in each year), “Because I enjoy being in school” (33% in 2007, 34% in 2008), and “Because of my teachers” (21% in 2007, 22% in 2008).

### ***Boredom and Engagement***

Boredom is a common and recognizable sign of a lack of engagement with school and learning. However, students tend to be better able to describe responses to boredom than to define boredom (Farrell et al., 1988). HSSSE asks two direct questions about boredom: “Have you ever been bored in class in high school?” and “If you have been bored in class, why?”

**Figure 4: HSSSE 2007 & 2008 Respondents by Academic Track**



Two out of three respondents (67% in each year) are bored at least every day in class in high school; approximately half of the students (51% in 2007, 50% in 2008) are bored every day and approximately one out of every six students (16% in 2007, 17% in 2008) are bored in every class. Only 2% in each year report never being bored.

Responses to the second question provide insight into the sources of students' frequent boredom; students could mark as many reasons for their boredom as were applicable. Of those students who claimed they have been bored in class, the material being taught was an issue: more than four out of five noted a reason for their boredom as "Material wasn't interesting" (83% in 2007, 82% in 2008) and about two out of five students claimed that the lack of relevance of the material (41% in each year) caused their boredom. The level of difficulty of the work was a source of boredom for a number of students: about one-third of the students (33% in 2007, 32% in 2008) were bored because the "Work wasn't challenging enough" while just over one-fourth of the respondents were bored because the "Work was too difficult" (27% in each year). Instructional interaction played a role in students' boredom as well: more than one-third of respondents (35% in each year) were bored due to "No interaction with teacher."

### ***Dropping Out and Dis-Engagement***

Dropping out of school is the ultimate form of "dis-engagement," a physical and mental separation from the school environment. With the current sharp focus on reducing the dropout rate and preventing students from dropping out of school (see, for example, Balfanz et al., 2009; Dynarski et al., 2008), it is important to know what current students think about their own prospects of staying in school or "dis-engaging." To this end, HSSSE asks three questions related to student perspectives on dropping out:

- Have you ever skipped school?
- Have you ever considered dropping out of high school?
- If you have thought about dropping out of high school, why?

Skipping school frequently is often a precursor to — and an indicator of a risk factor for — dropping out (Rumberger, 1987). Current students who skip school frequently are prime targets for interventions and dedicated efforts to reconnect them to the school environment. Though these behaviors (skipping school) are often treated with discipline that further separates the student from the school environment (e.g., detention, suspension), addressing the issue through more positive interventions may help contain the larger problem of permanent dis-engagement, or dropping out. In both 2007 and 2008, 51% of the students report having skipped school either "once or twice" or "many times." Of that group, 16% in 2007 and 17% in 2008 have skipped school "many times."

Approximately one out of five students (21% in 2007, 22% in 2008) has considered dropping out at some point during high school. In each year, 7% of the respondents have considered dropping out "many times." While much of the public attention on this issue and disincentives for dropping out are focused on the costs to the individual and to society, particularly in long-term social and economic terms, students represent their reasons for considering dropping out in much more immediate and personal ways.

The three most-cited reasons — given by students who have considered dropping out — are all focused on school-related factors: "I didn't like the school" (53% in 2007, 51% in 2008), "I didn't see the value in the work I was being asked to do" (44% in 2007, 45% in 2008), and "I didn't like the teachers" (41% in 2007, 40% in 2008). While 35% of respondents in each year considered dropping out because of the difficulty of the work, 12% in each year considered dropping out because "The work was too easy."

Important to note is the role that adults play in students' thoughts about dropping out. The connection a student feels to the people in the school is an important factor in students' decisions to stay in school or leave. Of students who have considered dropping out, 16% in 2007 and 15% in 2008 identified "No adults in the school cared about me" as a reason for thinking about dropping out; in each year, 9% of the respondents stated, "Adults in the school encouraged me to drop out." Whether that encouragement came in the form of an intentional act of counseling a student out of school or an offhand remark by an adult is not clear; what is clear is that adults play an important role in the decisions of a number of students to stay in school or to drop out.

### **STUDENT ACTIONS FOR LEARNING**

Students play a major role in their own engagement with learning and school. Time-on-task is a traditional, though woefully incomplete, measure of engagement. The logic equation set up is that, the more time a student spends on a task, project, or activity, the more engaged that student is with what she/he is doing. However, though time-on-task is a countable measure, the time and engagement theory does not take into account the degree of a student's investment in the work they do. There are many reasons why a student may spend more or less time on a task, including compliance with rules, relative difficulty of the task, and the pursuit of externally-imposed grades; though these incentives may lead to an observation of high amounts of time on task, the conclusion cannot necessarily be drawn that the observed student is engaged deeply with the task. Students' priorities, the importance they assign to particular activities, and the effort they exert (in class and for class) have an impact on the ways and extent to which they engage in learning.

### ***Time-on-Task and Task Importance***

HSSSE 2007 & 2008 respondents were asked a standard time-on-task question about a variety of academic, social, and school-related activities: "About how many hours do you spend in a typical seven-day week doing each of the following?" In addition, to get at students' priorities and the importance they assign internally to particular activities, students were asked about those same activities: "How important are these activities to you?" Tables 2 and 3<sup>2</sup> present respondents' answers to these two questions about a set of activities associated with engagement in the life and work of high schools, and social activities that occupy students' time and attention outside of school.

Looking at these activities exclusively through a time-on-task lens provides cause for concern. In both 2007 and 2008, more than 80% of the respondents reported spending one hour or fewer *per day* "Doing

<sup>2</sup> Due to rounding, some rows in Tables 2 and 3 do not sum to 100%.

written homework” and “Reading and studying for class”; 40% or more in each year reported spending one hour or fewer on these academic tasks *per week*. On the other hand, between one-fourth and one-third of the students reported spending six hours or more per week “Watching television, playing video games” and “Surfing or chatting online.”

Taking into account the importance of these activities to students complicates the picture. The academic activities on which students report spending very little time are quite important to them: Between 70% and 80% of respondents in each year report that “Doing written homework” and “Reading and studying for class” are “Somewhat Important,” “Very Important,” or a “Top Priority.” Further, over half of the respondents in each year rate “Watching television, playing video games” and “Surfing or chatting online” as either “Not at All” important or “A Little” important. This distinction that respondents make between time spent on a task/activity and the importance they assign to the task/activity highlights not only the limitations of a time-on-task focus but also the need to look at the quality of the tasks themselves for insight into the possibilities that exist for engaging students more intensely in academic-related tasks and work.

### **Effort**

In 2007 and 2008, fewer than half of respondents (47% in 2007, 48% in 2008) reported giving their maximum effort in “Most” or “All” of their classes. Nine percent of students reported giving their maximum effort in “None” of their classes, while the remaining students (44% in 2007, 43% in 2008) responded that they give their maximum effort in “1 or 2” or “Some” of their classes.

Responses to the question, “In about how many classes do you put in very little effort?”, were similarly consistent from 2007 to 2008. Eighteen percent of respondents reported putting in very little effort in “Most” or “All” of their classes, while 26% reported giving very little effort in “None” of their classes. The majority of students (65% in 2007, 64% in 2008) reported giving very little effort in either “None” of their classes or “1 or 2” of their classes; these students are

giving more than minimal effort in almost all of their classes. At the same time, the majority of students are not giving their maximum effort in “Most” or “All” of their classes.

## **RIGOR AND RELEVANCE**

“Rigor” and “Relevance” are two key concepts in the engagement literature, as well as the current emphasis on 21st century learning skills. How challenging is the work for students? What kinds of thinking and learning skills are being taught to students? How relevant do students perceive the work to be to their current interests, and their lives and work beyond high school? A lack of rigor and/or relevance becomes a source of boredom for students and a reason for dis-engaging. Nearly half of the students in 2007 (44%) and 2008 (45%) who considered dropping out did so because they did not see the value in the work they were being asked to do; just over 40% of the students in 2007 and 2008 saw the lack of relevance of the material in class as a cause of their boredom. Students were asked questions in a number of areas related to both rigor and relevance.

### **Challenge of Classes**

Fewer than half of the survey respondents (45% in 2007, 46% in 2008) claimed that they are challenged academically in “Most” or “All” of their classes. One out of four (25% in each year) reported being challenged academically in “None” or “1 or 2” classes. A majority of students (63% in each year) reported that they are not required to work hard in either “None” of their classes or only “1 or 2” of their classes; fewer than one out of five students (16% in 2007, 17% in 2008) claimed that they are not required to work hard in “Most” or “All” of their classes.

### **Focus of Work**

To get an idea of the kinds of work that students are exposed to in their high schools, students were asked, “To what extent do you believe your high school emphasizes each of the following?” About one in

**Table 2: HSSSE 2007 & 2008 Number of Hours Spent on Particular Activities in a Typical Seven-Day Week**

Activities	Spring 2007 -- Number of Hours					Spring 2008 -- Number of Hours				
	0	1 or fewer	2 to 5	6 to 10	10+	0	1 or fewer	2 to 5	6 to 10	10+
Written homework	6%	34%	41%	14%	5%	8%	35%	39%	12%	5%
Reading/studying for class	11%	42%	37%	8%	2%	13%	42%	35%	8%	3%
Reading for self	15%	39%	30%	10%	5%	17%	39%	29%	10%	5%
Participating in school-sponsored activities	31%	18%	22%	13%	17%	31%	18%	23%	13%	16%
Watching TV/playing video games	6%	24%	39%	18%	13%	6%	25%	38%	18%	13%
Surfing/chatting online	15%	27%	33%	16%	11%	14%	28%	33%	15%	10%
Talking on the phone	7%	33%	32%	15%	13%	8%	33%	31%	15%	14%
Socializing with friends outside of school	4%	10%	31%	28%	28%	4%	10%	32%	27%	27%

**Table 3: HSSSE 2007 & 2008 Importance of Particular Activities**

Activities	Spring 2007 -- How Important?					Spring 2008 -- How Important?				
	Not at All	A Little	Some-what Important	Very Important	Top Priority	Not at All	A Little	Some-what Important	Very Important	Top Priority
Written homework	7%	14%	35%	36%	9%	8%	15%	34%	34%	9%
Reading/studying for class	9%	20%	34%	31%	8%	10%	20%	33%	29%	8%
Reading for self	16%	28%	33%	19%	4%	18%	29%	31%	18%	4%
Participating in school-sponsored activities	24%	16%	21%	28%	11%	24%	16%	21%	27%	11%
Watching TV/playing video games	22%	36%	27%	10%	5%	22%	36%	27%	10%	5%
Surfing/chatting online	24%	32%	28%	12%	4%	24%	33%	28%	12%	4%
Talking on the phone	16%	30%	31%	17%	6%	15%	29%	31%	18%	7%
Socializing with friends outside of school	4%	8%	24%	44%	21%	4%	8%	24%	43%	21%

five students (21% in each year) reported that their school “Very Much” emphasizes “Memorizing facts and figures in work for classes”; nearly a third of the students (32% in 2007, 31% in 2008) reported that their school “Very Much” emphasizes “Understanding information and ideas in work for classes”; and more than one in five students (22% in 2007, 23% in 2008) claimed that their school “Very Much” emphasizes “Analyzing ideas in depth in work for classes.”

***Contribution to Growth***

How do students perceive that their high school contributed to their growth in a range of important areas linked to learning, communicating effectively, and succeeding in the world after high school? Not more than one-third of the students reported that their school contributed “Very Much” to their growth in the following areas related to rigor and relevance: “Acquiring skills related to work after high school” (23% in 2007, 24% in 2008); “Writing effectively” (31% in 2007, 30% in 2008); “Speaking effectively” (27% in each year); “Thinking critically” (32% in each year); “Reading and understanding challenging materials” (28% in each year); “Learning independently” (28% in 2007, 30% in 2008); and “Solving real-world problems” (20% in 2007, 21% in 2008).

**RELATIONSHIPS, SUPPORT, AND CONNECTION**

The assessment and evaluation of high schools in the United States has evolved to center almost exclusively on student performance on a set of standardized measures; though these measures are countable and statistically comparable across schools, the reliance on these measures has shifted focus away from many important factors that go into creating successful high schools.

On the open-response question at the end of the survey, most students focus on relationships with adults in the school (either positive or negative), the support they feel they get or don’t get, and the connection or lack of connection that they feel with the school and the

people in it. A principal of a large urban high school that participated in HSSSE in 2007 tells a story about how each year just before graduation, the top ten students (academically) in the senior class are asked to name their favorite teacher during their time at the high school and why they have selected that particular teacher. Each year, each student’s reason for naming their particular favorite teacher is centered around the relationship and/or connection: “She believed in me,” “He got to know me as a person,” “She encouraged me to pursue my interests,” and similar comments. It is important to recognize that these top academic students were inspired and motivated by teachers with whom they felt they had the strongest connections.

The research evidence tells a similar story. Strong relationships and connection to school are critical factors in both student persistence and student achievement (Blum, 2005; Daniels & Arapostathis, 2005; Intrator & Kunzman, 2008; Klem & Connell, 2004; Montalvo, Mansfield, & Miller, 2007).

***Belief of Teachers***

Two out of three students (66% in each year) believe that “Most” or “All” of their teachers want them to do the best work they can do; however, 17% of respondents in 2007 and 18% of respondents in 2008 believe that “None” or only “1 or 2” teachers want them to do the best work they can do. In each year, 68% of respondents report that “Most” or “All” of their teachers believe they can do excellent work; at the other end of the spectrum, 15% of the students in each year report that “None” or only “1 or 2” teachers believe they can do excellent work.

***Support from Adults and Peers***

Research on student engagement indicates that a connection to an adult in the school community — at least one adult — is critically important for students to remain in school and be engaged with the learning environment (Daniels & Arapostathis, 2005; Klem & Connell, 2004). In each year, 88% of students agreed or strongly agreed that “There is at least one adult in this school who cares about

me” (12% disagreed or strongly disagreed). Fewer students (74% in 2007, 73% in 2008) agreed or strongly agreed that “There is at least one adult in this school who knows me well” (more than one out of four students — 26% in 2007, 27% in 2008 — disagreed or strongly disagreed).

Of the adults in the school environment, students feel most supported by the teachers: 81% of students in each year agreed or strongly agreed that they feel supported by teachers. These figures match the support the students feel from their peers: 81% of students in each year agreed or strongly agreed that they feel supported by other students. It is important to note that on both questions (regarding support from teachers and from peers), nearly one out of five students disagreed or strongly disagreed that they feel supported.

Students were also asked if they felt supported by other adults in the school environment: administrators (62% in 2007 and 64% in 2008 agreed or strongly agreed); counselors (73% in each year agreed or strongly agreed); and other adults, such as secretaries, custodians, and other support staff (62% in 2007 and 61% in 2008 agreed or strongly agreed).

### ***Safety and Fairness***

An environment that is perceived by students to be safe and fair is most conducive to engagement and productivity; students have a difficult time engaging in learning in a school they believe is unfair or unsafe. In each year, 77% of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, “I feel safe in this school,” while 23% disagreed or strongly disagreed. More than one out of four students in each year (27% in 2007, 26% in 2008) have been picked on or bullied either “Sometimes” or “Often”; approximately one in five students (19% in 2007, 20% in 2008) have been picked on or bullied other students either “Sometimes” or “Often.”

Many students identify “favoritism” as an impediment to engagement in learning in their school. While most of the respondents (72% in each year) believe they are treated fairly in school, a sizable portion of the respondents (28% in each year) do not agree that they are treated fairly. Students are split on whether or not their school’s rules are fair; in each year, 53% of the respondents agree or strongly agree that their school’s rules are fair, while 47% disagree or strongly disagree. There is also a clear but slightly less-pronounced split among respondents on whether or not their school’s rules are applied and enforced consistently; 59% in 2007 and 62% in 2008 agree or strongly agree that their school’s rules are applied and enforced consistently, while 41% in 2007 and 38% in 2008 disagree or strongly disagree.

### ***Connection to School Community***

Four items from the survey provide a good overview of the connection students feel to their school. In 2007 and 2008, 80% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, “Overall, I feel good about being in this school”; 20% of respondents in each year disagreed or strongly disagreed. A smaller percentage of students in each year, 68%, agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, “I care about this school”; 32% disagreed or strongly disagreed. If faced with a choice of high school right now, only 62% of respondents in 2007 and 63% of respondents in 2008 would choose

to go to the same high school they are currently attending. Surveys of adults tend to indicate that, though the respondents identify problems in schools, they are generally happy with their local schools or the schools their children attend; by contrast, in this survey of students, nearly two out of five students would choose a different high school to attend if they could at this point. Finally, only 54% of students in each year agree or strongly agree that “I am an important part of my high school community”; nearly half of the respondents disagree or strongly disagree.

## **INSTRUCTIONAL METHODS & PEDAGOGICAL POSSIBILITIES**

*Why won't they bring what we are learning to life?*

— HSSSE 2007 Respondent

In the current policy context, a number of states have either implemented or are proposing teacher certification standards that purport to emphasize content over pedagogy. The guiding principle of such standards is that teacher expertise in content is more important than expertise in instructional methods. For students, however, engaging instructional methods are critically important to effective teaching and successful learning. More than four out of five students reported that the source of their boredom in class was that the material was not interesting, and more than one out of three students reported they were bored in class because they had no interaction with their teacher. Instructional methods can provide the means to make content more interesting and generate interaction within the learning situation, ultimately lessening student boredom and creating the possibility of greater learning.

Students were asked to rate the degree to which various types of work in class — instructional methods — excite and/or engage them. Students rated most highly those methods that involve work and learning with their peers. “Discussion and Debate” was rated as to some degree or very much exciting/engaging by about three out five students (61% in 2007, 60% in 2008), while only 16% of respondents in 2007 and 17% in 2008 rated this instructional method as not at all exciting/engaging. “Group Projects” were rated similarly: in each year, 60% of respondents rated this instructional method as to some degree or very much exciting/engaging, while only 16% in each year rated it as not at all exciting/engaging. Students also are excited/engaged by instructional methods in which they are active participants, in which nearly half the respondents were engaged/excited to some degree or very much: “Presentations” (44% in 2007, 43% in 2008), “Role Plays” (43% in 2007, 42% in 2008), and “Art and Drama Activities” (49% in 2007, 48% in 2008). Students reported being least excited/engaged about instructional methods in which they do not play an active role: “Teacher Lecture” was rated as to some degree or very much exciting/engaging by no more than one out of four students (24% in 2007, 25% in 2008), while 46% of the respondents in 2007 and 48% in 2008 rated this instructional method as not at all exciting/engaging. Figure 5 presents HSSSE 2007 respondents’ views on types of work in class; Figure 6 presents HSSSE 2008 respondents’ views.

Figure 5: HSSSE 2007 Respondents' Views on Pedagogical Methods

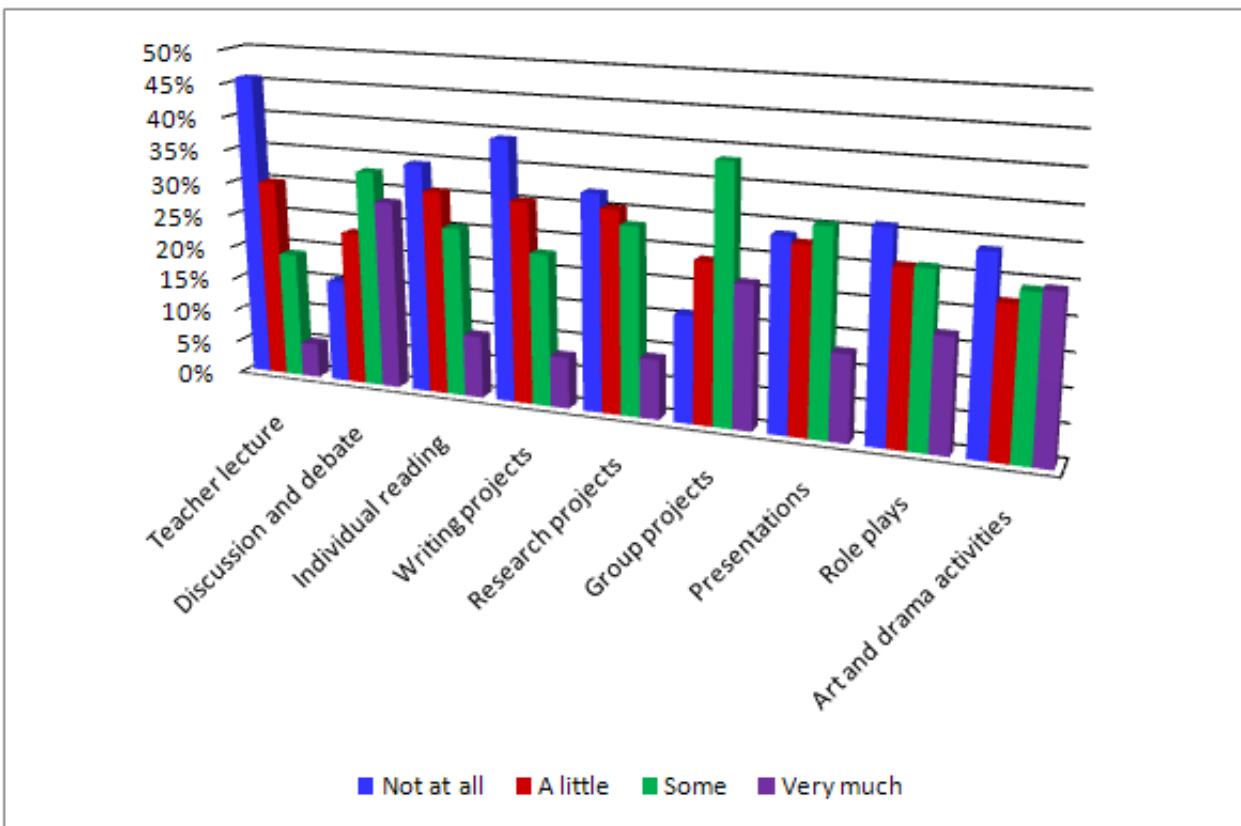
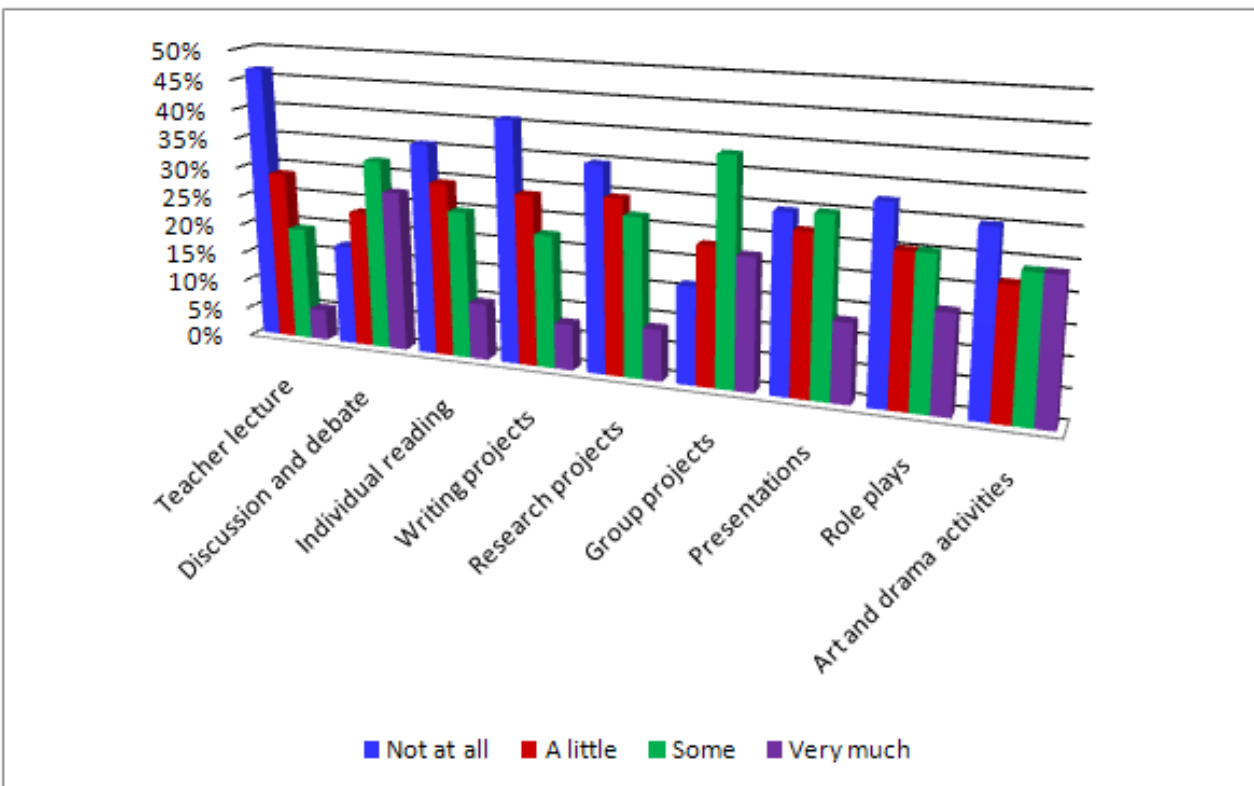


Figure 6: HSSSE 2008 Respondents' Views on Pedagogical Methods



## QUESTION 35: OPEN RESPONSES

Question 35, the last question on the survey, asks students: “Would you like to say more about any of your answers to these survey questions?” Opening the door to students’ freely-written responses generated a wide range of rich and valuable data, providing insight into students’ thinking about engagement, their work, and their high school experience. Though these data present greater challenges for reporting and analysis than the quantitative data gathered through students’ bubble-in responses to other questions on the survey, there are enormous benefits of these students’ insights both to schools working on student engagement and the larger educational community. In 2007, 11,300 students provided responses to Question 35; in 2008, 11,660 students provided responses to Question 35. Student responses to question 35 were categorized by content, and by type and dimension of engagement.

In terms of content of responses, the idea most frequently communicated by students in both years is that there is no point to doing these surveys since no one listens to students’ ideas and perspectives. In spite of their work to complete the survey and share their perspectives, the frequently-expressed belief is that no action would be taken as a result of the surveys, rendering student participation meaningless. In terms of type and dimension of engagement, students most often gave responses that were categorized as “emotional engagement” — responses focusing on how students feel about their current experiences in school, including thoughts on support (or lack of support), relationships and connection, boredom and excitement, and general feelings about the school and/or the people in the school. Some examples of student responses follow.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> To the extent possible, student responses are presented as they were written on the survey. Specific names — of people, schools, and locations — have been removed in the comments printed in this report.

**Students shared many positive thoughts about their high schools. Their comments reveal a range of why they feel good about their schools, including support, respect, safety, and opportunities:**

- *I love this school; for the most part they treat us like adults and teach us things that will help us when we graduate.*
- *This school is very educational and I enjoy being here. The environment is safe.*
- *This is a good school. Hope it stays that way!*
- *My school is great. Every teacher I have supports and believe [sic] I can finish high school. This school might not be the best to many kids in high school, but I think the school is okay.*
- *\*\*\* is a good school, and I’m getting a good education.*
- *This school help [sic] me to find my place in this world.*
- *I enjoy attending \*\*\* High School because it is so diverse.*
- *This school is a really good place to be. You can always find someone to be with.*
- *Overall I feel that \*\*\* High School and \*\*\* County as a whole is a wonderful learning environment. I feel very safe, which makes learning easier. When I attended \*\*\* in \*\*\* this was not always the case. Also, most of the teachers have been exceptional.*
- *I think \*\*\* is a great school, with an amazing and friendly environment. My teachers and class mates are full of energy and I appreciate the things it has allowed me to do.*

**Students often single out specific adults in the building for praise, naming teachers and/or staff who have had a positive impact on their high school experience. Comments are frequently focused on the encouragement and support students received from teachers, resulting in the pursuit of an academic interest or success academically:**

- *My English teacher this year is amazing and has helped me out. I love \*\*\*!*
- *Our school has a lot of great art programs and great art teachers.*
- *Mrs. \*\*\* was a really good teacher! I had a lot of fun in seminar class and didn't really get bored.*
- *Mr. \*\*\* and Miss \*\*\* are the most amazing teachers in \*\*\*. They motivate in and out of class.*
- *The Science department in this school is amazing! I am planning to take 7 courses of science because of the excellent teachers here.*
- *I loved HS, I had a wonderful experience! It makes the world of difference when you have encouraging teachers, like Mrs. \*\*\* - learn from her!*
- *I love my teachers, every single one of them. They are all very supportive and caring.*
- *This is a really good school with a fantastic principal.*
- *\*\*\* is an awesome school and the teachers are fantastic - in my 4 years here I have developed 3 mentors - my coaches who are also teachers and my history teacher. He is why I'm majoring in history.*
- *I love school; I love my teachers. I think they're all really great and always want to help.*
- *I'm improving a lot from last year. The teachers at \*\*\* are amazing. I love Mr. \*\*\**

**Some students used the space in Question 35 to clarify and qualify responses they gave to the bubble-in questions on the survey:**

- *Most of the positive responses to questions like "There is at least one adult in this school who cares about me" is because of 4 teachers I've had in all 4 years.*

**Negative comments about schools were quite common in response to Question 35. Students shared their general dislike of their school, as well as particular aspects of their school that they felt had a negative impact on their work and learning:**

- *My school doesn't allow for much creativity. It relies on one way of learning.*
- *I feel the school offers no compassion for one's well-being or encourages one to be all they can be on a regular basis.*
- *I think students should have more of a voice at their school. We are not heard enough.*
- *I don't feel I'm treated like a person.*
- *I believe there's no motivation in our school. They worry about the little things and don't look at the big picture.*
- *Because of the large class sized [sic] and diversity in ability and learning types, it is difficult for teachers to effectively engage students and answers [sic] to their individual needs.*
- *My school doesn't seem to care about itself or the students in it. It does not seem to care at all about anyone's goals or feelings.*
- *I feel the school does things because they have to, not because they want to help.*
- *\*\*\* is more interested in how it looks to the public than how they make the students feel or what they think.*

**Students raised issues about teachers and administrators, both in general and about specific individuals. Just as they named teachers who have had a positive impact on their experience, they also at times singled out teachers and adults who have affected their experience negatively. Some comments indicate students feel the effects of external pressures on teachers and the school to perform effectively:**

- *A lot of the time teachers are too irritated to just chat when one needs it.*
- *Several teachers only seem to care about students excelling so that the teachers make themselves look good.*
- *Teachers need to be more motivating and encourage students to do well in school. They also need to make learning fun and interesting.*
- *I feel more people could give us more drive to be the best we can be. There is less encouragement throughout the school and a few of my friends have already or are considering dropping out.*
- *Teachers only want me to succeed because that is how they are evaluated.*
- *The teachers are too judgmental. They hold me and others like me back. If you mess up once, they hold you to it your entire high school career.*
- *Teachers who don't care shouldn't teach.*
- *Why do teachers treat us so bad and they think we're stupid and they don't let us voice our opinion?*
- *There are some extraordinary teachers, that are personable, and go out of their way to explain, and talk to students, but there are a lot more teachers that complain, and don't explain material, and pick favorites. It makes going to school a chore because you don't learn anything.*
- *Most teachers of A.P. subject just prepare us for the test - granted that is important but learning should be focused more on the understanding of concepts, not test scores.*
- *I sometimes feel I'm moving backwards rather than forwards academically.*
- *School is boring because teachers are not teaching they are just instructing. Anyone can read something the night before and explain it to the class. Teachers that just read from the overhead are not teachers.*
- *I don't feel most teachers treat us as adults or listen to our opinion.*
- *I think the principal should have a better relationship with the students instead of hiding in her office all day.*

**There were a number of comments focused on classes, with a wide range of viewpoints: too challenging, too easy, too boring, and too irrelevant.**

- *I love school, I hate projects. Lectures are awesome because in history it always leads to a debate, and I love a good debate.*
- *Enough with the lectures! They put us to sleep and not one student I know pays attention. We all hate the lectures.*
- *School is not as hands on as I'd like it to be. They rely too much on grades and not capabilities. That eventually limits a child into thinking he/she isn't good enough.*
- *I do enjoy class discussions and I wish that every class was focused on that method of learning.*
- *Some teachers always keep the class engaged, where other classes it seems we only get work to keep us busy at home and in school.*
- *Most classes are kind of irrelevant to outside life, too much pressure on grades.*
- *I wish the class sizes were smaller - I feel more comfortable.*
- *If the teachers didn't do the same thing every day...we would want to come to school.*
- *I feel as if I'm just coasting through school. Moments of extreme interest are rare. I don't feel motivated.*
- *It's not that I don't like school, I just think the requirements and courses we take aren't relevant to every kid. High School should have more optional courses so kids can direct themselves toward their desired career.*
- *In this survey I have stated, in several answers, that school isn't challenging. The reason I believe this is NOT because of a lack of work but because of the excess of unchallenging, mind-numbing work.*
- *Teachers need to be more enthusiastic and material should not be as boring - the curriculum makes me not want to be here.*
- *I come to school to learn not to get grades. Too much emphasis is placed on grades, tests, and studying.*
- *I do not think this school is suitable for learning.*
- *Most work I do is completely irrelevant to real life and I will never remember anything off the 90 million worksheets and pointless exercises and lectures in 2 months.*

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**Students' comments emphasize the importance of a safe learning environment, with clear and fair rules, and discipline that addresses problems. Quite a number of responses focus on students not feeling safe within the schools they attend every day:**

- *The schools are not safe enough and socially they are damaging.*
- *Administrators need to hear the students not only the teachers.*
- *The school is more focused on discipline then it is on learning.*
- *School seems too big to be safe in. Too much conflict and not enough protection.*
- *I don't feel safe in this school because I feel that the administration does not trust the students enough to tell us what is happening without our own school! Honesty is the key!*
- *Students should have a stronger say in rules.*
- *People are picked on in this school and no one does anything about it.*

**A very frustrating aspect of school for many students is the perception that some students are more valued than others, that rules and standards are applied differentially to different students, and that opportunities are not equally open to all students. Discrimination and favoritism — caused by racial prejudice, preferential treatment given to certain groups of students, or the presence of cliques — were raised as issues by students:**

- *Administrators Principal/Vice Principal do not want everyone to succeed. They do not treat all students equally, they show a lot of favoritism toward certain students and exclude others.*
- *I don't think the rules are applied very fairly. There are some kids that get away with a lot and others that get hit bad.*
- *The biggest problem in this school is that the rules don't seem to apply to everyone.*
- *I don't like the fact that the school is based upon popularity. And if someone thinks that you aren't suppose to fit in, then they don't treat you like a normal human being.*
- *Our area is not ethnically diverse so it is hard to educate students about race without any real life connections or examples relevant to us.*
- *There is a lot of racial tension in our schools, we need to not separate ourselves but interact with one another including teachers.*
- *I do feel lucky to be in this school and getting a good education, but sometimes I feel very out of place here because if I want to join a club, it's difficult because they are so clicky [sic].*
- *Overall, I think our school needs to educate students on other races (African Americans, Asians, etc.) because there is a lot of racism in our school.*
- *Classes are not enjoyable because each student's needs are not met. At school there are too many preconceived ideas of a student. Sometimes clean starts of a new year are not given.*
- *\*\*\* only cares about honors students, the rest are looked over.*
- *Counselors don't treat everyone the same. They let the people in sports do whatever they want. The ones not in sports have to suffer.*
- *This school does NOTHING to promote other beliefs and make people with those beliefs comfortable. Also, I do not feel treated fairly by peers because of my race.*
- *Teachers pick favorites and act like other students don't exist.*
- *I believe our school could increase school spirit/pride and understanding of those of different races/backgrounds. The greatest thing we suffer from is apathy.*

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**Students have a wide range of ideas about what they think should be different about their schools, and many used Question 35 to share their recommendations:**

- *Schools should have a career month where a variety of careers are introduced to the students.*
- *Education is important in today's society and we all know that, but if it's not made interesting and fun it doesn't allow for students to enjoy and learn all they can at school.*
- *I do really well in classes I am interested in, but I feel that the majority of the classes I am required to take will not be used outside of college and are a waste of time. I would rather spend my time perusing studies I am interested in, or classes I will need and use outside of school.*
- *If school allowed me to actually think about big ideas, values, and life, it would be way more exciting.*
- *Our school needs to give its students more free range to explore their talents and how their brain works. Memorizing facts and statistics seems ineffective and is extremely boring and causes conformity.*
- *This school puts too much focus on athletics and looking good. They need to focus more on helping students succeed in life; not everyone will go to college!*
- *I think teachers need to try and make boring material more interesting and not lecture all the time. They need to get us out of our seats and moving.*
- *Until school material can be related to the real world, kids will continue to fail and lose interest!*
- *Our school needs a video class/program. So many kids are interested in communication arts but there are no programs.*
- *No matter what you do, if you plan on making us sit in a desk all day school will continue to be boring, especially if you don't plan on going to college. You should offer more hands on classes like shop class or cooking where we learn valuable skills.*
- *I think that this school suffers from a disconnect, as if people are just floating through, completely detached from one another. People are withdrawn and it sometimes feels as if the teachers don't care about the success of their students. More of an effort needs to be made to help students.*
- *There should be a variety of electives so kids can learn more about what they are interested in and be able to adapt to better serve the community.*

**The most common theme in the student responses to Question 35 was that there is no point to taking surveys like this because students' ideas don't matter, nobody in school listens to students, and no action will be taken based on the responses to the survey.**

- *This won't be read by people at this school, so it is pointless.*
- *Good survey - hopefully action is taken.*
- *I hope that someone actually cares about these answers and it changes some of the things about this and other schools that everyone disagrees with, but, it has been my experience that...no one cares.*
- *I chose not to do this survey because it will make no difference. Regardless of our answers, the schools will do what make them look good and whatever is the least costly. Our opinions will not change this fact.*
- *These won't do much in the long run.*
- *Taking this test will not change things, only to make you think you are making a difference.*
- *I want to know if this is really going to be used. As far as I know, I've taken so many of these, & they've never done anything. That's ridiculous and sad.*
- *Well, I don't want to feel disrespectful, but I do not know why we are doing a survey, because our opinions are not respected at this school. No one cares about students' opinion.*
- *This is stupid there's no point in doing this, y'all never do anything about it.*
- *After filling out this survey I feel as though nothing will change, you NEVER listen to us!!!*
- *My opinion will most likely not be taken into consideration. This was pointless.*
- *This is stupid, it's not like you're going to do anything about these answers, all you do is look at it - take action!*

Students' responses to Question 35 cover a wide range of topics, beliefs, feelings, and experiences. Comments are both positive and critical, express boredom and enthusiasm, provide analysis and recommendations. If taken seriously, these insights from students can feed a school's reform efforts and add critical perspectives into the larger conversation on how to improve schools, increase graduation rates, and make work more relevant and important to students. The common theme that emerges from these open responses is that students yearn to be taken seriously, to know that adults in the school care what they think, and to be recognized as important members of the school community. That one of the most frequently articulated responses from students at the end of the survey — after working on the survey — is that nothing will change because nobody will listen to what the students say in the survey speaks to the fact that, in many cases, students believe that their presence, their views, and their experiences don't matter in the school environment. The first steps to engaging all students will involve taking students seriously, listening to what students are saying, and acting on students' ideas.

## **DIMENSIONS OF ENGAGEMENT**

The concept and construct of student engagement in K-12 settings continues to evolve in the research literature. Despite efforts by researchers to use specific student behaviors (time-on-task, attendance, tardiness) or school characteristics (the presence of technology) as discrete indicators of engagement, the research — often complex and sometimes conflicting — best supports a “multifaceted” definition of student engagement (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004).

Individual questions on the survey provide important data on students' perspectives on particular aspects of their experience, and schools make effective use of analysis of specific items. In addition, it is important to investigate groups of questions that fall within defined areas of engagement. The High School Survey of Student Engagement utilizes three dimensions of engagement for analysis: Cognitive/Intellectual/Academic Engagement, Social/Behavioral/Participatory Engagement, and Emotional Engagement.

*Cognitive/Intellectual/Academic Engagement* captures students' effort, investment in work, and strategies for learning: the work students do and the ways students go about their work. This dimension, focusing primarily on engagement during instructional time and with instruction-related activities, can be described as engagement of the mind. Survey questions that are grouped within this dimension of engagement include questions about homework, preparation for class, classroom discussions and assignments, and the level of academic challenge that students report.

*Social/Behavioral/Participatory Engagement* emphasizes students' actions and participation within the school outside of instructional time, including non-academic school-based activities, social and extracurricular activities, and interactions with other students - the ways in which students interact within the school community beyond the classroom. This dimension, with its focus on student actions, interactions, and participation within the school community, can be described as engagement in the life of the school. Survey questions that are grouped within this dimension of engagement include questions

about extracurricular activities, students' interactions with other students, and students' connections to the community within and around the school.

*Emotional Engagement* encompasses students' feelings of connection to (or disconnection from) their school — how students feel about where they are in school, the ways and workings of the school, and the people within the school. This dimension, focusing largely on students' internal lives not frequently expressed explicitly in observable behavior and actions, can be described as engagement of the heart. Survey questions that are grouped within this dimension include questions about general feelings regarding the school, level of support students perceive from members of the school community, and students' place in the school community.

These dimensions of engagement provide schools with an additional method of analyzing and using their student engagement data. While analysis of individual items allows schools to look at student responses to specific questions, these dimensions of engagement allow schools to focus on groups of questions connected to important areas of engagement. Schools can choose to focus on one or more of these dimensions of engagement, depending on the goals that the school is setting for improvement. Schools focused on improving academic programs, opportunities, and instruction may look more closely at Cognitive/Intellectual/Academic Engagement. Schools looking to increase student participation and involvement in the non-academic life of the school may investigate Social/Behavioral/Participatory Engagement. Schools focused on strengthening students' feelings of connection to the school community and providing strong support networks may emphasize Emotional Engagement. Schools can also examine all three dimensions in efforts to improve in the widest range of areas.

## **ENGAGEMENT GAP**

A great deal of research has been devoted to establishing the existence of an achievement gap in schools in the United States (Ferguson, 2003, 2005). The greatest focus is on the racial achievement gap, the gap between the scores on standardized assessments of students of different races. Schools and districts have made significant efforts — and devoted time and resources — to both understand and close these gaps in achievement on standardized tests.

Data from the High School Survey of Student Engagement continue to suggest the existence of another gap: *the engagement gap*. Consistent with a pattern first identified in HSSSE 2006 data (Yazzie-Mintz, 2007), there are noticeable gaps in reported levels of engagement in data from 2007 and 2008 across the three dimensions of engagement: *Cognitive/Intellectual/Academic Engagement*, *Social/Behavioral/Participatory Engagement*, and *Emotional Engagement*.

Findings from an analysis of the three dimensions of engagement among HSSSE 2007 and 2008 respondents include the following:

- Girls report higher levels of engagement across all three dimensions than boys.
- White students and Asian students report higher levels of engagement across all three dimensions than students of other races/ethnicities.

- Though there are not sizeable gaps in engagement by current grade level, there are noticeable gaps across all three dimensions based on when students started attending their current high school. Students who started attending their current high school in grade 9 report the highest levels of engagement across all three dimensions; students who started attending their current high school in grade 12 report the lowest levels of engagement across all three dimensions.
- Students in honors/college preparatory/advanced classes report higher levels of engagement across all three dimensions of engagement than students in other academic tracks.
- Students in special education classes report lower levels of engagement across all three dimensions of engagement than students in other academic tracks.
- Students who are not eligible for free or reduced-price lunch programs report higher levels of engagement across all three dimensions of engagement than students who are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch programs.

These gaps mirror the achievement gap in multiple ways, and have been identified in other contexts as well (Brooking, Gardiner, & Calvert, 2009). Is there a connection between the engagement gap and the achievement gap? If so, what is the nature of that connection? Answers to these questions may provide insight into ways of closing both gaps, and improving both engagement and achievement for all students in high schools.

## STRATEGIES FOR ENGAGEMENT

HSSSE has proven to be useful as both an evaluative tool and a professional development strategy. Administering the survey in both the fall and the spring, or once a year for several years, provides data to gain insight into the perspectives and experiences of students, evaluate the progress of initiatives, understand the impact of policies on students, and track changes in student attitudes over time. Each administration of the survey provides a wealth of data that can be used as a foundation for professional development in schools, including data on instruction, rigor and relevance of curriculum, students' risk of dropping out, and reasons why students disengage from school.

Participating high schools receive a comprehensive, individualized data report of their students' responses to survey questions. The data are presented in a variety of ways to allow schools to make the most effective use of the survey results. Given the wide range of data that schools receive, and the different goals that schools have for their work, there are many strategies that schools might employ in both analyzing their data and implementing changes based on their data.

For example, a school looking to improve instruction would certainly want to look at the question on the types of work in class that excite and/or engage students. It would also be useful for the school to incorporate in its analysis the questions of why students go to school and why students are bored, as well as open responses from question 35. Looking at why students go to school, the aggregate data indicate that most students go to school in order to get a degree and go to college, but many students also go to school because of their friends and peers. The data on instruction indicate that many students are most excited and engaged by instructional methods in which they are working and learning with their peers, such as group projects. Further,

the most frequent response to the question of why students are bored is that the material isn't interesting, and the second most frequent response is that the material isn't relevant; about one third of the students indicate that a source of their boredom is not having interaction with their teacher. Taking these data together, a school can begin to piece together an instructional plan that involves active methods of classroom learning, in which students are working with their peers and interacting with their teachers. Bringing in other data from the survey will help refine this plan in order to generate more engaging and effective instruction.

Two examples from HSSSE participating schools provide insight into how schools and districts have been making effective use of survey data to create more engaging learning environments.

*High School A is a large, well-resourced, generally high-performing school in the midwest. As part of a restructuring plan designed to make the school feel smaller for students and prevent any students from "falling through the cracks," High School A is looking to create ways to connect all students to adults in the school. In addition to creating a ninth grade academy, High School A is planning to implement an advisory structure in which students will meet regularly with a teacher or other staff member. At the beginning of this process, High School A implemented HSSSE to get a sense of student perspectives on school culture, their school experience, the level of support students feel they receive, and the kinds of support that they would like to have. The high school then contracted with the HSSSE project for an on-site professional development session. The session served as a venue for the group to examine the data, work to understand the students' current experience, delve into questions raised by small groups of staff members, and use the HSSSE data to create initial plans for the purpose and content of advisory group meetings. The school staff continues to collect and use HSSSE data as they move toward implementation of the advisory system.*

*District B is located in the southeastern United States. In an area hit hard by hurricanes, District B has repeatedly worked quickly to get as many of the schools back up and running as soon as possible and to provide a source of stability in the area while families dealt with the effects of the storms. District B set student engagement as one of its district-wide goals and initiatives, and has participated in HSSSE for the last four years. They use the data to understand the perspectives of their students, to create conversations among their staff about how to engage all students (even with a transient population, as families continue to return to their homes in the district), and to improve instruction. The HSSSE project has done a professional development workshop with principals in District B each year since they began participating in HSSSE, using these sessions to examine student perspectives and plan implementation of more interactive pedagogies.*

These examples are just two ways in which schools (and a district) make effective use of their HSSSE data. While their purposes and strategies are specific to their schools, and their school contexts are quite different, their overall goals are identical:

- to create engaging learning environments
- to connect students to the school community
- to capitalize on engagement to ultimately have an impact on student performance.

HSSSE data provide these schools with the perspective of the students, pointing the way to more effective implementation of reforms.

## **CONCLUSION — ENGAGING THE VOICES OF STUDENTS**

A cartoon in a recent issue of *The New Yorker* magazine shows a school bus driving down a road past trees and fences. Students occupy each of the rows, two to a seat. In the front row, there are two young boys talking to each other. The caption of the cartoon, the words of one of the boys, reads, “*I turned five. That’s why I’m here. What are you in for?*”

This image of school as a prison, a confining institution, portrayed as coming from the mouths of students as young as age five, is one of many popular images of schools. These images of schools, largely negative, are both conflicting and contradictory. School is seen as both the great equalizer and the earliest instrument of stratification, a place of opportunity and a place where children learn what doors are closed to them, a vehicle for change and an institution designed to reproduce society’s inequalities.

What is school and what is the purpose of schooling? Adults — policymakers, researchers, administrators — focus heavily on the measurable outcomes: graduation rates, standardized test scores, course-taking patterns, college-going rates. On the High School Survey of Student Engagement, most students assert the importance of getting a degree and going on to college. However, these student voices tell us that, while in high school, they want to be engaged — academically, intellectually, socially, and emotionally — with the work and life of their high school. Those who are not engaged either grind through it to get the diploma and move on, or dis-engage and drop out of high school.

Though often the targets of blame, teachers have a great deal of power to shape the experiences of students in positive ways. On the survey, students regularly name teachers who have had a positive impact on their experiences; most of these comments relate to teachers who believed in them, challenged them, or demonstrated real care about them and their learning. One student in 2007 wrote, “I always wished at least one teacher would see a skill in me that seemed extraordinary, or help to encourage its growth.” This student is looking for a teacher to help her/him find something special inside, to get to know her/him well enough to see that special skill or talent — not to help get a higher score on a test or to merely take enough courses to graduate, but to find something that the student can use for a lifetime.

Can schools and teachers accomplish what students are looking for within the current structures? It is clear from HSSSE data that students believe much more needs to be done to create engaging teaching and learning environments.

One area that schools can focus on is instruction. Nearly one-half of respondents in 2007 and 2008 think that teacher lecture is not at all exciting or engaging; students prefer instructional methodologies in which they are active participants and are learning through interaction with their peers. More than 80% of students in each year have been bored in class because the material wasn’t interesting, more than 40% in each year have been bored because they felt the material wasn’t relevant to them, and more than one-third of the respondents have been bored because they have no interaction with their teacher. Schools and teachers can investigate ways to implement more active teaching and learning methodologies, and work to teach in ways that students best learn the material. Expertise in content and using challenging curricula are critical; engaging pedagogy creates the means for students to learn what is being taught.

Schools can also focus on policies and structures. For example, the data indicate that there is a relationship between the grade level at which students entered their current high school and their levels of engagement with the work and life of their high schools. Students who entered their high schools in grade 9 report higher levels of engagement than students who entered their high schools in later grades; students who entered their high school in grade 12 report the lowest levels of engagement. High schools — particularly those with highly mobile populations — can work to create entrance or induction programs to ensure that students who enter the school after grade 9 are acclimated to the environment and become engaged with all the school has to offer.

Third, the data indicate that there is an engagement gap deserving of attention from schools and researchers. Though there is a great focus currently on the achievement gap, HSSSE data suggest that there are important gaps in levels of engagement among various populations: Girls report higher levels of engagement than boys; White and Asian students report higher levels of engagement than students of other races; students in honors, college preparatory, and advanced classes report higher levels of engagement than students in other academic tracks; students in special education classes report lower levels of engagement than students in other academic tracks; and students of lower socioeconomic status report lower levels of engagement than students of higher socioeconomic status. Further inquiry needs to be conducted to understand the reasons why these gaps in engagement emerge and to investigate possible connections to the achievement gap; further action needs to be taken to close these gaps and to engage all students in the high school community.

What is the connection between engagement and achievement? Students indicate that more engaging learning environments — with a focus more on knowledge than on tests, more on learning than on grades — would lead to greater knowledge acquisition and, subsequently, greater achievement. What is engagement in the school context? Is it the devotion of a certain amount of time to a specific task, or is it the devotion of energy and passion to the pursuit of learning, such that the learner and teacher are no longer counting the minutes? While students are often portrayed as not caring about

school or learning, many students who respond to the High School Survey of Student Engagement are looking for something more complex than statistics can measure, something more intellectual than the kinds of knowledge tested on standardized assessments, and something more interactive than what they are currently experiencing. Students are looking to be interacted with, cared about, challenged, and valued. In creating engaging schools, these student voices are important and insightful; schools that listen to their students and utilize their survey data to take action have started down the path to engaging all students.

*Hope my answers help with major decisions.*

— HSSSE 2007 Respondent

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