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A look at life in high school

National survey puts the focus on Glenbard students

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Students at the Glenbard high schools value their teachers but don't spend much time communicating with them outside of class. The students rarely read for pleasure or volunteer in their community. They feel challenged to do their best in class but spend less than an hour a day on average preparing for school. They talk a lot on the phone but don't get enough sleep.

Such were the first results from a national study measuring how connected students are to their high school. The Glenbard district was the first in the nation to participate in the survey.

The responses of the 7,200 students in the four west suburban Glenbard schools will serve as the baseline for what is expected to be a comprehensive survey this year of more than 100,000 students from as many as 200 high schools nationwide. Glenbard's survey was conducted last spring.

The idea behind the survey is to go beyond the standardized test scores that often determine whether a school is considered successful. The data are expected to help educational leaders at the national and local levels focus their energy and resources on practices that make high schools more effective.

The survey was adapted from a college engagement survey that is given to nearly 300,000 students at more than 700 universities nationwide.

"What we're hoping to accomplish on a national level is give high schools some really useful data that can help them in designing their school reform efforts," said Martha McCarthy, survey project and an education professor at Indiana University. "Right now, what is driving reform efforts is these high stakes tests, and we need to supplement that."

Glenbard Supt. Tim Hyland said one of the downsides of being the first to take the survey is that there is no way of knowing how students compare with their U.S. peers.

Still, the results provided school officials with insight and will likely trigger changes and improvements at each of the schools.

"I'm just proud we are asking students these kind of questions ... asking our customers how we're doing. That's something no high school has ever done," said Hyland, a former school superintendent in Indiana who pushed for Glenbard to become the pilot district after he was hired last spring.

"It's easy for us to make assumptions, but we need to make sure the faculty has a real grip on what students are thinking."

The concept of student engagement is an important piece of the reform puzzle because research has shown it to be one of the most important predictors of academic success.

Engagement can take many forms but typically includes students' participation in extracurricular activities, connection to teachers and staff, participation in class discussions, time commitment to academic projects and general beliefs about the school climate.

Glenbard educators said they are encouraged by students' perceptions that their courses are much more likely to emphasize comprehension and problem-solving rather than memorization of facts.

Officials, however, were baffled by the seeming disconnect between how students ranked the quality of their relationships with teachers (70 percent giving high marks for being helpful and sympathetic) and their connection to them outside class time (almost half reported never receiving mentoring or personal support from a teacher).

And they are troubled by how little reading and class preparation students report doing in a typical week. About 60 percent spend less than an hour a day on studying and homework. About 70 percent of Glenbard students read fewer than three hours in a week.

Distractions are definitely a factor: phone, video games, computer, friends.

Students think reading is boring because there are many more interesting things to do with their time, said Derek Falk, 17, student body president at Glenbard North who, as might be expected of a school leader, spends more time on school work and extracurriculars than the typical Glenbard student.

Falk also works more than 25 hours a week--a rarity in a school district where half the students said they did not work for pay.

Glenbard North Principal Prentiss Lea said he expects the survey will trigger some immediate changes at his school, simple things such as encouraging teachers to use e-mail to communicate with students.

Glenbard students are inclined to blame their peers, rather than their teachers, for slacking off in class or tuning out of school activities.

Sophomore Frank Bertolini said he feels comfortable talking with his teachers and would not hesitate to ask one for help during or after school.

Glenbard officials want to encourage their students to read more on their own time but are not sure how to accomplish this without turning "pleasure reading" into just one more homework assignment.

The survey confirmed that the majority of students believe they are pushed to do their best. If anything, students said, they are pushed too hard.

Michelle Loftus, an A-average sophomore, said it would be nice if school officials would allow students to enjoy what they are learning now instead of talking endlessly about how it will prepare them for college.

"A lot of focus is put on the future ... on what college they are going to get into," Loftus said. "I know teachers and parents use it as a motivational tool, but it becomes something negative because it's forced onto us."