Charting the Path from Engagement to Achievement:

A Report on the 2009 High School Survey of Student Engagement

Ethan Yazzie-Mintz, Director, High School Survey of Student Engagement

"When I am not engaged, it is because the work is not intellectually engaging."

— *HSSSE 2009 Student Respondent*

INTRODUCTION

In high schools across the United States, the primary focus and goal is student achievement. Schools are assessed virtually exclusively on quantitative measures of student outcomes: test scores, graduation rates, and adequate yearly progress. Though various goals and purposes are often articulated in the mission statements of high schools, what matters is student achievement on a specific set of measures. Based on the U.S. Department of Education's plan for reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (U.S. Department of Education, 2010), student performance and achievement will continue to be the standard by which students and schools in this country are measured. This ideology is so pervasive that one student respondent on the 2009 High School Survey of Student Engagement (HSSSE) wrote, perhaps tongue-in-cheek, on the survey, "Is this a cleverly disguised standardized test?"

The sharp focus on achievement and accountability in education policy and practice has highlighted the dropout problem in high schools across the country. According to the latest report from the Institute of Education Sciences of the U.S. Department of Education, 25% of students in the class of 2008 in public high schools in the U.S. did not graduate "on time," defined as four years after entering high school (Stillwell, 2010). Though one out of four students are not graduating "on time," data from the High School Survey of Student Engagement indicate that students' aspirations for their schooling are high: Of 42,754 student respondents in 2009, 91.4% expect to attain at least a high school diploma, 87.0% expect to attain some form of postsecondary degree, 81.8% expect to attain at least a bachelor's degree, and 45.2% expect to attain an advanced degree; only 1.5% expect to leave high school without finishing. Over the four-year period from 2006 to 2009, of more than 300,000 student respondents, 88.6% expected to attain at least a high school diploma.

Dropping out has been described as a "slow process of disengagement from school" (Bridgeland, DiIulio, & Morison, 2006). In response to this trend, many schools have begun to focus on student engagement, creating programs and practices that connect students to school. Though a clear and consistent definition does not exist in the research literature, student engagement is most cogently thought of as a complex construct comprised of multiple dimensions (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). Engagement can best be understood as a relationship: between the student and school community, the student and school adults, the student and peers, the student and instruction, and the student and curriculum.

In this context, it is important to ask, *What is the connection between student engagement and student achievement?* Much of the research literature on engagement and achievement focuses on two major areas: student behavior (such as self-efficacy, self-regulation, and motivation; see, for example, Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2003; and Skinner, Wellborn, & Connell, 1990) and school structures (for example, class size, attendance, and use of technology). In an analysis of PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) data from the year 2000, Willms (2003) examined a construct of engagement consisting of "belonging" and "participation" (measured by attendance and truancy). Noting that the data indicate that there is "a high prevalence of students who are disaffected from school" (p. 53), Willms found that "On average, schools with high levels of engagement tended to have high levels of literacy skills" (p. 56). Willms asserts that engagement is important as well for those going into the workforce, as the academic record of employees is less important to employers than "whether they can work well with others, contribute new ideas, and align themselves with the goals of the organization" (p. 56).

Perhaps surprisingly, the study of engagement is emerging in the corporate world. Whereas schools have often borrowed restrictive structures from the field of business — for example, the factory model of schooling, the input-output model — the field of "employee engagement" is promising in terms of both process and outcome. Fleming & Asplund (2007), using a 12-question Gallup survey reflecting many of the engagement issues important to students in schools, found that "high scores on these items reflected an underlying emotional engagement in the employees who took the survey, an engagement that results in improved business outcomes, including increased levels of productivity, profitability, and employee retention" (p. 163). Though the traditional corporate model is one based on power and position, the Gallup study found that "engaged employees want their organization to succeed because they feel connected emotionally, socially, and even spiritually to its mission, vision, and purpose" (pp. 159-160).

In looking at the connection between engagement and achievement, the corporate world offers an employee engagement model in which strong relationships — between employee and organization, employee and employer, employee and customer, and employee and work — create productive and profitable businesses in which employees remain with their companies. Viewing this model through the lens of education, student engagement has promise as a driving force in creating high-achieving schools in which students persist through graduation.

In fact, schools that focus on student engagement are seeing both great possibility and real success. Schools that utilize the High School Survey of Student Engagement are listening to their students' beliefs, perceptions, and perspectives on their school experience; those schools that utilize their student engagement data effectively are making progress. This report highlights five such schools and districts; struggling with a variety of structural, instructional, and societal issues, these schools are focusing their efforts on charting a path to achievement that starts with engagement.

WHAT IS HSSSE?

"I hope this survey allows you to do better research on how high school life can be improved: academically, socially, mentally, and physically."

— HSSSE 2009 Student Respondent

Vivian Gussin Paley, the early childhood teacher and prolific education researcher, once wrote, "When we are curious about a child's words and our responses to those words, the child feels respected. The child *is* respected." (1986, p. 127). Students want to feel that their words and thoughts are important to adults within the school community. While schools that participate in the High School Survey of Student Engagement (HSSSE) are generally eager to hear what their students have to say about various aspects of the student experience in school, schools often do not know what to do with the data and how to incorporate the viewpoints of students into school planning and improvement efforts.

The High School Survey of Student Engagement is designed to both help schools ascertain students' beliefs about their school experience and provide assistance to schools in translating data into action. HSSSE is a research and professional development project directed by the Center for Evaluation and Education Policy (CEEP) 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.

History of HSSSE

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. Originally directed by Dr. Martha McCarthy, HSSSE has been based at the Center for Evaluation and Education Policy (directed by Dr. Jonathan Plucker) since the 2005-06 school year.

The Survey

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 350,000 students in over 40 states have taken the survey.

Currently, there is a survey administration each fall and each 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.

Dimensions of Engagement

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. The High School Survey of Student Engagement 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.

Though researchers often attempt to identify specific student behaviors (time-on-task, attendance), student characteristics (self-efficacy), or school structures (small learning communities, presence of technology) as discrete indicators or predictors of engagement, reviews of the research literature best support a definition of student engagement that is complex and "multifaceted" (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). 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.

While analysis of individual survey items allows schools to look at student responses to specific questions, these dimensions of engagement help schools 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 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.

PURPOSE OF REPORT

"What is the point of this survey? What difference are you making with this survey? Are you doing anything?"
— *HSSSE 2009 Student Respondent*

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. A report released in November 2009, *Engaging the Voices of Students*, focused on data from HSSSE 2007 and 2008. The current report focuses on HSSSE 2009 data.[1] These reports, after being released, are available on the HSSSE Web site (http:// ceep.indiana.edu/hsss e/).

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.

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[1] The data presented in this report were collected during the spring 2009 administration of HSSSE. In fall 2008, a small group 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. Additionally, during fall 2008, a small group of independent schools participated in a pilot project on engagement for the National Association of Independent Schools. These data are not included in the current report; however, as the fall survey administration grows to include a critical mass of schools and students, fall survey data will be included in these reports.

The current report is designed to provide an overview of the data so that a wider group of educators, researchers, practitioners, and policymakers have access to the picture of student engagement generated by HSSSE and insight into the thoughts, beliefs, and perceptions of the 42,754 students from a variety of schools across the United States who participated in HSSSE 2009. In addition, the report highlights individual schools and districts that are digging into their HSSSE data and using the data to improve engagement and achievement. Following an introduction to the report and to HSSSE, this report has three major sections:

- Overview of HSSSE 2009 Schools & Survey Respondents
- Selected Findings from HSSSE 2009 (and Four-Year Aggregate Highlights, 2006 to 2009)
- Profiles of Individual Schools and Districts Using HSSSE Data

Finally, the report concludes with an overall analysis and reflections on HSSSE 2009, including strategies and recommendations for: strengthening student engagement, engaging the voices of students for effective school improvement, and charting the path from engagement to achievement.

PROFILE OF HSSSE 2009 PARTICIPATING SCHOOLS

In 2009, 103 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 2009 was 787; the smallest participating school had an enrollment of 20, and the largest participating school had an enrollment of 3,143. The average (mean) survey population at a HSSSE participating school in 2009 was 415.

Schools by Region

All five regions of the country — Northeast, Southeast, Midwest, Southwest, and West — were represented in the pool of participating schools in 2009. Two regions — the Midwest and the West — accounted for 63% of the high schools that participated; one third of the participating schools were located in the Northeast and the Southeast. Table 1 presents the participating schools by region, along with the states that had participating schools within each region.

Schools by Classification

The Institute of Education Sciences of the U.S. 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 2009 participating schools were located in a variety of contexts: urban, suburban, rural, and town. Of the spring 2009 participating schools, 53% were located in urban contexts, 31% in suburban contexts, 12% in rural contexts, and 4% in town contexts.

Public schools comprised 87% of the pool of 2009 participating schools; private and independent schools comprised 13% of the participating schools in 2009.

Table 1: HSSSE 2009 Participating Schools by Region

Region	States with HSSSE Spring 2009 Schools	Number of Schools
Northeast	CT, MA, MD, NH, NJ, NY, RI	15 (14.6%)
Southeast	AL, FL, GA, LA	19 (18.4%)
Midwest	IL, IN, MI, MN, MO, OH, WI	38 (36.9%)
Southwest	AZ, NM, TX	4 (3.9%)
West	CA, HI, NV, UT, WA, WY	27 (26.2%)

Schools by Size

HSSSE 2009 participating schools ranged in size from 20 students to 3,143 students; the average (mean) student enrollment at a HSSSE participating school in 2009 was 787. Fifty-three schools had enrollments of 500 students or fewer, 18 schools had enrollments between 501 students and 1,000 students (inclusive), 26 schools had enrollments between 1,001 students and 2,000 students (inclusive), and 6 schools had enrollments of 2,001 students or greater. Figure 1 presents the percentage of schools in each size range for 2009.

PROFILE OF HSSSE 2009 PARTICIPATING STUDENTS

In 2009, 42,754 students participated in the administration of the High School Survey of Student Engagement; these students accounted for 74% of the intended survey populations in participating schools (74% response rate). 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 2009, 30% of HSSSE respondents were in grade 9, 27% were in grade 10, 23% were in grade 11, and 20% were in grade 12. Most of these students — 88% — began attending their current high school in grade 9. Figure 2 presents the participating students in 2009 by current grade level.

Students by Sex/Gender

In 2009, HSSSE respondents were almost evenly split between males and females, with slightly more females than males comprising the pool of respondents. Female respondents made up 52% of the pool, while 48% of the 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."

More students of color and students identifying themselves as "Multiracial" participated in HSSSE in 2009 than in previous years. Figure 3 presents the 2009 participating students by race/ethnicity.

Students by Free/Reduced Lunch

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 2009 respondents, 25% reported being eligible to receive a free or reduced-price lunch at school, 54% reported that they were not eligible, and 21% did not know if they were eligible or preferred not to respond to the question.
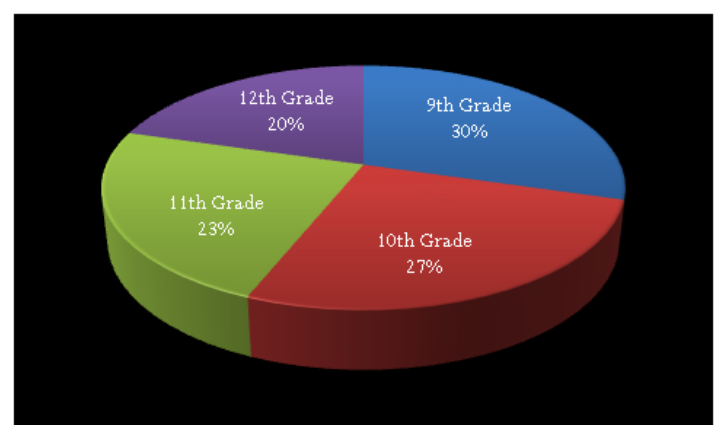
Students by Language Spoken at Home

In 2009, 87% of HSSSE respondents reported that English is spoken in their homes while 8% reported that Spanish is spoken at home. Other languages are spoken in 11% of respondents' homes.

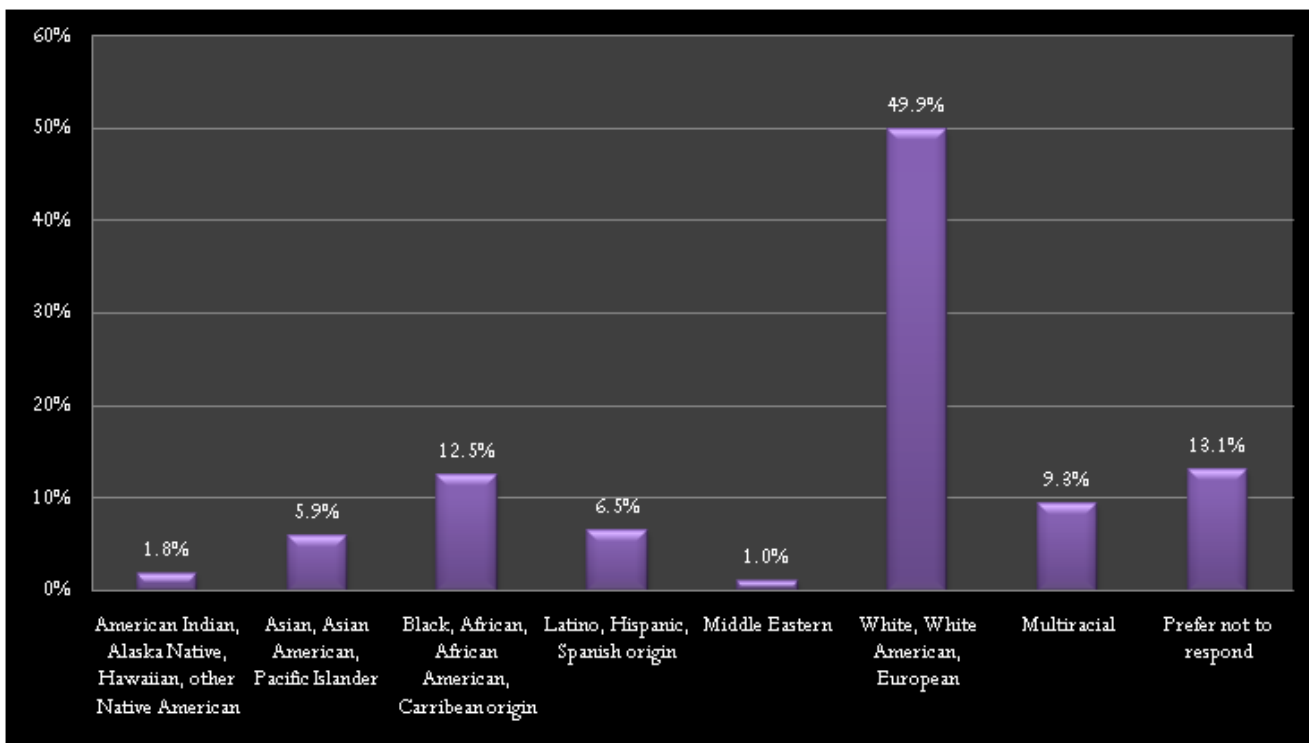**Figure 1. HSSSE 2009 Participating Schools by School Size**
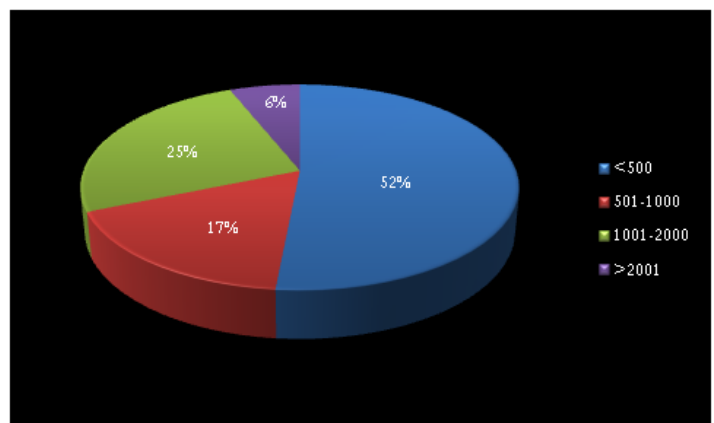
Figure 2. HSSSE 2009 Participating Schools by Grade Level

Figure 3. HSSSE 2009 Respondents by Race/Ethnicity

Students by High School Grades

More than half of the respondents in 2009 (58%) reported that they received either "Mostly As" or "Mostly As and Bs." Additionally, 28% of respondents reported receiving "Mostly Bs and Cs," while 9% report receiving "Mostly Cs and Ds" and 3% report receiving "Mostly Ds and below." Only 2% 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 (81%) in 2009 identified their academic track or most of the classes they take as either "General/Regular" or "Honors/ College Preparatory/Advanced." Figure 4 presents the 2009 participating students by academic track.

FOUNDATIONS OF ENGAGEMENT

The "Foundations of Engagement" are those aspects of the student experience that form the building blocks for an understanding of the ways in which students engage or dis-engage — and the degree to which they engage or dis-engage — in the life and work of school. Three areas of inquiry comprise the "Foundations of Engagement":

- Why students go to school (i.e., what motivates them to get themselves to school each day)
- Boredom: How often and why students are bored in school
- Risk of Dropping Out: How often and why students have considered dropping out of school

Schools and districts keep attendance records — whether students were in school or absent, on time or tardy. However, little is known about why students go to school: what gets them up in the morning to attend school and what keeps them in school. Understanding students' reasons for being in school may help schools create more engaging learning environments for students, providing students with compelling reasons to persist and achieve. At the same time, understanding students' reasons for checking out of school — either temporarily in the case of boredom or permanently in the case of dropping out — can provide schools with a set of guideposts for engaging students in learning.

Why do Students Go to School?

Students were asked on the survey, "Why do you go to school?" The assumption can be made that students only go to school because they are required; in fact, "Because it's the law" was only the fifth most common response, noted by 56% of respondents in 2009 (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" (73%), "Because I want to get a good job" (67%), "Because of my peers/friends" (66%), and "Because of my parents/ guardians" (64%).

These data have been consistent from 2006 to 2009. There are three main purposes for which students attend school:

- Academic Purpose: get a high school degree, pursue future schooling and/or work
- Social Purpose: be with peers and friends
- Family Purpose: parents/guardians push students to attend school, students feel an obligation to family to pursue schooling

Figure 4. HSSSE 2009 Respondents by Academic Track
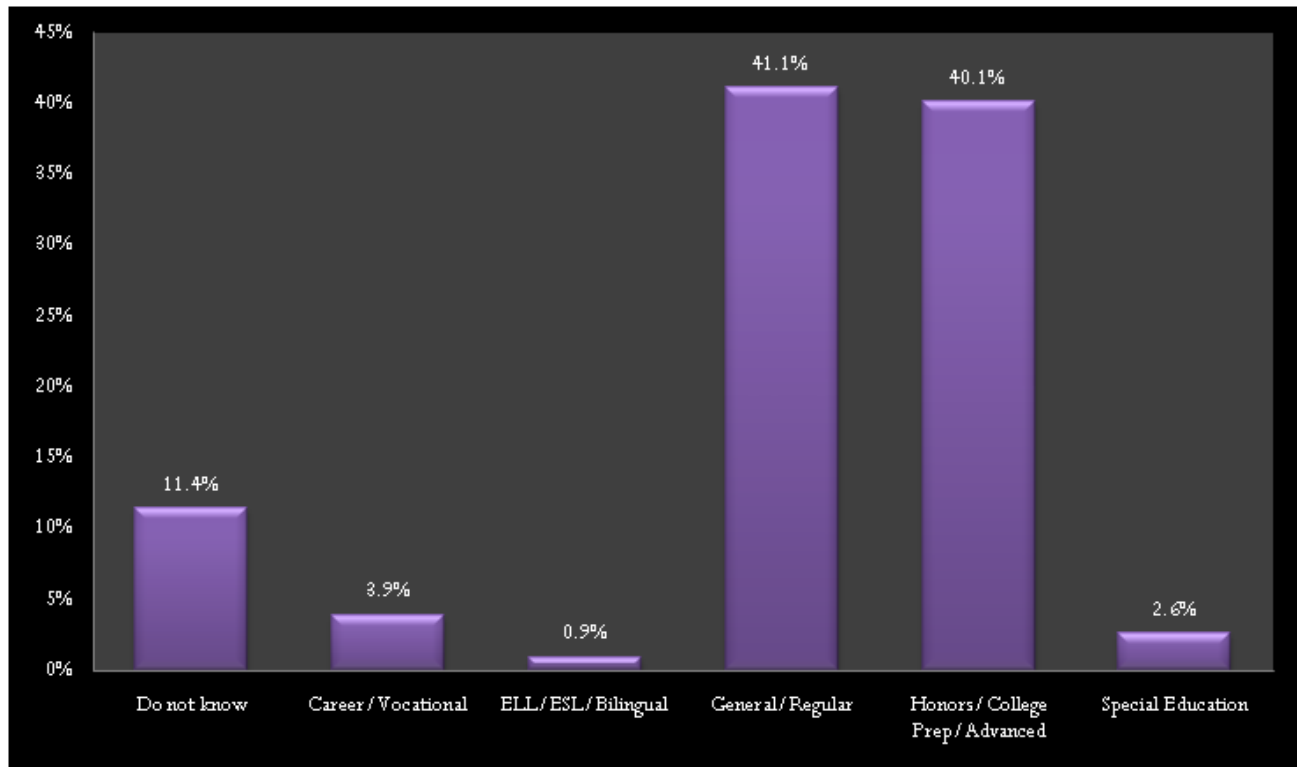
The academic purpose — pursuit of a degree, postsecondary education, workforce — is foremost in students' minds; the message being sent to students about the importance of a high school degree is being received. However, schools need to understand and acknowledge both the social purpose and the family reasons (and pressures) for students to attend school; these broader understandings (beyond solely academics) can help schools design engaging work and programs for students.

It is important as well to note reasons for going to school that are less prevalent among students. Well below half of the student respondents gave school-based or classroom-based responses to this question. These responses include: "Because of what I learn in classes" (41%), "Because I enjoy being in school" (36%), and "Because of my teachers" (23%).

Boredom and Engagement

Is boredom a real phenomenon to be addressed by schools? Or is "being bored" just something students claim to be, when they don't want to work? Is boredom an inevitable fact of life, as one respondent to an article on boredom and engagement in high school wrote, "Life is boring, and high school is preparing students for life"?

One of the challenges is that boredom, as a complex construct, has not been defined in a way that is consistent or accepted across the body of research literature (Vodanovich, 2003). Studies looking at students and boredom have noted that students are able to describe their feelings of boredom but not define what boredom is (Farrell, Peguero, Lindsey, & White, 1988). A study of high school students who had been identified as "gifted" in elementary school and were currently "underachieving" found that "schooling" — as opposed to "learning"

— was associated with boredom; five factors were likely to create a situation of learning instead of boredom: control, choice, challenge, complexity, and caring (Kanevsky & Keighley, 2003).

However defined, boredom is a temporary form of dis-engaging from school; it is important for schools to understand both the extent of students' boredom and the reasons why students are bored. 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?"

Two out of three respondents (66%) in 2009 are bored at least every day in class in high school; nearly half of the students (49%) are bored every day and approximately one out of every six students (17%) are bored in every class. Only 2% report never being bored, and 4% report being bored "once or twice."

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 were ever bored (98%), the material being taught was an issue: more than four out of five noted a reason for their boredom as "Material wasn't interesting" (81%) and about two out of five students claimed that the lack of relevance of the material (42%) 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%) 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" (26%). Instructional interaction played a role in students' boredom as well: more than one third of respondents (35%) were bored due to "No interaction with teacher."

Over four years of HSSSE survey administrations, student responses have been very consistent regarding boredom. In a pool of 275,925 students who responded to this question from 2006 to 2009, 65% reported being bored at least every day in class in high school; 49% are bored every day and 16% are bored every class. Only 2% reported never being bored.

Students' reasons for their boredom are similarly consistent in the four-year aggregate as well. "Material wasn't interesting" was cited by 82% of respondents and "Material wasn't relevant to me" by 41% of respondents. Thirty-four percent of students said that a primary source of their boredom was "No interaction with teacher."

Dropping Out and Dis-Engagement

Dropping out is a more permanent form of dis-engagement, a full separation from the school community. The latest data from the National Center for Education Statistics (Stillwell, 2010) indicate that the public high school class of 2008 in the U.S. included 75% of the students who began high school as ninth graders four years earlier. The high costs of dropping out for both the individual and the broader society are well-documented (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2009; Sum, Khatiwada, & McLaughlin, with Palma, 2009). 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; in other words, policy interventions for dropout prevention are designed to keep students in school (or get students back to school), not necessarily to improve their in-school experience. However, research has demonstrated that in-school factors contribute to dropping out: content and classes are not interesting, students do not feel connected to school, and students do not see the purpose or relevance in the work (Bridgeland, DiIulio, & Morison, 2006).

With one-quarter of the students in public high schools not graduating "on time," it is critical to understand students' thoughts on the possibility of dropping out: how often they have considered the idea and why. 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 can be seen as a risk factor for dropping out. Not surprisingly, students who have most often skipped school have also most often considered dropping out. Students who skip school but return provide an opportunity for prevention of more permanent dis-engagement. Seeking understanding of the reasons that students skip school, and targeting interventions rather than punishment for these students, may lead to greater persistence in school rather than dropping out. In 2009, 50% of the students report having skipped school either "once or twice" or "many times." Within that group, 16% have skipped school "many times."

Approximately one out of five students (21%) who took the HSSSE survey in 2009 has considered dropping out at some point during high school; 7% of the respondents have considered dropping out "many times." The pool of HSSSE respondents who have thought about dropping out during high school provides a window into understanding why students have considered permanent dis-engagement.

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" (50%), "I didn't see the value in the work I was being asked to do" (42%), and "I didn't like the teachers" (39%). While 35% of respondents considered dropping out because of the difficulty of the work, 13% considered dropping out because "The work was too easy."

Adults play a significant role 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% identified "No adults in the school cared about me" as a reason for thinking about dropping out and 9% of the respondents stated that, "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 a casual 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.

Further, 16% of students who have thought about dropping out did so because they were picked on or bullied. In extreme cases, bullying has led to tragic consequences; HSSSE student respondents report that such bullying has led them to consider leaving high school. Adults can play an important role in making schools safer environments for all students.

From 2006 to 2009, 20% of student respondents had considered dropping out once or twice, and 9% had considered dropping out many times; 71% of student respondents had never considered dropping out. While a greater percentage of students have considered dropping out over the four-year span than in 2009 alone, students' reasons for considering dropping out have been consistent. The three responses related to school, classroom, and learning were the three most-cited reasons by students for considering dropping out of school: "I didn't like the school," "I didn't see the value in the work I was being asked to do," and "I didn't like the teachers."

STUDENT ACTIONS FOR LEARNING

How do students contribute to their own engagement in learning? Research tends to focus on countable measures, such as the time students spend "on task." More time spent on task is equated with more engagement in learning. Even the literature on time-on-task acknowledges that time is not the only factor involved in engaging students in learning. Prater (1992), for example, delineates three types of classroom time: *allocated time, time-on-task,* and *engaged learning time.* Though engaged learning time is when real engagement in learning is most likely to happen, the focus of restructuring efforts around scheduling and instruction often focuses on allocated time (time devoted to instruction) and time-on-task (time students spend on classroom and school tasks).

Time-on-task, though measurable quantitatively, is an incomplete measure of engagement. Students who spend time on particular assigned tasks cannot necessarily be said to be engaged. The amount

Table 2: HSSSE 2009 Number of Hours Spent on Particular Activities in a Typical Seven-Day Week

Activities	Number of Hours				
	0	1 or fewer	2 to 5	6 to 10	10+
Doing Written Homework	7%	32%	39%	15%	7%
Reading/Studying for Class	11%	39%	37%	10%	3%
Reading for Self	16%	38%	29%	10%	6%
Participating in School-Sponsored Activities	26%	18%	25%	14%	17%
Watching TV/Playing Video Games	6%	25%	38%	18%	12%
Surfing/Chatting Online	12%	27%	35%	16%	10%
Talking on the Phone	8%	34%	30%	14%	14%
Socializing with Friends Outside of School	4%	11%	33%	27%	26%

Table 3: HSSSE 2009 Importance of Particular Activities

Activities	How Important?				
	Not at All	A Little	Somewhat Important	Very Important	Top Priority
Doing Written Homework	7%	14%	33%	36%	10%
Reading/Studying for Class	9%	18%	33%	31%	9%
Reading for Self	17%	27%	32%	19%	5%
Participating in School-Sponsored Activities	20%	16%	23%	30%	11%
Watching TV/Playing Video Games	22%	36%	27%	10%	5%
Surfing/Chatting Online	22%	33%	28%	12%	4%
Talking on the Phone	16%	30%	30%	17%	7%
Socializing with Friends Outside of School	4%	10%	26%	42%	18%

of time spent "on task" can be driven by expectations, compliance, task difficulty, or external rewards, none of which necessarily indicate that a student is engaged with the task. A student who spends a great amount of time on a particular task but does not carry any learning from the task past the end of class cannot be said to have been deeply engaged. Task importance — the priority students place on particular tasks and activities — is important to consider along with time-on-task to obtain a fuller picture of engagement; the importance with which students view tasks and activities will influence how much time and effort they apply, and the degree to which (and ways in which) they engage in learning. Students responding to HSSSE in 2009 (consistent with data from the four-year period from 2006 to 2009) report an interesting disjuncture between the time they spend and the importance they assign to various activities. These data provide a cautionary note to researchers and practitioners interpreting time-on-task data too narrowly.

Time-on-Task and Task Importance

HSSSE 2009 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[2] 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 2009, 77% of the respondents reported spending five hours or fewer per week (translating to one hour or fewer *per day)* "Doing written homework" and 87% reported spending that same amount of time "Reading and studying for class"; 39% of students report spending one hour or fewer *per week* "Doing written homework" and 50% of students report spending one hour or fewer *per week* "Reading and studying for class." On the other hand, 30% of students reported spending six hours or more per week "Watching television, playing video games" and 26% reported spending that same amount of time "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: 79% of the respondents report that "Doing written homework" is "Somewhat Important," "Very Important," or a "Top Priority"; 73% of respondents report that "Reading and studying for class" is "Somewhat Important," "Very Important," or a "Top Priority." Further, more than half of the respondents rate "Watching television, playing video games" and "Surfing or chatting online" as either "Not at All" important or "A Little" important.

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[2] Due to rounding, some rows in Tables 2 and 3 do not sum to 100%.

Students make an important distinction between the amount of time they spend on particular tasks and activities, and the importance with which they view these same tasks and activities. Looking at just time-on-task — the countable, observable measure — provides a limited picture when focusing on the possibilities for engagement in learning. Understanding the importance students place on various tasks and activities can lead to different strategies and processes for engagement; because students see many academically-related tasks as important, the critical issue for schools to focus on may be the quality of the tasks rather than time spent on those tasks.

Effort

In 2009, fewer than half of respondents (49%) 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 42% responded that they give their maximum effort in "1 or 2" or "Some" of their classes.

In response to the question, "In about how many classes do you put in very little effort?", 19% of students reported putting in very little effort in "Most" or "All" of their classes, while 27% reported giving very little effort in "None" of their classes. The majority of students (64%) 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.

These data present a picture of students exerting varying levels of effort across their classes. Most students report not giving maximum effort in most of their classes; most students also report giving at least some effort in more than one or two classes. Effort is an important indicator of engagement; the reasons for students giving more or less effort in classes will need to be investigated to understand better the connection between levels of effort and engagement.

RIGOR AND RELEVANCE

"It'd be nice to understand things or learn important stuff for life after high school."

— HSSSE 2009 Student Respondent

Of the students in 2009 who considered dropping out, 42% did so because they did not see the value in the work they were being asked to do; the same proportion of students saw the lack of relevance of the material in class as a cause of their boredom. While "rigor" and "relevance" are two of the new "three Rs," students are reporting a lack of rigor and relevance in their work. Students commonly use the open response space on Question 35 to articulate their feelings about rigor and relevance. One student wrote, "This school does not challenge me academically," while another wrote, "I don't find the work interesting, don't enjoy being talked at, and hate that everyone teaches to standardized tests." Many students are looking for work that connects to what they want to do with their lives after high school, echoing the sentiments of this student: "We should be able to take classes that would actually help us in what we want our career to be." On the survey, 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 (48%) claimed that they are challenged academically in "Most" or "All" of their classes. One out of four (25%) reported being challenged academically in "None" or "1 or 2" classes. A majority of students (63%) 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 (17%) 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?" Almost one in four students (23%) reported that their school "Very Much" emphasizes "Memorizing facts and figures in work for classes"; more than a third of the students (36%) reported that their school "Very Much" emphasizes "Understanding information and ideas in work for classes"; and more than one in four students claimed that their school "Very Much" emphasizes "Analyzing ideas in depth in work for classes" (28%).

Contribution to Growth

How do students perceive that their high school contributed to their growth in important areas linked to learning, communicating effectively, and succeeding in the world after high school? Between one fourth and two fifths 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" (26%); "Writing effectively" (35%); "Speaking effectively" (30%); "Thinking critically" (37%); "Reading and understanding challenging materials" (32%); "Learning independently" (32%); and "Solving real-world problems" (23%).

RELATIONSHIPS, SUPPORT, AND CONNECTION

Following a session on leadership and engagement at a recent conference, a member of the audience — an assistant principal at a rural high school — related a story. In their high school, the administration decided to put teachers at all exits of the school at the end of the day to greet the students — to say "Good night" and "See you tomorrow" to all of the students — as they leave the school for the day. The purpose was to create a way of connecting with the students in a positive way as they leave the school. One day, a student came up to this assistant principal and asked, "Where's Mr. X today?" This assistant principal told him, "He's out sick today." As the student seemed agitated, the assistant principal talked to the student and found out that the student had been suicidal for months. Despite his deep depression, he kept coming to school because every day, at the end of the school day, Mr. X said to him as he left the school building, "I want to see you tomorrow." This student did not want to disappoint Mr. X.

Adults in schools don't often know the impact they are having on students in their lives. What is known is that students are eager for connection with school adults. This story is consistent with many others, in which students are hungry for support and connection, will go out of their way to sustain that connection, and can overcome great barriers — temporarily or permanently — with the caring support of

an adult. Similarly, many students, given the opportunity to express their thoughts on engagement through the open-response question at the end of the HSSSE survey, articulate their feelings about relationships with adults and peers in the school (positive or negative), support or lack of support from adults and peers, and connection or lack of connection with the school and the school community; many express a wish for stronger connections and relationships with others in school.

Research evidence supports the importance of relationships within schools. Strong relationships with both adults (Tucker et al., 2002) and peers (Perdue, Manzeske, & Estell, 2009) function as strong predictors of student engagement. These connections are also critical for success in school through academic achievement, persistence and graduation, and school connectedness (Blum, 2005; Klem & Connell, 2004; Morse, Anderson, Christenson, & Lehr, 2004).

Belief of Teachers

Two out of three students (67%) believe that "Most" or "All" of their teachers want them to do the best work they can do; however, 17% of respondents believe that "None" or only "1 or 2" teachers want them to do the best work they can do. In 2009, 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 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. In 2009, 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%) 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% — disagreed or strongly disagreed). Over the four-year period from 2006 to 2009, 84% of student respondents agreed or strongly agreed that "There is at least one adult in this school who cares about me" (16% disagreed or strongly disagreed). In the same period, 78% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that "There is at least one adult in this school who knows me well" (22% disagreed).

Of the adults in the school environment, students feel most supported by the teachers: 82% of students in each year agreed or strongly agreed that they feel supported by teachers. These figures are similar to the degree of support students feel from their peers: 81% of students agreed or strongly agreed that they feel supported by other students. It is important to note that nearly one out of five students disagreed or strongly disagreed that they feel supported by teachers and by other students.

Students were also asked if they felt supported by other adults in the school environment: administrators (65% agreed or strongly agreed); counselors (74% agreed or strongly agreed); and other adults, such as secretaries, custodians, and other support staff (63% agreed or strongly agreed).

Safety and Fairness

A number of students note on the open-response question on the survey how they feel about the safety of the school. Issues of safety — including physical violence, bullying, enforcement of rules, and respect for all students — are perceived by students as important for creating a productive learning environment. In 2009, 79% of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, "I feel safe in this school," while 21% disagreed or strongly disagreed. More than one out of four students (27%) have been picked on or bullied either "Sometimes" or "Often"; approximately one in five students (20%) have 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 (73%) believe they are treated fairly in school, a sizable portion of the respondents (27%) do not agree that they are treated fairly. Students are divided on whether or not their school's rules are fair; 55% of the respondents agree or strongly agree that their school's rules are fair, while 45% disagree or strongly disagree. There is also a division among respondents on whether or not their school's rules are applied and enforced consistently; 63% agree or strongly agree that their school's rules are applied and enforced consistently, while 37% 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 2009, 80% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, "Overall, I feel good about being in this school"; 20% of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed. A smaller percentage of students, 70%, agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, "I care about this school"; 30% disagreed or strongly disagreed. If faced with a choice of high schools right now, only 64% of respondents would choose to go to the same high school they are currently attending. The 2009 data are consistent with the four-year aggregate (2006 to 2009), in which 63% of more than 300,000 respondents would choose to go their current high school. Finally, only 57% of students in 2009 agree or strongly agree that "I am an important part of my high school community"; 43% of the respondents disagree or strongly disagree. Over the four-year period from 2006 to 2009, 55% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that "I am an important part of my high school community"; 45% disagreed or strongly disagreed.

INSTRUCTIONAL METHODS & PEDAGOGICAL POSSIBILITIES

My favorite classes are the ones with good teachers.
-- HSSSE 2009 Student Respondent

Do teachers need to have knowledge of content or expertise in pedagogy? Should undergraduate pre-service teachers get trained in schools of education or in other academic departments? Should teachers need to get master's degrees in teaching or in arts and sciences? Is it best to certify teachers through traditional programs or alternative pathways?

These dichotomous questions have framed the current policy and research debates regarding the best way to ensure that strong teachers are working in K-12 classrooms. It is a given that teachers need to have knowledge about the content area in which they are working; whether this knowledge comes from undergraduate classes, graduate programs, continuing education programs, or an alternate certification process is still up for debate. However, often overlooked in the policy arena is the importance to students of teachers who employ engaging instructional methods.

Many of the factors that contribute to students dis-engaging from school — either temporarily or permanently — are tied to students' perceptions of effective or ineffective instruction. Of students who have thought about dropping out, 42% cited "I didn't see the value in the work I was being asked to do" as a primary reason for considering leaving school and 39% cited not liking the teachers as a primary reason. Of students who have been bored in class in high school, 81% stated that a reason for their boredom was that the material wasn't interesting, 42% cited the lack of relevance of the material, and 35%

reported that the source of their boredom was that they have no interaction with their teacher. Engaging and interactive pedagogy can play a critical role in addressing the issues students raise on the survey and creating schools as arenas for not only effective teaching but greater learning.

On the HSSSE survey, 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%), while only 16% of respondents rated this instructional method as not at all exciting/engaging. "Group Projects" were rated similarly: 60% of respondents rated this instructional method as to some degree or very much exciting/ engaging, while only 17% rated it as not at all exciting/engaging. Students also are excited/engaged by instructional methods in which they are active participants; nearly half the respondents were engaged/excited to some degree or very much by these methods of instruction: "Presentations" (46%), "Role Plays" (43%), and "Art and Drama Activities" (49%). An additional choice added for 2009 — "Projects and Lessons Involving Technology" — was chosen by 55% of students as an instructional method that was exciting/engaging either to some degree or very much. 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 only 26% of respondents, while 44% of the respondents rated this instructional method as not at all exciting/engaging. Figure 5 presents HSSSE 2009 respondents' views on types of work in class.

Figure 5. HSSSE 2009 Respondents' Views on Degree of Excitement/Engagement of Various Pedagogical Methods
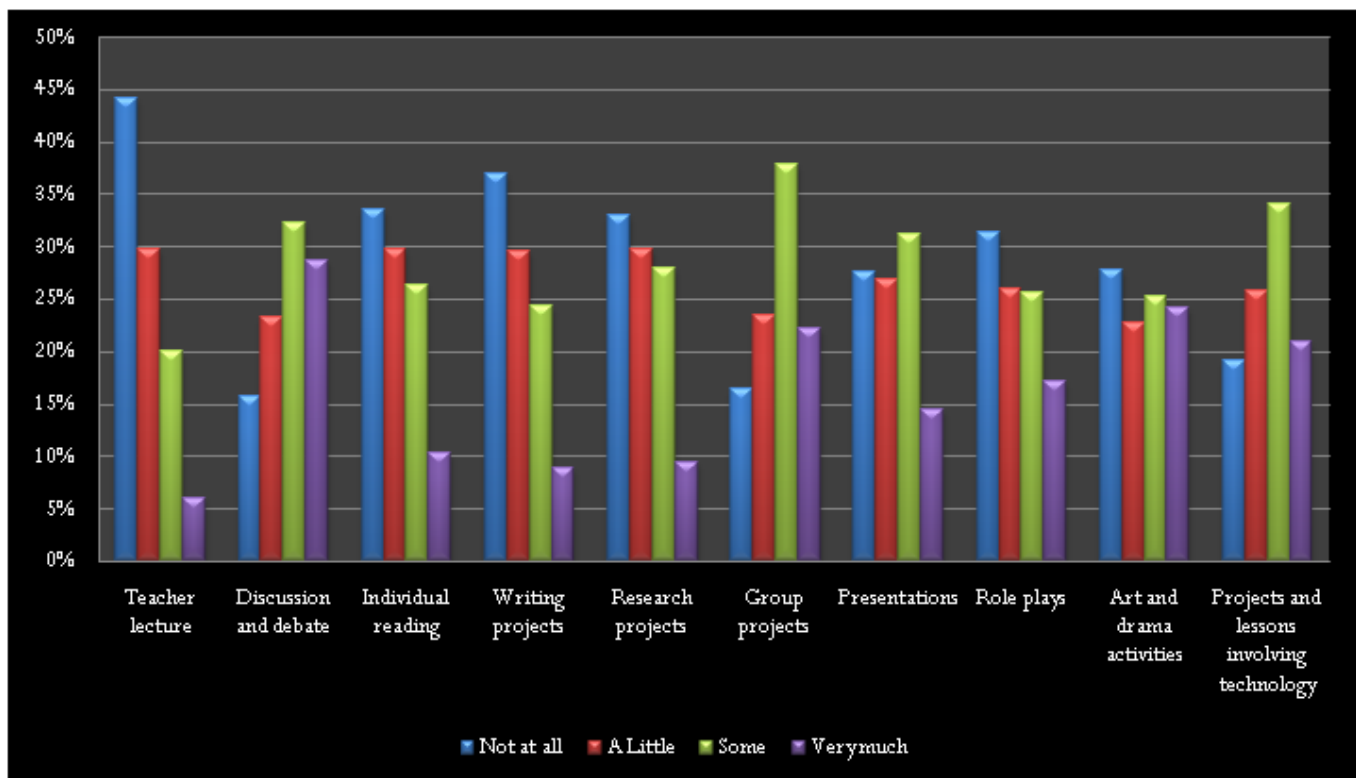
QUESTION 35: OPEN RESPONSES

"I am glad in an emphatic way that I took this survey; this survey allowed me to let go of some of my anger and allowed me to express who I am in a very unique and special way. I am glad that there are people that actually care (and I do hope you people do care, I honestly hope so)."

— HSSSE 2009 Student Respondent

The majority of the HSSSE survey asks students to rate their beliefs, perceptions, and experiences on a scale, and to bubble in their answers from among pre-determined options. Question 35, the last question on the survey, provides students a space to share thoughts in an open-response format. The question asks students: "Would you like to say more about any of your answers to these survey questions?" Since 2006, students have written nearly 50,000 responses in the space provided. In 2009, 8,150 students (approximately one in five student respondents) provided responses to Question 35.

As responses to this question reveal, students have a great deal to say: some students use this space to respond and react more extensively to questions on the survey, some students clarify their responses to particular questions, and some students raise issues beyond what is asked on the survey. The most frequently expressed idea is that taking this survey is "pointless" and a waste of time. Those that give reasons for believing that there is no point in doing this survey generally state one of the following: no one listens to students or cares what students have to say, and no one will take action in response to students' views. The irony is that the act of surveying students and garnering information on student experiences and beliefs, when the data are used in meaningful ways, is in itself an act of engagement; many students, however, given their perception that adults do not know or care what they think, see the survey as a meaningless act, contributing further to student frustration and dis-engagement.

Students, when given this opportunity to respond in freehand to this question, continue to generate rich and valuable data that provide important insight into students' thinking about their work, their school experience, and the possibilities that exist for schools to engage students in learning. Often, discussion and analysis of results from surveys focus on quantitative data gathered from the scaled, multiple-option questions. However, though these open-response data present greater challenges for reporting and analysis, they provide depth and perspective, and play an important complementary function for the multiple-option data. For schools, these data can be the most valuable data they receive from the survey, pointing the way to strategies and solutions to the engagement problem. For the larger educational community, these data provide a window into students' thinking that can benefit both research and practice.

Student responses to Question 35 were coded and categorized by content, theme, and by type and dimension of engagement. Samples of content and themes that emerge from the data are presented below.[3] In terms of type and dimension of engagement, most student responses continue to be coded 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.

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[3] 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.

QUESTION 35: THEMES AND SAMPLE RESPONSES

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, the motivation to learn they felt while working with particular teachers, and the ways in which individual teachers helped them be successful:

- *I feel Ms.*** is the only teacher who truly motivated me in all areas of school.*
- *Mr.*** is a [sic] awesome teacher!*
- *Yes, *** is the reason my high school career is a success. She is understanding to everything.*

Many students used the space to share positive thoughts about their high schools. Their comments reveal a range of reasons why they feel good about their schools, including support from adults and peers, respect, safety, and opportunities that the school provides them. In some cases, they qualify their positive thoughts:

- *My high school provides a great environment for learning. Not only do teachers care about their students, the students are able to create friendships with their peers and teachers. I love learning and that is the reason I came to school. My friends, musical activities, sports and learning are good.*
- *When I see other schools at sports games and school events, it makes me remember how glad I am to go to ***. There's nowhere I'd rather go.*
- *A majority of the teachers are very supportive and will listen to problems and opinions.*
- *Academically, I feel great about my school. I know how I will be successful in the future. Socially, I feel awkward and alienated.*
- *I find it a lot easier to enjoy school when you have peers and classmates who are positive and supportive.*
- *I come to school every day for the chance to learn something new. I leave school, and I know I go home to a family who cares about my education as much as I do. I want to succeed in life, and my teachers, family, and friends want the same thing.*
- *One of the biggest reasons why I'm still in school today is because of the music class. Playing the guitar gave me something to be proud of. And yet music classes are being taken away every day. Music is powerful.*
- *Overall it's a really great school. Most if not all drawbacks are simply an aspect of high school as a whole and being a teenager. Some of my peers who say it's a bad school would say that about any school they went to whether they deserved it or not.*
- **** is a great school that keeps me motivated about learning and classes. The teachers are incredibly understanding and engaging and I feel comfortable to discuss problems or just chat with them.*
- *I can honestly say that my school is my second home. I love coming to school, despite the ups and downs. *** has made me a better scholar as well as a better person.*

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

- *In reference to question 24, I feel that we do not work at a fast enough pace and I wish that more honors classes were available to freshman [sic] outside of accelerated math classes.*
- *For the most part, I have felt good about being here but there are periods of time when I felt some discouragement with social groups and some of the school work.*
- *For Question 25A, why would a teacher lecture excite?*
- *Although I tend to play video games and go on the computer a lot, I always put my schoolwork first.*
- *For #15, I responded 'not at all' because things like personal beliefs are something I find best developed on my own; you can't learn that in school.*

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, learning, and development:

- *I am a smart individual. I could have a 4.0 GPA in all my classes, but I have only had two teachers who actually inspired me to work. High school is a waste of time.*
- *I believe strongly in a holistic, self-driven education. This educational institution discourages that. Forced education or learning retards motivation and a natural drive or curiosity to learn.*
- *I feel as though even though individualism is encouraged, anyone like me who does go against the norm is basically shunned.*
- **** focuses too much on maintaining its reputation and not enough on connecting with students.*
- *School does not determine how smart a student is. A "smart" student is one who absorbs everything they are told. I hate school because it only limits students to one kind of smart.*

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 (individuals and groups) who have affected their experience negatively.

- *Our administrators/principals do not make most kids feel welcome. They only greet a select few in the hallway. Also, the teachers do not always teach. They throw in a video or make us read.*
- *Administrators are more worried about a student's uniform than his/her education.*
- *I wish we could get more help. I feel uncomfortable about talking to counselors here because we are always rushed out of the office.*
- *Mr.*** doesn't respect me.*
- *Many teachers don't understand that people learn in different ways.*
- *I feel like some of the teachers are just teaching to get it done. They teach us because it's their job and they just teach from the book. This requires a lesson plan without really caring about whether we learn or not or succeed.*
- *Many teachers at my school forget what they're supposed to do, TEACH. I learn best with realistic, humorous, engaging professors that teach us not only the material we need to know, but the lessons as well. A fun, open teacher whom [sic] has a personality and tailors their methods to be interesting and exciting is the best.*

Comments focused on classes were numerous, expressing a wide range of viewpoints. Some students like their classes; others would like them better with some changes to instruction and interaction. Many students dislike classes, finding them too challenging, too easy, too boring, too passive, too limited in scope and focus, and/or too irrelevant.

- *I like attending school. I work hard in my classes. But I would like them to be a little more interesting, interactive.*
- *I enjoy *** but sometimes the classroom is monotonous, boring, and repetitive. I feel like I'm living the same day over and over again.*
- *I like hands on things and group projects as I answered in these questions because they help me focus and really feel excited and I interact more. It makes me want to learn and the material that I'm learning interesting.*
- *I think a lot of classes are pointless, boring, and have no real life application. I feel like there should be more classes that attract different types of peoples' interest rather than just one general curriculum that is the same thing every day.*
- *This school does a lot prepping for state tests, but you forget all the material soon after.*
- *There are lectures in 90% of my classes. Very little group discussions.*
- *The biggest problem I had with classes was the lack of interaction. I know college will be full of lectures, but we're not in college yet and therefore should have more discussions.*

Students' comments emphasize the importance of creating a safe learning environment in schools, with clear and fair rules, discipline that addresses problems, and a culture in which students can be who they are. Quite a number of responses highlight fears and frustrations of students who do not feel safe within the schools they attend every day.

- *I do not feel safe here and the administrators need to do a better job of punishment because there are fights all of the time.*
- *I feel that much of the school policy is not about understanding issues and creating a safe community for the students, but rather it is to make the administration look good.*
- *I don't feel safe. I feel like the school is focusing on the wrong thing like changing IDs yearly.*
- *School rules are technically fair, but are usually not enforced in any fair way.*
- *I do not feel respected as a person in this school. I strive to be myself and that is hindered by bias and discrimination. I am a target at ***.*
- *I am gay, and the school doesn't do enough to fight homophobia. I feel very isolated. I'm not personally picked on, but I get depressed when teachers/students mock homosexuality. I haven't come out yet.*

A very frustrating and potentially dis-engaging 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 (based on social, academic, or athletic standing), or the presence of cliques - were raised as issues by students:

- *This school, the teachers, and even the principal don't treat people equally. The jock and cheerleader are first priority.*
- *I do not like how some courses (the most interesting courses) are only offered to GT [Gifted & Talented] students. I have a 3.8 GPA and I take several honors courses but I am not allowed to participate in several courses because I am not in GT.*
- *I think there is a lot of favoritism at ***. I have seen students and parents with demanding personalities get whatever they want and are able to ignore established rules.*
- *I feel the administration supports sports more than anything and theater is not fairly recognized.*
- *The school only cares about sports and money. The more money and athletic you are, the better you're treated.*

Students describe the difficulties of being a successful high school student, given enormous pressure to succeed, stress about school work, and varied responsibilities that pull students in many directions.

- *Too much homework! People have other responsibilities outside of school and can't finish homework. If the amount of homework was less, people would do better in school and be able to take care of their other responsibilities with less stress!*
- *Sometimes the work load is overwhelming which leads to some struggling in school!*
- *Balancing a fulfilling high school experience is completely exhausting. From Honors and AP classes to rehearsals and performances and practices and games to student government. . . I am drowned. If only there were more hours in a week or an extra day to rest or an eighth day to take a breath for once.*
- *School needs to be a place where everyone wants to be. The students are over worked and over tired. You shouldn't expect a kid to go to school, work, do homework, and get up to be at school by 7:20. It's too much.*
- *Schooling and everything that goes along with it is too much on kids these days. Too much pressure to be perfect and get into a formidable school. After a while it's so fatiguing that it consumes the lives of kids.*

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:

- *High school seems like it can be a lot more challenging. I wish that more classes did document analysis and independent research papers. I LOVE education but lose interest when I'm not challenged and there is not independent thought.*
- *School should be more fun and interactive so kids want to go to school.*
- *I only wish that this school was more challenging. I found myself very bored at times.*
- *This school needs to do a better job preparing kids for the real world.*
- *School would be better if this was a more inviting environment. I feel like I'm being held back from my academic potential.*
- *More actual thought and real understanding/engaging ideas would make school a whole lot better and would allow students to get more out of it. Also new approaches to teaching, more discussion used.*
- *I wish the school fostered more compassion in its students. I think when people don't feel loved or admired, it's hard to give that to others. I wish the high school let you be more independent and trusted you better.*

The most pervasive theme in the student responses to Question 35 is that there is no point to taking surveys like this. Students feel that their ideas don't matter, nobody in school listens to students, no action will be taken based on the responses to the survey, and there are too many surveys administered to students. A number of students stated that it is important to come to the school and talk to students, rather than gathering information just by surveys.

- *This survey is pointless and stupid. Nothing will be done based on anyone's answers.*
- *Why would we fill these out and find no change when you get others' hopes up by doing this, and it fails?*
- *Most of the questions are self-explanatory just by walking into the school.*
- *This is pointless. Nobody is going to look at this.*
- *If this school has taught me anything, it is that my opinion matters not here.*
- *This school does not allow students to have a voice in decision-making, even though they say they do.*
- *We need teachers to listen to our opinions.*

Question 35 provides an opening for students to express views about whatever is important to them in connection with engagement. Students' responses cover a wide range of topics, beliefs, feelings, and experiences, and are expressed in a variety of ways: students use the space to be both positive and critical, express boredom and enthusiasm, provide analysis and recommendations. Even students, and there are many of them, who believe that no one is going to listen to them or take their comments seriously, complete the survey and present their ideas. These students provide great insight into the experience of the high school student — eager to be heard, hoping to be recognized, yearning to matter. Students want to be taken seriously and to be seen as important members of the school community. Schools can make the best use of these data from Question 35 by including these important voices in the work of school improvement; the perspectives shared here can be harnessed to develop strategies for schools to improve efforts at both youth development and student achievement, creating stronger and more engaging schools. The first steps begin with taking students seriously, knowing and caring about what students think, and acting on students' ideas.

THE ENGAGEMENT GAP

Gaps in student performance and student outcomes are often indicators of inequities in schooling. Research has established the existence of an achievement gap in schools in the United States (Ferguson, 2003; Ferguson with Mehta, 2005), in which students of different races/ethnicities and socioeconomic status levels achieve consistently on standardized assessments at different performance levels. Even at the highest performance levels, an "excellence gap" exists (Plucker, Burroughs, & Song, 2010). While causes and solutions have been elusive, the costs — both societal and economic — have been exceedingly high (McKinsey & Company, 2009).

Since 2006, data from the High School Survey of Student Engagement have consistently indicated that another gap in schools exists: the *engagement gap.* Consistent with a pattern first identified in HSSSE 2006 data (Yazzie-Mintz, 2007), and followed up in the HSSSE 2007 and 2008 data (Yazzie-Mintz, 2009), there are noticeable gaps in reported levels of engagement in data from HSSSE 2009 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 2009 respondents reveal the same gaps seen in earlier HSSSE data:

- 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.

What is the connection between the engagement gap and the achievement gap? Are these two gaps independent, or is there a link between the two? The engagement gap, identified in contexts outside the United States as well (Brooking, Gardiner, & Calvert, 2009), presents similar characteristics as the achievement gap. Given the nature of engagement, an engagement gap is both more pernicious and potentially more addressable than the achievement gap. Initial research into the engagement gap is underway, and may shine light on the causes of and solutions to both gaps.

PROFILES OF ENGAGEMENT

What do we do with all that data? This is a question that gets asked in schools regularly; in particular, schools that participate in the High School Survey of Student Engagement are faced with a wealth of data on their students and the challenge of making effective use of that data. Hundreds of schools have participated in HSSSE since its inception; a number of these schools have made their engagement data a regular part of planning, professional development, and school conversations.

The five schools and districts profiled in this section provide insight into the possibilities of using engagement data to improve structures and practices, the challenges of doing data-driven work, and the opportunities that these data present. *Designed for Excellence* describes the efforts of the Chesterfield County Public Schools in Virginia, from the district level, to make the large learning environments of high schools smaller by creating strong relationships with individual students. They use engagement data to understand which students are academically at risk and create programs that are focused on the needs of students to connect to the learning environment; in this way, they strengthen academics by focusing on relationships. At Kealakehe High School in Kailua-Kona, Hawai'i, the principal has always viewed building relationships with students as an important priority for the school; *What About the Rest of the Kids? What are Those Kids Doing?* describes the school's efforts to use engagement data to improve the whole school experience for *all* students. Explorations Academy, a small independent school in Bellingham, Washington, has built its school around a philosophy that ties together engagement, academic achievement, and the connection between learning and the wider world; *Looking Inward and Shouting Outward* depicts the process of integrating student engagement data into the school's daily work and pursuit of its mission. Westmount County School District (a pseudonym) is in the early stages of integrating student engagement data into the regular conversations throughout the district's high schools. The district operates on the theory that "change on self-reported engagement data will be connected to change in achievement"; *Creating a Broader Conversation* profiles this district's work at expanding the conversation about achievement in the district beyond external, quantitative measures. Finally, *Engagement Will Drive Structures* focuses on Yorkville High School in Yorkville, Illinois, a school that, as a result of analysis of its student engagement data, is using engagement as the driving force for its work toward improvement, paying close attention not just to what the adults are doing but how the students are interacting with and experiencing the various aspects of the work of the school.

These five schools and districts, and many others like them across the country, are taking on the challenge of listening to students, focusing on engagement, and exploring the great opportunities that HSSSE data present for improving schools academically, socially, and structurally.

DESIGNED FOR EXCELLENCE
— Chesterfield County Public Schools —

We look at engagement as a way of understanding which students are academically at risk. We are big fans of kids not getting lost in the numbers.
— Dr. Glen Miller, Manager, School Improvement
Chesterfield County Public Schools

In many school districts, the central office focuses on accountability, aggregate student outcomes, data analysis, and institutional research; it is left up to the individual schools to focus on interacting with and engaging students in school and learning. Not in Chesterfield County, the fifth-largest school district in the commonwealth of Virginia. Since 2006, Chesterfield County — through a district-initiated project based in the Office of School Improvement — has participated in the High School Survey of Student Engagement on an every-other-year basis. Despite serious budget issues, the district continues to make student engagement data a key aspect of school improvement efforts.

Chesterfield County has 64 schools and a student population of about 59,000: 59% of the students are White, 28% are African American, 8% are Latino, and 3% are Asian; 27% of the students are eligible for the free or reduced-price lunch program. Twelve high schools in the district graduate approximately 4,000 students per year.

Centered just outside of the capital city of Richmond, Chesterfield County is "one of the banner districts" in the state, according to Dr. Glen Miller, manager of school improvement for the Chesterfield County Public Schools. Miller, with support from the Assistant Superintendent for Instructional Support, has championed the use of student engagement data in professional development, school improvement processes, and long-range planning. In fact, the school board has recently approved HSSSE as a key part of the district's six-year strategic plan, *Design for Excellence*, highlighting student engagement as an important part of the district's ongoing strategy for improvement. Chesterfield County's *Design for Excellence* has five major goals:

(1) Academic excellence for all students
(2) Safe, supportive, and nurturing learning environments
(3) Knowledgeable and competent workforce
(4) Community investment
(5) Effective and efficient systems management

(continued on next page)

The district sees a clear connection between engagement and achievement, utilizing engagement data "as a way of understanding which students are academically at risk" and to focus efforts on connecting students to adults and linking students into learning: "We challenge schools to do something to thwart the 2000-kid approach to adolescents," says Miller. These efforts, supported by the district, focus on making the large learning environment smaller and getting to know individual students.

One school in particular, James River High School, has made "exemplary use" of the HSSSE data, digging into the data for both "aha moments" and "chances for the school to celebrate," according to Bryan Carr, the Coordinator of School Counseling at the high school. Carr reports that HSSSE "is golden - it gives us incredible results and maybe some uncomfortable results."

With a principal who sees the use of data as an important piece of the professional atmosphere of James River, a counselor who believes in the importance of understanding how students feel about adults and their school experience, and encouragement and technical support from the district, James River High School has made great strides in engaging their students and, in particular, reducing the risk of dropping out for a number of students.

The faculty at James River dug into the student engagement data, and began to address issues that were hindering academic achievement. A mentoring group was created by the teachers to provide support for struggling students at all grade levels: school adults now have daily contact with these students, providing both academic help and connections to teachers. A concern was identified from the data that students of color were "being left out of the picture and weren't really engaged." In a school of almost 2000 students, of whom 70% are White, there was a need to more closely focus on developing relationships by actively reaching out to students of color, providing the opportunity and support for all students to both achieve academically and participate fully in the school community. Additionally, a program of both mentoring and remediation was created for students without enough credits to pass ninth grade. This program, built on the idea that relationships and academics go hand-in-hand, has achieved success by getting a number of students back on track to be promoted with their original classes and reconnected to the learning environment.

The results of these efforts were reflected in the HSSSE data. In 2008, student responses at James River High School indicated greater engagement in a number of areas than in 2006. For example, in 2006, 82.8% of James River students agreed or strongly agreed that "There is at least one adult in this school who cares about me"; in 2008, 92.1% of the students agreed or strongly agreed with that statement. In 2006, 62% of students responded that most or all of their teachers want them to do the best work they can do and 67% responded that most or all of their teachers believe that they can do excellent work; in 2008, those numbers were 75% and 74%, respectively. In 2006, when asked why they go to school, 28.4% of students stated that one reason was because they enjoy being in school and 32.8% stated that one reason was because of what they learn in classes; in 2008, those numbers were 33.3% and 39.4%, respectively.

James River continues to work on utilizing student engagement data to connect students with adults in school, and the school is seeing success in both engagement and achievement. Another high school in the district looked at their data and found, similarly, a number of students getting "lost." In response to the data, this school has restructured its homeroom environments; teachers will now be with a group of 25 students from grade nine through grade twelve, touching base at least weekly with students on issues of both academics and engagement.

Chesterfield County is listening to its students, who present many of the same issues on the survey that students in other schools and districts do:

- *Teachers need to make class more fun in order for kids to interact, have fun, and learn.*
- *I feel that the adults should be more supportive with the students individually.*
- *Make sure you hire teachers that can interact and relate to students.*
- *I feel like the administration cares more about the school's rankings than its students.*

Rather than continuing solely on an accountability/assessment path, the district is finding that students are looking for more than just high scores on tests. As Dr. Miller states, "HSSSE results really opened our eyes to the importance of both relationships and academics."

In Chesterfield County, excellence is defined not just as a set of scores that climb above a benchmark, but a culture in which each student is connected to the school (and the adults in the school), engaged in learning, and achieving academically. ❖

WHAT ABOUT THE REST OF THE KIDS? WHAT ARE THOSE KIDS DOING?
— Kealakehe High School —

HSSSE data help to create a focus on the mission and vision of the school.
—Wilfred Murakami, Principal, Kealakehe High School

Kealakehe High School is located in Kailua-Kona on the island of Hawai'i, serving approximately 1600 students in grades nine through twelve in the largest geographical school district in the state. Most students attending Kealakehe are Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islanders, and Filipino, and the Latino student population is growing; nearly 40% of the student population is eligible for the free or reduced-price lunch program.

Wilfred Murakami has been principal of Kealakehe since the school opened in 1997. His focus has been on building relationships between adults and students in Kealakehe, raising achievement, increasing participation in school activities, and using data to move people to action. Underlying this work is a belief in "relationships, respect, and responsibility" so that the students "will engage and stay engaged." He centers his work on creating a school in which the vision and mission lead to action, a community in which all students and staff are engaged, and a learning organization that experiences constant and consistent improvement.

The vision of the school is articulated as follows: *Harmony and unity through dynamic education and community for everyone, every time.* The vision sets out three important principles that guide the work of the principal and staff at Kealakehe: (1) Community - in both senses (creating collaboration and involving all of the stakeholders in the school) - is an important aspect of the educational goals of the school; (2) Everyone - all students and members of the school community - are central to the work of the school; and (3) The work needs to be focused on every student every time, maximizing the potential of all students. These principles are embodied in the mission of the school as well: *Encouraging partnerships among students, parents, faculty, staff and community by offering a curriculum which will address multi-intelligences and awareness; providing a safe environment which expects mutual respect; providing opportunities where all students can develop their gifts and talents to be productive members of the community without need for remediation.*

Murakami knows that putting missions, visions, and principles into action is one of the most challenging aspects of school leadership. Getting staff to care about data and "personalize" the data, understanding that these data are connected to their students and their school, presents another set of challenges. To that end, Murakami, after hearing about the High School Survey of Student Engagement in 2006, looked into the feasibility of using HSSSE at Kealakehe. Linda Jeffrey, the Parent-Community Center Coordinator at Kealakehe and Murakami's right-hand person in examining data and presenting results, found that HSSSE provided questions and data that other surveys, including the state school quality survey, did not: data specific to Kealakehe, a potentially high survey return rate, and, most important, data on what Kealakehe students are thinking.

Teachers have to care about students.
— Kealakehe High School HSSSE 2009 Student Respondent

Over several decades working in education in Hawai'i, Murakami has seen trends come and go: The focus on developing relationships in schools started about 20 years ago, but "took a back seat" due to No Child Left Behind and its focus on accountability and assessment. Now, however, "relationships are coming back around again." Students focus heavily on relationships, looking for teachers to "care" about them, and HSSSE data have provided a good rationale for focusing staff conversations on building relationships and the connections between engaging students and raising achievement.

One of the primary ways Kealakehe builds relationships is through a citizenship/advisory program, in which faculty advisors serve as mentors to students. Though often schools of Kealakehe's size (medium size for a US high school, but "large for the island of Hawai'i") break up into "houses" in order to work with students in smaller learning communities, Murakami believes that the school must stay together structurally as a community: "We should be able to engage all students in this one house." Advisors work toward this goal by working with students at the classroom level, "shepherding kids through classes" and guiding students and families to services that will facilitate greater engagement with school. According to Murakami, "This is the primary means of building relationships."

I think that the teachers have a lot to do with how you feel about school.
Some teachers do well in engaging you and others never engage anyone.
— Kealakehe High School HSSSE 2009 Student Respondent

Spring 2009 was the third consecutive year that Kealakehe High School participated in HSSSE. What has the school gained from the data? After three years, "kids feel at a higher level that adults care about them, but not enough. We're trying to say that we need to look at the other 55% and work to engage them." Murakami is sharing with the state department of education the data on students who have skipped school — "If kids are not here, we can't impact them; they don't feel that class is engaging" — with the hope that more stringent guidelines on truancy will be developed. While Murakami acknowledges that "part of that is curriculum," he hopes this is an area where the school and the state can work together to make sure students are in school and in class.

An important use of the survey data for Murakami is to create a realistic picture of the school and the student experience, and use that picture as a lever for school improvement. For example, "People love the school from the outside - that's a perception. Based on the survey, about 50% of the students love the school." The same mindset prevails in the areas of participation in athletics, service organizations, and school activities, in which school staff members believe more students are active members of the school community than in actuality: "What appears to be high participation is really not when you look closely at the data; the percent of kids who participate is high but not over 50%." In these discussions, in which adult perception bumps up against student reality, Murakami regularly asks his staff: "What about the rest of the kids? What are those kids doing?" Engagement efforts at Kealakehe focus on all of the students.

Now Murakami is moving more intently into "implementation." In his view, about 85% of the teachers are effective and engaging, but their work is compromised by the 15% that are not. The next steps involve more coaching and modeling of engaging practices with staff, supporting and encouraging collaboration among teachers, pushing the effectiveness of teachers to at least 90% or 95%, and regularly asking and answering hard questions about students: "Why do kids feel that nobody in the school knows them? If kids are not engaged, why?"

The work at Kealakehe is ongoing, and there is much work to be done to engage all students and create a fully effective and engaging teacher corps. In pursuing these goals, the school now has a baseline of three years of HSSSE data from which to work. Most importantly, the data have provided an opening to discuss what is really happening with the students in the school community, and for Murakami to motivate his staff with key questions emerging from the survey data: "What are we willing to do? We reference the survey data to push us. Because it's primary data, it's hard to argue with the data." ❖

LOOKING INWARD AND SHOUTING OUTWARD
— Explorations Academy —

I think the HSSSE is a great tool and one that offers an important glimpse into the outcomes that a 21st Century school should be working toward.
—Daniel Kirkpatrick, Director, Explorations Academy

At first glance, it may not seem that Explorations Academy is the kind of school that would participate in the High School Survey of Student Engagement. A small "experientially-based secondary school" located in Bellingham, Washington, Explorations Academy has an enrollment of 20 students and a staff of eight (four full-time, four part-time). Focused on instruction within "a small learning community" that is "geared to individual abilities and needs," the school's mission statement and philosophy of education describe a structure and process designed to maximize participation, involvement, student-teacher interaction, and understanding of the student experience. A school of this size and purpose - the smallest school in the pool of HSSSE participating schools - would seem to have the student engagement aspect of the work covered.

In fact, though, that is exactly the reason why Daniel Kirkpatrick, founder and director of Explorations Academy, has administered HSSSE to students at the small independent school for three consecutive years. With student engagement as a central focus of the work of the school, "one level of utility of the data is to help us answer important questions - 'What are students saying about us?' and 'Is that consistent with what we're trying to do?'" Student engagement is not a task to be completed at Explorations, but an ongoing process of listening to students (through a variety of means, including student forums and councils), paying attention to the experiences of students, reflecting on students' ideas, and making improvements to the curricular and pedagogical program.

When the HSSSE data come back to the school, there are usually two kinds of initial analyses that emerge from the data: One set of responses are the "congratulations," the things that students affirm the school is doing well. Another set of responses are the "eye-openers" for staff, the areas that students say need more work. One such "eye-opener," according to Kirkpatrick, centers on "participatory governance…giving students a voice in school decisions. Kids sometimes report not having a voice, though that's one of the things we try to address." And the school works on these issues, through "robust" staff discussions in which "HSSSE figures pretty prominently"; assumptions are uncovered and tested, and student engagement data are used to plan programs and processes, driven by an important central question: "Will something new gain us an additional unit of educational growth?"

There are three important forums in which Explorations Academy makes use of HSSSE data. The first is in-house, as part of the school development and improvement process, in which the staff wrestles with the data to identify areas in which school practices can be more tightly connected to the mission and philosophy of the school: "HSSSE is the first tool we've found that gives us quantitative data that matches our outcomes…HSSSE asks the kinds of questions we should be asking in all of our schools." The second forum is for promotion of the school, with an audience comprised of potential students. The data provide ways in which Kirkpatrick can identify to prospective students and families both strengths of the school and areas that the school continues to work on, through the voices of current students; use of the data in this way creates a vivid picture of the student experience for outsiders. The third forum is centered on performance and credibility; the audience here is comprised of the school's accrediting bodies and funders. Much of the budget of Explorations Academy is raised through private donors and foundations; it is important that HSSSE data provide a way to compare the school to a nationwide pool of respondents. HSSSE data are also

important in the school's accreditation process with its two accrediting bodies, the Northwest Association of Accredited Schools (NAAS) and the Pacific Northwest Association of Independent Schools (PNAIS): "The PNAIS identifies one of its core values as having member schools 'create a culture where students are free to express their ideas on all subjects'; the HSSSE gives us a way to determine if such a value is being successfully addressed."

Though the small size of the staff allows opportunities for "extended discussion about educational theory and practice," one limitation of the structure is that the data the school receives are too much for the resources in the school. This challenge, shared by many schools across the pool of HSSSE participants, is particularly acute at Explorations Academy; Kirkpatrick is seeking out potential partnerships, including with the local college, to help facilitate digging deeper into the data.

The work at Explorations Academy brings together "academic excellence, experiential education, and interdisciplinary study." Students are expected to pursue higher education, but not just by being successful in the classroom and on standardized tests; academics are situated within a "meaningful, real world context" to make the learning relevant and to prepare students to use their knowledge beyond high school. Kirkpatrick and his staff at Explorations Academy use HSSSE data as a way of examining their own practices through the eyes of students, reflecting on the strength of the connection between philosophy and action, measuring the degree to which they are achieving their learning and pedagogical outcomes, and promoting the school to prospective students and supporters - "looking inward and shouting outward," as Kirkpatrick describes it.

Academic achievement at Explorations Academy is not just about gaining course credits, passing standardized tests, and going on to higher education, though each of those academic milestones is expected of the students. Kirkpatrick believes that achievement is a product of creating meaningful and relevant work for students, identifying and building on individual student strengths, and connecting learning to the context of the outside world; in this way, students have both knowledge and a way of learning as they move on to the next steps in the educational trajectory. Student engagement data play a role in helping Explorations Academy fulfill its mission: "We discovered HSSSE as a tool that offers quantifiable data about some of the things that we focus on - relevance of learning, exposure to new ideas, diversity in curriculum…HSSSE has filled a niche and a very important niche." ❖

CREATING A BROADER CONVERSATION
— Westmount County School District[4] —

Our theory is that change on self-reported engagement data will be connected to change in achievement.
—Jason Reese, Assessment Data Coordinator, Westmount County School District

The Westmount County School District serves approximately 11,500 students in 34 schools. There are five high schools in Westmount County, though some of the ninth graders attend junior high schools in the district. The district has been participating in the High School Survey of Student Engagement since 2007, initiated by the former (now retired) superintendent and continued by the current administration. Westmount County is focused on preparing students to "be successful in the 21st Century," and to that end, is currently in the midst of a comprehensive process of "re-envisioning secondary education" in the district, according to Jason Reese, Assessment Data Coordinator for the district.

A significant part of this transformational process, says Reese, will be to "lead people beyond the AYP conversation to a broader conversation" that delves more deeply into different kinds of data. Originally, HSSSE was identified by the district in order to replace a brief climate survey that was regularly administered to schools with a survey that provided both more depth and external comparison data. Three years later, the district and schools have a wealth of student engagement data, but, competing for attention with assessment data, the HSSSE data has "not yet found a huge audience at the building level." Schools are struggling with the heavy focus on assessment data, while the district is working to generate a more complex conversation that involves creating a broad picture of schools - one that encompasses both academic measures and engagement constructs.

Working with data effectively and strategically has been the challenge for schools and the district. While the schools are "more accepting about looking at data," the schools are not yet catching on to the possibilities and potential of a "deep look at data"; in the principals' meetings, the conversation about HSSSE data, according to Reese, goes something like this: "'Have you looked at your data?' 'Yes!' Then they move on." The areas that do get the attention of certain principals are: the dimensions of engagement (looked at broadly), the numbers of students who have thought about dropping out, participation in activities, and homework loads. These are areas that can provide a starting point for the broader conversation about engagement in academics, student participation within the school community, and students' feelings of connection or lack of connection with their schools.

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[4] At the request of the school district, the name of the district and all names of people and schools are replaced by pseudonyms.

Westmount is moving toward a new public accountability system driven by a model of "continuous improvement cycles." At the same time, the district is working to generate more focus on a wide variety of data - beyond test scores and AYP. Student engagement data is expected to play a significant role in this transformation, as Reese expresses a concern that there are students who feel they are not important parts of their school communities: "We have a healthy respect for student opinion. But we miss a silent minority that we are most concerned about. That group feels like they are not heard. We respect student opinion, but aren't effective at listening to or hearing these students."

The theory driving the work in Westmount is that "change on self-reported engagement data will be connected to change in achievement." Jason Reese and his colleagues in Westmount County Public Schools are working with HSSSE data to both put this theory into action and create a district-wide conversation that goes beyond test scores and adequate yearly progress, generating continuous improvement along multiple important dimensions. ❖

ENGAGEMENT WILL DRIVE STRUCTURES
— Yorkville High School —

We now know that engagement is the piece we will need to address consistently.
—Tim Shimp, Principal, Yorkville High School

By many measures, Yorkville High School has been a successful school; with high graduation rates and high college-going rates, Yorkville is, on paper, a high-achieving school. However, looking more closely at the school's data over the last several years, Tim Shimp, principal of Yorkville High School, saw reasons to be concerned: "Course failure rates were high, highest among freshmen, and ACT scores were flatlining." Because of the school's overall success, these issues may not have raised caution flags outside of the school, but for Shimp, these represented indicators of potentially larger problems.

Having opened a separate ninth grade campus the year before, Shimp turned to the High School Survey of Student Engagement in 2009 to investigate a different angle on the academic problems: "We had an opportunity to see what might be causing flatlining of ACT scores and the high course failure rate. We thought, 'Can this survey help find some causes?'" Shimp previously worked with HSSSE data as the assistant principal of another participating high school, though the data were used there to look more closely at "student connectedness." At Yorkville, Shimp was focused on finding answers to the academic issues: "We weren't completely sure what the connection would be to academic issues. We now know that engagement is the piece we will need to address consistently."

In pursuing answers to these important academic questions, Shimp created a unique partnership with Dr. Lynn Burks, a college professor and school board member in the Yorkville School District. Burks' focus on data for making district-level decisions - "We are sitting at the table making huge multi-million dollar decisions without any data" - worked well with Shimp's search for answers to academic questions at the high school. Together, their analysis of HSSSE data revealed surprises. As Burks describes, "Both the ninth grade and eleventh grade were significantly less engaged than the national sample. We didn't think this would be the case. We thought they would at least be equally as engaged as the national sample."

Low student engagement has become a primary issue that Shimp and Burks are trying to address at the high school, and this effort is spreading across multiple areas, including structures, practices, and professional development: "There was an assumption that 'if we teach it, you will learn it.' We have to move from the teaching aspect to the learning aspect," says Shimp. This shift means that what students think, how they learn, and how they are experiencing school will all play important roles in Yorkville High School's improvement process.

Though the school has not done much staff development on student engagement, Shimp says that the survey data will "steer some changes. We are looking for more intentional ways of impacting kids." One of those areas will be the school schedule, in which the school is figuring out whether to continue with block scheduling, go back to a traditional schedule, or move to a hybrid format. One student stated on the HSSSE 2009 survey, "Block scheduling is not good and teachers should not lecture the whole time." Shimp noted that block scheduling "has assisted space issues, as we are a high-growth district, but perhaps it created dis-engagement. There's just too much time…We haven't talked about how to keep kids engaged for 90 minutes."

One thing is for sure - students' voices will be heard in Yorkville. Traditionally, schools create structures to address a variety of needs: space, schedules, course requirements, and specific issues that arise in the school context. Shimp is taking a different course of action: "Engagement will drive structures" at Yorkville, tying the creation of structures and programs together with how students experience those structures and programs.

Shimp and Burks are continuing to use HSSSE with both the ninth grade academy and the traditional high school, creating a longitudinal study in which they are investigating engagement and achievement over time. In the next school year, Shimp is moving into the position of chief academic officer of the district, providing a forum in which he can have an even broader impact on student engagement and academic achievement. As he continues this work at the district level, he will take with him lessons learned from implementing HSSSE at the high school: "If we had done business as usual, everything would have been fine. But what we're realizing is that something in the school did go down - engagement. We will have some pretty powerful insights from our HSSSE data. Not just a bunch of strategies, but a philosophy." ❖

CONCLUSION:
The Power of Engagement

Students need a voice, not a survey.
-- HSSSE 2009 Student Respondent

The student quoted above distinguishes between taking a survey and having a "voice." Students take plenty of surveys in school, in which they are asked for their opinions and viewpoints. They take so many surveys about so many different topics (including, for example, health, drugs, alcohol, out-of-school behaviors) that, each year, including this one, several students write in response to HSSSE's Question 35, "Where were the questions on drugs?" "Why didn't you ask us how much alcohol we drink?"

Taking surveys is about being asked questions. The respondent above is demanding a "voice" — not just to be asked questions but to be heard, to be listened to, to have ideas turned into action. Taking surveys is about anonymously filling in bubbles or writing in answers; having a "voice" is to be recognized as an individual with thoughts, perspectives, and unique ways of learning. Surveys help schools, researchers, and policymakers get a picture of a particular issue among a particular population. Giving students a "voice" and recognizing their perspectives as important creates a meaningful place for students within schools.

On the 2009 High School Survey of Student Engagement, only 57% of students agreed or strongly agreed that "I am an important part of my high school community." Over the four-year period from 2006 to 2009, out of more than 300,000 students, only 55% agreed or strongly agreed with that statement. More than two out of five students in high schools across the country do not feel that they are an important part of the community in which they spend the bulk of their time each day.

Does it matter at all that so many high school students do not feel as though they are an important part of their school communities? The traditional transmission model of schooling holds that the adults are responsible for "transmitting" knowledge; the students are only responsible for receiving the knowledge. Whether or not the students feel important — or that they feel challenged, interacted with or cared for — does not matter in this model. At the other end of the teacher/learner relationship spectrum, Benne (1970) describes a model for the teacher/learner relationship based on "anthropogogical" authority, in which the teacher with expertise and the learner with curiosity build a relationship that enlarges the body of knowledge of each individual as well as the field; in this model, who the teacher is and who the learner is have an important impact on the substance and process of the teaching and learning interaction.

In attempting to navigate the teacher/learner relationship within high schools, the most important question to ask and answer is: What is the purpose of schooling in high schools in the United States? If the purpose is to get students a high school diploma, then passing classes, acquiring credits, and successfully completing standardized assessments will be more important than the quality of the student experience. If the purpose is to prepare students to get a job in the workforce, then expanding opportunities within school, creating experiences relevant for the world of work, and enlarging the scope of schooling beyond academics will be critical. If the purpose is to create a way of learning and acquiring knowledge, to dig into an area of interest and inquiry, and to take an intellectual or practical passion to the next level of schooling and/or work, then engaging students in the life and work of schools will be of paramount importance.

The five schools and districts profiled in this report have begun to blaze a trail to achievement that begins with a focus on engaging every student. Chesterfield County Public Schools in Virginia is using student engagement data to understand and address students who are at risk academically, to ensure that students — in particular, students of color — are not being left out of the school community, and to make the large learning environment smaller; their focus on student engagement and building relationships has brought about academic success, and their focus is now on "both relationships and academics." For Kealakehe High School, building relationships between adults and students is a high priority; they believe that keeping students connected with school and the people in school will lead to greater persistence and higher achievement. The philosophy of Explorations Academy is built around engaging students through relevant work and connections to the wider world; engagement is the starting point for all academic work at the school. Westmount County Public Schools, in looking to move beyond a limited focus on standardized assessments, is building a plan of district and school improvement built on the idea that changes in engagement will be connected to changes in achievement. Yorkville High School in Illinois is coming to understand that improving teaching and academic achievement means focusing on learners and learning; engagement is now driving structural and strategic decisions in the school.

These five schools and districts, like many others across the country, are finding out what students think, seeking to understand students' perspectives, and putting those data to good use on a daily basis. The choices they are making are based not just on what adults in the school community want, but on what students need to experience school fully — academically, socially, and emotionally. They are not just giving a survey, or implementing a new structure — they are giving students a "voice" and taking action, creating an important place for students within the school community, and finding success in multiple realms. These schools and districts are charting a path from engagement to achievement.

AUTHOR

Ethan Yazzie-Mintz (emintz@indiana.edu) is Director of the High School Survey of Student Engagement (HSSSE) and Assistant Research Scientist at the Center for Evaluation & Education Policy (CEEP), Indiana University.

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HSSSE@indiana.edu

**Center for Evaluation & Education Policy
Indiana University
1900 East Tenth Street
Bloomington, IN 47406-7512
812-856-1429
1-800-511-6575
Fax: 812-856-1886**

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