

My Voice®
Student Report
2008



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The Role of Student Aspirations in Today's Schools

When students have high aspirations, *they have the ability to dream about the future, while being inspired in the present to reach those dreams.* Whether their goal is to learn algebra or a trade, get good grades or go to college, today's students want to be successful. Too often, however, students can't reach their future goals and dreams because the conditions around them do not support their desire to do so. As a result, their aspirations flounder and achievement wanes.

In order for students to have and sustain high aspirations, the conditions that enable them to reach their goals must be in place. These conditions are known as the **8 Conditions that Make a Difference**[®] and are a critical, often overlooked, part of education and school improvement initiatives. The 8 Conditions have been identified and defined by Dr. Russell J. Quaglia, an internationally known leader in the study of student aspirations. The 8 Conditions are: *Belonging, Heroes, Sense of Accomplishment, Fun & Excitement, Curiosity & Creativity, Spirit of Adventure, Leadership & Responsibility, and Confidence to Take Action.* In order to measure these conditions in today's schools, the *My Voice*[®] Student Aspirations Survey was developed.

The *My Voice*[®] Student Aspirations Survey

The *My Voice*[®] Student Aspirations Survey assesses student aspirations by asking students to respond to 57 statements about the 8 Conditions, as well as demographic questions. Students respond to the 8 Conditions statements on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "Strongly Agree" to "Strongly Disagree." The survey takes approximately 15 minutes to complete. By asking students how *they* perceive their school environment, *My Voice*[®] provides educators with a powerful tool for understanding both what motivates and inspires students to achieve, and how well students believe their school is meeting those objectives. *My Voice*[®] is a powerful tool for initiating innovative, meaningful school reform.

***My Voice*[®] Demographics for the National 6-12 Report 2008**

Between fall 2006 and spring 2008, 414,243 students in grades 6-12 completed the *My Voice*[®] survey. Five hundred sixty-nine (569) schools from 32 states representing various sizes and socioeconomic backgrounds were included. Fifty percent (50%) of the students surveyed were female and 50% were male. Grades 6-12 were represented as follows:

Grade 6:	7%
Grade 7:	7%
Grade 8:	7%
Grade 9:	21%
Grade 10:	21%
Grade 11:	20%
Grade 12:	17%

The participants identified themselves as being from a range of ethnic backgrounds:

White:	62%
Black/African American:	11%
Hispanic/Latino:	12%
American Indian or Native Alaskan:	2%
Asian:	3%
Native Hawaiian:	1%
Other Pacific Islander:	2%
Other:	7%

My Voice® National 6-12 Report

The *My Voice*® National 6-12 Report is organized around the 8 Conditions. In each section, the condition is defined and data on the survey statements about that condition are described. The data are reported in percentages based on the combined number of students who responded “Strongly Agree” or “Agree” to each statement. The results are then discussed in relation to key aspects of the condition. Separate sections are dedicated to gender differences and changes between middle school (6-8) and high school (9-12).

CONDITION 1. BELONGING

The Condition of Belonging means that a student is a valued member of a community, while still maintaining his or her uniqueness. It is a relationship between two or more persons characterized by a sense of connection and support. Belonging is a necessary condition for students’ well-being, social engagement, and competence. The condition of Belonging increases intrinsic motivation, for it fosters self-confidence and investment in the community.

Students’ Perceptions of *Belonging*

There are two key aspects to the condition of Belonging in schools. First, students must perceive school as a community in which they feel connected, safe, and supported. Sixty-two percent (62%) of the students surveyed agreed with the statement “School is a welcoming and friendly place.” Twenty-nine percent (29%) of the students surveyed said they do not feel comfortable going to the cafeteria for lunch. Just under half (49%) of all 6-12 students reported they are proud of their school, and 33% of students surveyed agreed bullying is a problem in their school.

The second key aspect of the condition of Belonging is that students feel valued for who they are as individuals. Seventy-seven percent (77%) of the students surveyed agreed with the statement “I feel accepted for who I am at school,” while 12% said they have difficulty fitting in at school. Forty-four percent (44%) believe teachers care about their problems and feelings.

Belonging Statements	% in agreement
School is a welcoming and friendly place.	62%
I feel accepted for who I am at school.	77%
I have difficulty fitting in at school.	12%
Teachers care about my problems and feelings.	44%
I am proud of my school.	49%
I feel comfortable going to the cafeteria for lunch.	71%
I think bullying is a problem in my school.	33%

Discussion

Clearly, large numbers of students do not experience school as a place where they feel a sense of connection, support and safety. These findings may surprise teachers and school leaders who work hard to create a sense of community within the school building. If we are to increase the number of students who feel connected to their school, we must ask students how they would foster a welcoming and supportive school environment. What does a welcoming school look like to students? How can the cafeteria be re-imagined so it is a place where all students feel comfortable? How do students in different grades define bullying? If we listen to the voices of students and how they define the condition of Belonging, we may also see more positive results in the area of school pride, which less than half of the students surveyed say they feel.

Students' self-worth and connection to their teachers is relatively positive. Approximately 8 out of 10 students agree with the statement "I feel accepted for who I am at school." However, the finding that less than half of the students surveyed believe their teachers care about their problems and feelings is troubling. While most teachers would claim they care deeply about their students, it is critical teachers express care in ways that are meaningful to their students.

CONDITION 2. HEROES

Heroes are the everyday people—teachers, friends, family—in students' lives who inspire them to excel and to make positive changes in attitudes and lifestyles. Heroes are people students can connect with, those who have a positive influence on them, and who listen to and value their ideas. Heroes build trust in others and belief in oneself. Educators are, by definition, Heroes to their students who look up to teachers and school leaders as people to learn from and communicate with about many things. Building relationships with students through support, guidance, and encouragement enables them to become more confident in their academic, personal, and social growth.

Students' Perceptions of Heroes

The condition of Heroes emphasizes the critical ways teachers believe in, support and inspire students. In response to My Voice® statements about this condition, 65% of students surveyed said they have a teacher who is a positive role model. Less than half of

the students agreed with the following statements: “Teachers care about me as an individual” (48%); “Teachers care if I am absent from school” (45%); and “If I have a problem, I have a teacher with whom I can talk” (49%).

The condition of Heroes is also about respect, not just between teachers and students, but students and one another. Just 39% of students surveyed said students respect teachers and even fewer reported students respect each other (30%). Teachers fared somewhat better, with 54% of students agreeing with the statement “Teachers respect students.”

Heroes Statements	% in agreement
Students respect teachers.	39%
I have a teacher who is a positive role model for me.	65%
Teachers care about me as an individual.	48%
Teachers care if I am absent from school.	45%
If I have a problem, I have a teacher with whom I can talk.	49%
Teachers respect students.	54%
Students respect each other.	30%

Discussion

Students’ responses to statements about the condition of Heroes tell us two critical things. First, although teachers have the potential to inspire, support and encourage students, they are not doing so in ways students recognize. While two-thirds of students say they have a teacher who is a role model, students have the chance to build relationships with so many teachers during a given school year that the percentage should be higher. In addition, the condition of Heroes is about more than being a role model. It is about being an adult who students can trust and turn to in times of difficulty. The finding that less than half of all students surveyed perceive these characteristics in their teachers reveals an area of concern for educators to address. Most troubling is that over half the students in this country do not think teachers care if they are in school. Before we can expect students to meet their academic potential, we should, at the very least, let them know we care if they are in school.

The second point these results emphasize is that students perceive a severe lack of respect in their schools. While just over half of all students said they believe teachers respect them—a worrisome result in and of itself—the fact that even fewer think students respect teachers is very troubling. If teachers are in a position to inspire and support students through their learning, the challenge of doing so increases significantly if there is an essential lack of respect on either side. Perhaps most alarming, however, is that just 1 in 3 students believes students respect one another. Students, too, are in a position to be heroes and role models to their peers. Under these circumstances, the chances of such student-to-student support will be difficult to foster.

CONDITION 3. SENSE OF ACCOMPLISHMENT

The Condition of Sense of Accomplishment recognizes effort, perseverance, and citizenship—along with academic achievement—as signs of student success. Educators have traditionally used a narrow view of accomplishment as it refers to innate ability, grades, or who is “best in the class.” The Condition of Sense of Accomplishment, however, views success in terms of personal growth and effort, not just class rank and test scores. Schools can celebrate their students’ accomplishments in visible ways. Taking time to recognize and support students’ efforts will result in students who are motivated to persevere through difficult tasks and to create a healthy learning environment through hard work and dedication.

Students’ Perceptions of Sense of Accomplishment

When asked questions about traditional forms of academic accomplishment, 84% of students surveyed agreed with the statement: “Getting good grades is important to me.” Sixty-nine percent (69%) said tests are an important part of their education.

When asked questions about their effort and perseverance, 18% of students surveyed agreed with the statement “I give up when schoolwork is difficult.” Conversely, 69% said they put forth their best effort at school. Fifty-seven percent (57%) of students surveyed said teachers recognize them when they try their best.

When asked about whether accomplishments are recognized or citizenship is celebrated in their school, 21% of students in grades 6-12 reported they have never been recognized for something positive at school. Seventy percent (70%) stated teachers recognize students who are kind and helpful.

Sense of Accomplishment Statements	% in agreement
Tests are an important part of my education.	69%
Teachers recognize students who are kind and helpful.	70%
I have never been recognized for something positive at school.	21%
I give up when schoolwork is difficult.	18%
Teachers recognize me when I try my best.	57%
I put forth my best effort at school.	69%
Getting good grades is important to me.	84%

Discussion

Students appear to understand what schools expect of them in terms of academic achievement. Though these percentages could be higher, the majority of students say they want to get good grades and they understand the significance of testing.

While most of the students surveyed want to do well in school, they are not necessarily putting forth the effort needed to achieve: close to one-fifth of them give up when they encounter difficult schoolwork. Seven out of ten students say they try their best in school. Just over half the students think teachers recognize them when they try their best. The gap between wanting to achieve and persevering to meet that goal needs to be examined, as does the role teachers play in recognizing effort and perseverance.

The data also reveals that schools need to do a better job of recognizing student accomplishments of all sorts, including celebrating signs of good citizenship. Schools are very good at recognizing certain types of success—high grades, athletic ability, etc. Yet all students need to be recognized for their unique talents and interests, and schools need to act accordingly to create this type of an environment.

CONDITION 4. FUN & EXCITEMENT

The condition of Fun & Excitement is characterized by students being inspired to learn. They are actively engaged and emotionally involved in their school work. Students who exhibit Fun & Excitement are self-confident, curious, and prepared; they are willing to meet the challenges of the day. To foster this condition in schools, students need to be offered new opportunities, as well as meaningful challenges, that are connected with their individual interests.

Students' Perceptions of Fun & Excitement

Fun & Excitement is first and foremost about students being engaged in their learning. To be actively engaged in learning students must find it enjoyable and worthwhile. Forty-nine percent (49%) of students surveyed said they enjoy being at school and 54% said they enjoy participating in their classes. While a higher percentage (64%) of students agreed with the statement “Learning can be fun,” 47% of students agreed with the statement “School is boring.”

The condition of Fun & Excitement is in part determined by a teacher’s willingness to foster this condition. However, students do not perceive teachers as especially engaged in the learning process. Fifty-six percent (56%) of students agreed with the statement “Teachers enjoy working with students,” and just 31% agreed “Teachers make school an exciting place to learn.” Thirty-eight percent 38% of students agreed with the statement “Teachers have fun at school.”

Fun & Excitement Statements	% in agreement
I enjoy being at school.	49%
Teachers enjoy working with students.	56%
Teachers make school an exciting place to learn.	31%
School is boring.	47%
I enjoy participating in my classes.	54%
Teachers have fun at school.	38%
Learning can be fun.	64%

Discussion

The most positive finding in this condition is the percentage of students who believe learning can be fun. Though this figure could certainly be higher, its significance is clear when contrasted with the high number of students who are bored in school and the low number who enjoy their classes. The disparity between the finding that students believe

learning can be fun, and the fact that so many do not experience engagement in their school, must be addressed. Students are clearly the potential, not the problem. Schools must explore more effective ways of tapping into their potential for engaged learning.

Students' perceptions of their teachers' engagement in the learning process is even more striking. Students do not see their teachers as individuals who enjoy their work in the classroom or with students. Whether this perception is true or not, these percentages are low and should be an area of professional concern for all educators.

The condition of Fun & Excitement in today's schools is not about students laughing and playing instead of studying and learning. It is about students becoming so engaged in what they are learning they stop watching the clock and looking out the window. These findings lead us to ask: How can schools foster this experience throughout the curriculum?

CONDITION 5. CURIOSITY & CREATIVITY

The condition of Curiosity & Creativity is characterized by inquisitiveness, eagerness, a strong desire to learn new or interesting things, and a longing to satisfy the mind with new discoveries. Curiosity triggers students to ask "Why?" while creativity gives them the initiative to ask "Why Not?" The intensity of Curiosity & Creativity tends to diminish over time due to the habituating effects of the environment. Therefore, to sustain student motivation, schools must pay careful attention to creating learning environments that promote questioning and creative exploration.

Students' Perceptions of Curiosity & Creativity

The condition of Curiosity & Creativity encourages students to experience the joy of exploring new ideas. When asked about their current learning, 75% of students surveyed stated they enjoy learning new things. Sixty-four percent (64%) said they learn new things that are interesting to them at school.

To foster Curiosity & Creativity, educators must encourage student inquisitiveness and demonstrate the relevance of studying new material. Questions about Curiosity & Creativity in the classroom yielded mixed results. Sixty-six percent (66%) of students agreed with the statement "I feel comfortable asking questions in class." Seventy-two percent (72%) of students surveyed agreed with the statement "My teachers present lessons in different ways," and 57% agreed with the statement "At school I am encouraged to be creative." Just 38% stated their classes help them understand what is happening in their everyday lives, though 75% agreed with the statement "What I learn in school will benefit my future."

Curiosity & Creativity Statements	% in agreement
I feel comfortable asking questions in class.	66%
My teachers present lessons in different ways.	72%
At school I am encouraged to be creative.	57%
My classes help me understand what is happening in my everyday life.	38%
I enjoy learning new things.	75%
I learn new things that are interesting to me at school.	64%
What I learn in school will benefit my future.	75%

Discussion

Questions about the condition of Curiosity & Creativity reveal that 3 out of 4 students surveyed like to learn new things. However, only 3 out of 5 students said they learn new things that are interesting to them in school. How can these percentages be improved? In addition, students must be engaged enough in their learning to ask “Why?” and “Why not?” questions. Yet the data shows approximately 1 out of 3 students do not feel comfortable asking questions in class. To foster Curiosity & Creativity students must also have the chance to be creative while they are learning. Ways to improve on the low percentages in these areas should be discussed.

In terms of relevance, 2 out of 5 students said they see the connection between their current learning and their everyday lives. For students to maintain an active interest in learning, they must see the value in it. They must be able to connect what they are studying to their world in some tangible way that leads them to ask questions and seek answers. If we do not make learning relevant, we are failing our students no matter how many new ideas they are exposed to in a given school year.

Interestingly, 3 out of 4 students believe what they learn in school is going to be helpful to them in the future. What does it mean if our students do not see school as relevant to their current lives, but do think it is meaningful for their future? How do we narrow this gap to ensure learning is relevant in the present, thus promoting active engagement in learning?

CONDITION 6. SPIRIT OF ADVENTURE

The condition of Spirit of Adventure is characterized by students’ ability to take on positive, healthy challenges at school and home, with family and friends. Students experience the Spirit of Adventure when they tackle something new without the fear of failure or success. When schools promote healthy decision making and healthy risk taking, their students become more confident and resilient. Students with the Spirit of Adventure see life as full of opportunities worth exploring for their own sake.

Students' Perceptions of *Spirit of Adventure*

The condition of Spirit of Adventure is about students trying new things. It is about students moving from their comfort zone to their challenge zone. Students face two common obstacles when they do so: the fear of success and the fear of failure. Seventy-six percent (76%) of students surveyed said they push themselves to do better academically. Twenty-four percent (24%) of students reported they are afraid to try something if they think they may fail. In terms of anxiety around success, 10% of students surveyed agreed with the statement “I am afraid my friends won’t like me if I do well in school.” Yet we find only 57% reported they are excited to tell their friends when they get good grades.

Another key aspect of Spirit of Adventure is whether students feel supported when they want to try new things. Support can come in many forms, including teachers and other students. Fifty-six percent (56%) of students surveyed believe teachers help them learn from their mistakes, and 70% said teachers think they can be successful. Peers fared less well: 38% of the students surveyed stated students are supportive of each other.

Spirit of Adventure Statements	% in agreement
I am afraid my friends won’t like me if I do well in school.	10%
I push myself to do better academically.	76%
Students are supportive of each other.	38%
I am afraid to try something if I think I may fail.	24%
Teachers help me learn from my mistakes.	56%
Teachers think I can be successful.	70%
I am excited to tell my friends when I get good grades.	57%

Discussion

Whether students have the courage to move beyond their comfort zone into their challenge zone depends on overcoming fear and anxiety. As the data shows, one-quarter of all students are reluctant to challenge themselves because they are afraid they might fail. This significant figure should be of concern to every educator. For if students are not willing to challenge themselves—academically, socially, personally—they will not learn and grow as individuals. It must be as safe for students to have a Spirit of Adventure and *not* succeed as it is for them *to* succeed when they take a healthy risk.

Less obvious, though no less worrisome, are the students who are afraid to challenge themselves because they might *succeed*. For these students, having a Spirit of Adventure means potentially threatening their social network—their sense of Belonging—and is therefore a powerful deterrent to success. The fact that just over half of the students surveyed are excited to tell their friends when they get good grades underscores this point. If all students are to reach their highest potential, schools must find ways to make it safe for all students to take on personal challenges and succeed at them.

Finally, the finding of just over half of all students believe teachers help them learn from their mistakes suggests students who try something new, and fail, need more sustained support so they do not give up. Schools must also explore how students can be

encouraged to support each other's healthy risk taking so all students embrace new ideas and challenges throughout their education.

CONDITION 7. LEADERSHIP & RESPONSIBILITY

The condition of Leadership & Responsibility means students are able to express their ideas and are willing to accept consequences for their actions. It cultivates accountability for the classroom environment and school community. Schools which promote this condition teach and expect their students to be good decision makers. They provide legitimate decision-making opportunities, seek student input, and expect students to be accountable for their actions and words. Students are trusted to make the right decisions and are recognized for doing so.

Students' Perceptions of Leadership & Responsibility

The condition of Leadership & Responsibility is twofold: students must develop strong decision-making skills and have real leadership opportunities. Only then can they be truly responsible leaders who make a difference in their community. When asked about decision making, 66% of students surveyed reported they think about others' feelings when they make decisions. Sixty-three percent (63%) said they are good decision makers. Sixty-two percent (62%) of students also stated teachers encourage students to make decisions.

In contrast to these relatively consistent percentages, when asked about leadership in their communities just 37% of students reported they know the goals their school is working on, and 30% stated student council represents all students at school. Similarly, only 35% of students surveyed agreed with the statement "Other students see me as a leader." When asked questions about themselves as leaders, 59% of students surveyed agreed with the statement "I see myself as a leader."

Leadership & Responsibility Statements	% in agreement
Student council represents all students at school.	30%
I see myself as a leader.	59%
Other students see me as a leader.	35%
Teachers encourage students to make decisions.	62%
I think about others' feelings when I make decisions.	66%
I am a good decision maker.	63%
I know the goals my school is working on this year.	37%

Discussion

The findings in this condition reveal that although the majority of students see themselves as leaders, this self-perception does not necessarily translate into leadership opportunities and action. This is most apparent in the fact that the majority of students see themselves as leaders, while only a third believe other students see them as leaders. For the condition of Leadership & Responsibility to thrive, students can't just think of

themselves as leaders; they must learn to be leaders in their communities, beginning with their school.

This discrepancy is further illustrated in the findings about decision making and leadership opportunities. While the majority of students say they see themselves as good decision makers, just over a third of the students say they are aware of the goals their school community is working on. Such disparity illuminates the challenges educators face in fostering responsible leaders in today's schools, as does the finding that less than a third of the students see student council as representative of the student body.

It is not enough for students to see themselves as leaders and decision makers, however; they must put those beliefs into practice through real leadership opportunities in their community. It is important to note that just 3 out of 5 students believe teachers encourage students to be decision makers, suggesting the leadership opportunities available in classrooms might be a good starting point for school-wide initiatives.

CONDITION 8. CONFIDENCE TO TAKE ACTION

Confidence to Take Action is the extent to which students believe in themselves. It encourages them to dream about their future while being motivated to set goals in the present. This condition is what educators strive for; all other conditions must be established and supported for students to attain this level of aspiration. Confidence to Take Action is characterized by a positive and healthy outlook on life and by looking inward rather than outward for approval. Schools can help build their students' Confidence to Take Action by providing support, celebrating diversity, and encouraging independent thinking.

Students' Perceptions of Confidence to Take Action

The condition of Confidence to Take Action is the pinnacle of the 8 Condition framework and also the goal of all educational ventures: to provide students with enough belief in themselves to set goals for the future and take steps in the present to reach those goals. When asked questions about goal-setting, 76% of students surveyed reported they think it is important to set high goals, and 79% said they work hard to reach their goals.

The ability to set and reach for goals is directly connected to a positive view of one's future. Ninety-one percent (91%) of students surveyed agreed with the statement "I believe I can be successful." In contrast, 77% of students believe teachers expect them to be successful. Seventy-seven percent (77%) said they are excited about their future. Just 63% agreed with the statement "I believe I can make a difference in this world."

Finally, when asked about the connection between school and their future, 86% of students surveyed agreed with the statement "Going to college is important for my future," while just 65% said their current school is preparing them well for the future.

Confidence to Take Action Statements	% in agreement
I believe I can be successful.	91%
I believe I can make a difference in this world.	63%
Teachers expect me to be successful.	77%
Going to college is important to my future.	86%
I work hard to reach my goals.	79%
I am excited about my future.	77%
I think it is important to set high goals.	76%
School is preparing me well for my future.	65%

Discussion

There is a difference between dreaming about the future and taking the steps needed to reach those dreams. The condition of Confidence to Take Action is defined by the successful integration of these two processes and the majority of students surveyed appear to know it is important both to set high goals *and* work hard to reach them. Nonetheless, one quarter of the students do not see goal setting as important.

Other troubling questions that arise from the data include: Why do so few students see their present schooling as relevant, in particular when compared to the higher percentage who see going to college as relevant? What does this tell us about students' understanding of the steps it takes to reach the goal of attending college? We must understand what it means that only a quarter of students believe teachers expect them to be successful. Teachers play a key role in helping students believe in themselves and their abilities to reach their goals. If students don't perceive teachers believe in them, they will certainly have a more difficult time believing in themselves.

Finally, while 9 out of 10 students think they can be successful, 30% fewer believe they can make a difference in the world. Schools must foster students' belief not only in their ability to succeed, but in their ability to be engaged citizens who contribute to the world around them.

THE ROLE OF PARENTS

Parents play a critical role in supporting student success and 94% of the students surveyed think their parents care about their education. A similarly high percentage (90%) state their parents think going to college is important. These percentages drop when students are asked if their parents like their school (63%) and whether their parents feel comfortable talking with their teachers (63%). Just 40% of the students say their teachers let their parents know what they do well in school, and 28% state they would like their parents to attend more school events.

Role of Parents Statements	% in agreement
My parents care about my education.	94%
My parents like my school.	63%
My parents think going to college is important.	90%
My parents feel comfortable talking to my teachers.	63%
Teachers let my parents know what I do well.	40%
I would like my parents to attend more school events.	28%

The high number of students who believe their parents support their current and future educational goals suggests parents are an important resource for fostering student aspirations. Unfortunately, this resource appears to be overlooked as significantly fewer students perceive their parents' relationship with their school and teachers is strong. Teachers and school administrators need to tap into this wealth of positive support for student learning, strengthening the connection between parents and schools.

The fact that so few students think their teachers share positive information with their parents is particularly concerning since this is a key line of communication about student accomplishments of all sorts. Teachers, who know better than anyone the types of successes students have in school, must do a better job sharing and celebrating these so all students feel recognized.

GENDER DIFFERENCES GRADES 6-12

Several important gender differences appear in the *My Voice*® national data for 2008. In general, fewer males than females reported positive responses to the survey questions, suggesting that fewer males than females perceive the 8 Conditions that foster student aspirations as present in their school experience.

Specifically, fewer males than females said they enjoy being at school or that learning can be fun. More males than females also said school is boring. This cluster of results tells us that fewer males than females experience school as a place which actively engages them. As the 8 Conditions framework suggests, students who are not engaged in their learning are less likely to reach their fullest potential. Educators must better understand why fewer males are engaged in school. They must learn why so many males say school is boring and so few of them believe learning can be fun. Educators must ask male learners to describe a fun learning environment and to talk about what interests them. They must then find ways to tap into these interests throughout the school experience.

The fact that males are less connected to their learning may explain some of the other gender differences around males' attitudes toward, and behaviors in, school. When students are disconnected from their learning, they are less likely to view it as important or to put in the time and effort needed to succeed. It may not be surprising, then, that fewer males than females say they put forth their best effort at school, push themselves academically, or think getting good grades is important. These findings tell us males are

doing less than their female counterparts to succeed in school or to challenge themselves. Perhaps most alarmingly, males are doing less than they need to do in order to reach their fullest potential. As educators, we must ask males about their effort and perseverance, about their perception of grades, and about why they think school is important.

Gender differences found in the 2008 national data are not only impacting students in their current education, however. They are also related to how students see their future, and males are less likely than females to hold a positive view of the future. For instance, fewer males than females say they are excited about their future, think it is important to set high goals or work hard to reach their goals, or believe going to college is important. These findings are worrisome because they suggest that fewer males are inspired to set goals for the future and take the steps needed to reach those goals. Schools need to do a better job fostering the conditions that help male students dream about the future and do what it takes to get there.

Males are not only disconnected from their aspirations, but from interpersonal relationships as well. Fewer males than females have a teacher who is a positive role model and fewer males say they think about others when they make decisions. Finally, fewer males say they are excited to tell their friends when they get good grades. If the foundation for student aspirations is a sense of Belonging and the presence of Heroes, these findings suggest stronger relationships need to be fostered with, and among, male students if the percentages are to be improved. Without personal relationships which support, inspire, and challenge them, males will be less able to take on the challenges facing them each day.

Overall, the gender differences found in the national data suggest fewer male than female students experience school as a place which fosters their aspirations. Fewer males are connected to either their current learning or their future hopes and dreams. Similarly, fewer males report strong relationships with teachers and peers. For these gender differences to be decreased, schools must specifically attend to male students' needs even as they foster aspirations for males and females alike.

Differences 7% or greater between males and females in grades 6-12

Statement from <i>My Voice</i>® survey	% Males in agreement	% Females in agreement
I have a teacher who is a positive role model for me.	61%	69%
I put forth my best effort at school.	63%	75%
Getting good grades is important to me.	80%	90%
I enjoy being at school.	45%	52%
School is boring.	52%	43%
Learning can be fun.	60%	68%
I push myself to do better academically.	71%	81%
I am excited to tell my friends when I get good grades.	50%	65%
I think about others' feelings when I make decisions.	60%	73%
Going to college is important to my future.	82%	91%
I think it is important to set high goals.	73%	80%
I work hard to reach my goals.	76%	84%
I am excited about my future.	74%	81%

GRADE LEVEL DIFFERENCES GRADES 6-8 and 9-12

Some grade level differences also emerged from the national data: overall, the number of students in agreement with *My Voice*® survey statements decreased between middle school (grades 6-8) and high school (grades 9-12). Whether the statement asked students about respect for teachers, whether school is boring, or if they are excited about the future, fewer high school than middle school students respond positively. In other words, according to the *My Voice*® national data, the longer students are in school, the less likely they are to experience school as a place that fosters their aspirations.

Several statements stand out from the national data as having especially strong decreases (10% or more) between middle and high school. In terms of Belonging, as students move through the grades fewer think teachers care about them and fewer are comfortable in the cafeteria. These findings reveal that the longer students stay in school, the less they feel like they Belong. Among the only positive differences between middle school and high school is the finding that fewer high school than middle school students think bullying is a problem in their school. However, the fact that one third of high school students still see bullying as a problem is of concern.

These weak findings in the condition of Belonging have wide-ranging repercussions. When students don't have a sense of Belonging, they are less likely to be engaged in their learning, to be motivated to try new things, or to have self-confidence. A sense of Belonging remains critical regardless of grade level and educators must reflect on the fact that students in high school are more disconnected from school than are younger students.

The changes between middle and high school may have to do with the teacher-student relationship which is perceived differently between students in grades 6-8 and 9-12. For example, fewer high school than middle school students say there is respect between students and teachers. Moreover, fewer high school students believe teachers enjoy their work with students, have fun at school, make school an exciting place to learn, or help students learn from their mistakes.

These findings tell us that relatively strong student-teacher relationships in middle school give way to weaker connections in high school. This is concerning given the role teachers can potentially play in the lives of students as they graduate, pursue college, or search for a meaningful job. Teachers have the ability to inspire positive attitudes and lifestyles in their students, yet this data suggests the potential to do so is being lost. The core of education—the teacher-student relationship—should become even more important and supportive as students gain knowledge and skill. Schools must look closely at these findings and determine specific steps to improve these relationships.

Other areas that decrease between middle school and high school cluster around effort in, and relevance of, school. Despite the fact that the stakes are higher as students move through high school, fewer students in high school than middle school say tests are an important part of their education or that they put forth their best effort at school. This may be connected to the fact that fewer high school students see their learning as relevant to their everyday lives.

These findings are alarming. As students prepare to graduate and participate as adults in society—whether through college or the workplace—it is critical that they understand how their current schooling is relevant to their future goals. The fact that fewer high school students than middle school students say they are allowed to be creative in school may reflect general trends in high school education; this makes the finding no less important to reflect upon, however, especially given the other findings. Life outside of school requires creative, innovative thinking and problem solving. How are schools preparing students for these real life challenges?

A few other differences between middle school and high school are worth mentioning. Fewer high school than middle school students think student council represents all students at their school, suggesting that a key area in which schools can foster Leadership & Responsibility is failing to live up to its potential. Schools must imagine other ways to engage students in civic activities, ones to which more students have access and to which they can contribute. In addition, parent-teacher relationships decline between middle school and high school, at least from the student perspective. Fewer high school students think their parents are comfortable talking to their teachers, and fewer high school students think that teachers tell their parents what they do well. Each of these areas warrants reflection and attention by districts committed to fostering aspirations throughout the middle and high school years.

Differences 10% or greater between grade 6-8 and grade 9-12 data

Statement from <i>My Voice</i>® survey	% of 6-8 in agreement	% 9-12 in agreement
Teachers care about my problems and feelings.	58%	40%
I feel comfortable going to the cafeteria for lunch.	84%	68%
I think bullying is a problem at my school.	41%	31%
Students respect teachers.	48%	36%
Teachers respect students.	67%	50%
Tests are an important part of my education.	80%	66%
I put forth my best effort at school.	79%	66%
Teachers enjoy working with students.	66%	53%
Teachers make school an exciting place to learn.	41%	28%
Teachers have fun at school.	47%	36%
My classes help me understand what is happening in my everyday life.	46%	36%
At school I am encouraged to be creative.	67%	54%
Teachers help me learn from my mistakes.	68%	53%
Student council represents all students at school.	41%	28%
My parents feel comfortable talking to my teachers.	74%	61%
Teachers let my parents know what I do well.	58%	35%

CONCLUSION

The *My Voice*® National Report 2008 reveals both positive and negative findings around each of the 8 Conditions that Make a Difference®. While schools should be proud of their accomplishments, there is clearly much work to be done to improve even the most positive of these findings.

In particular, attention must be paid to gender differences and the fact that, overall, fewer males than females see their educational environment as rich in the conditions that foster aspirations. Also, the decrease in positive findings between middle school and high school is alarming, especially around the conditions of Belonging, Heroes, and Sense of Accomplishment. It is naïve and ignorant to expect students to stay in school, let alone graduate and take the next steps toward reaching their fullest potential, if every year they are in school they feel less supported, less connected, and less inspired to learn.

The 8 Conditions that support student engagement—*Belonging, Heroes, Sense of Accomplishment, Fun & Excitement, Curiosity & Creativity, Spirit of Adventure, Leadership & Responsibility, and Confidence to Take Action*—need to be in place if schools are to foster students' ability to set and reach their goals. Yet, as the survey findings reveal, these conditions are neither fully nor deeply integrated into our nation's schools. If schools are to be places in which teaching and learning thrive, this must change. Listening to the voices of students is the first step.

As educators dedicated to positive reform in today's schools, it is our responsibility to explore in-depth the *My Voice*® data so that we can fully understand and appreciate how students perceive their learning environments. In doing so, we will gain insight into students' fears, frustrations, hopes and dreams. Only then can we take the next steps toward our goal of improving teaching and learning environments so that all schools promote students' self-worth, active engagement in the learning process, and a sense of purpose for all students.

My Voice® Student Aspirations Survey National 6-12 Report 2008

Condition	Survey Statement	Total % in Agreement
<i>Belonging</i>	School is a welcoming and friendly place.	62%
<i>Belonging</i>	I feel accepted for who I am at school.	77%
<i>Belonging</i>	I have difficulty fitting in at school.	12%
<i>Belonging</i>	Teachers care about my problems and feelings.	44%
<i>Belonging</i>	I am proud of my school.	49%
<i>Belonging</i>	I feel comfortable going to the cafeteria for lunch.	71%
<i>Belonging</i>	I think bullying is a problem in my school.	33%
<i>Heroes</i>	Students respect teachers.	39%
<i>Heroes</i>	I have a teacher who is a positive role model for me.	65%
<i>Heroes</i>	Teachers care about me as an individual.	48%
<i>Heroes</i>	Teachers care if I am absent from school.	45%
<i>Heroes</i>	If I have a problem, I have a teacher with whom I can talk.	49%
<i>Heroes</i>	Teachers respect students.	54%
<i>Heroes</i>	Students respect each other.	30%
<i>Sense of Accomplishment</i>	Tests are an important part of my education.	69%
<i>Sense of Accomplishment</i>	Teachers recognize students who are kind and helpful.	70%
<i>Sense of Accomplishment</i>	I have never been recognized for something positive at school.	21%
<i>Sense of Accomplishment</i>	I give up when schoolwork is difficult.	18%
<i>Sense of Accomplishment</i>	Teachers recognize me when I try my best.	57%
<i>Sense of Accomplishment</i>	I put forth my best effort at school.	69%
<i>Sense of Accomplishment</i>	Getting good grades is important to me.	84%
<i>Fun & Excitement</i>	I enjoy being at school.	49%
<i>Fun & Excitement</i>	Teachers enjoy working with students.	56%
<i>Fun & Excitement</i>	Teachers make school an exciting place to learn.	31%
<i>Fun & Excitement</i>	School is boring.	48%
<i>Fun & Excitement</i>	I enjoy participating in my classes.	54%
<i>Fun & Excitement</i>	Teachers have fun at school.	38%
<i>Fun & Excitement</i>	Learning can be fun.	64%
<i>Curiosity & Creativity</i>	I feel comfortable asking questions in class.	66%
<i>Curiosity & Creativity</i>	My teachers present lessons in different ways.	72%
<i>Curiosity & Creativity</i>	At school I am encouraged to be creative.	57%
<i>Curiosity & Creativity</i>	My classes help me understand what is happening in my everyday life.	38%
<i>Curiosity & Creativity</i>	I enjoy learning new things.	75%
<i>Curiosity & Creativity</i>	I learn new things that are interesting to me at school.	64%
<i>Curiosity & Creativity</i>	What I learn in school will benefit my future.	75%
<i>Spirit of Adventure</i>	I am afraid my friends won't like me if I do well in school.	10%
<i>Spirit of Adventure</i>	I push myself to do better academically.	76%
<i>Spirit of Adventure</i>	Students are supportive of each other.	38%
<i>Spirit of Adventure</i>	I am afraid to try something if I think I may fail.	24%
<i>Spirit of Adventure</i>	Teachers help me learn from my mistakes.	56%
<i>Spirit of Adventure</i>	Teachers think I can be successful.	70%
<i>Spirit of Adventure</i>	I am excited to tell my friends when I get good grades.	57%

Condition	Survey Statement	Total % in Agreement
<i>Leadership & Responsibility</i>	Student council represents all students at school.	30%
<i>Leadership & Responsibility</i>	I see myself as a leader.	59%
<i>Leadership & Responsibility</i>	Other students see me as a leader.	35%
<i>Leadership & Responsibility</i>	Teachers encourage students to make decisions.	62%
<i>Leadership & Responsibility</i>	I think about others' feelings when I make decisions.	66%
<i>Leadership & Responsibility</i>	I am a good decision maker.	63%
<i>Leadership & Responsibility</i>	I know the goals my school is working on this year.	37%
<i>Confidence to Take Action</i>	I believe I can be successful.	91%
<i>Confidence to Take Action</i>	I believe I can make a difference in this world.	63%
<i>Confidence to Take Action</i>	Teachers expect me to be successful.	77%
<i>Confidence to Take Action</i>	Going to college is important to my future.	86%
<i>Confidence to Take Action</i>	I work hard to reach my goals.	79%
<i>Confidence to Take Action</i>	I am excited about my future.	77%
<i>Confidence to Take Action</i>	I think it is important to set high goals.	76%
<i>Confidence to Take Action</i>	School is preparing me well for my future.	65%
<i>The Role of Parents</i>	My parents care about my education.	94%
<i>The Role of Parents</i>	My parents like my school.	63%
<i>The Role of Parents</i>	My parents think going to college is important.	90%
<i>The Role of Parents</i>	My parents feel comfortable talking to my teachers.	63%
<i>The Role of Parents</i>	Teachers let my parents know what I do well.	40%
<i>The Role of Parents</i>	I would like my parents to attend more school events.	28%