

*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**<sup>®</sup> 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*<sup>®</sup> Student Aspirations Survey was developed.

## **The *My Voice*<sup>®</sup> Student Aspirations Survey**

The *My Voice*<sup>®</sup> 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*<sup>®</sup> 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*<sup>®</sup> is a powerful tool for initiating innovative, meaningful school reform.

## ***My Voice*<sup>®</sup> 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*<sup>®</sup> 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.

<b>Belonging Statements</b>	<b>% in agreement</b>
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.”

<b>Heroes Statements</b>	<b>% in agreement</b>
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.

<b>Sense of Accomplishment Statements</b>	<b>% in agreement</b>
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.



























