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ABSTRACT

Studies indicate that information provided by students may contribute to successful implementation of educational innovations, but educators seldom seek out student perspectives. In April and May 1997, over 160 high school students participated in 16 focus groups in Kentucky, Tennessee, Virginia, and West Virginia. The students were primarily seniors and represented various achievement levels, career paths, extracurricular activities, genders, ethnic backgrounds, and attitudes toward school. They attended eight rural high schools in Kentucky and West Virginia, three urban school divisions in Virginia, and four suburban or small-town schools in Tennessee. The students discussed the strengths and weaknesses of block scheduling and year-round schooling, technology, school safety, quality of education, significant learning experiences, teaching, school-to-work opportunities, student activities, inclusion and diversity, parent involvement, and student voice. In general, students gave their schools above-average ratings or high ratings. They also said that schools help them learn by hiring good teachers, keeping class sizes small, providing computers, changing to block scheduling, and offering opportunities for real-life activities such as mentoring or job-shadowing programs. There were concerns about grading, sports activities, computer access and literacy, and a lack of voice in school policy decisions. One-page inserts detail results from each state. (SAS)

Let's Ask the Students . . .

Kentucky, Tennessee, Virginia, and West Virginia students talk about schools and change

August 1997

Little attention is paid to student voice when implementing education changes, yet many measures directly affect student behaviors in school. Seldom is thought given to how changes will be introduced to students or how students' reactions to them will be obtained (Fullen, 1991).

Some studies indicate that information provided by students might contribute to the successful implementation of innovations. The perspectives of students on the strengths and weaknesses of changes in their schools can be strikingly insightful, but "educators have a difficult time hearing their concerns" (Wagner, 1995/96, p. 43). Schools that listen to students and involve them in change efforts find that students can play a valuable role in renewing their own education, as well as contributing to the development of a shared vision and a sense of urgency essential to change efforts (Lott, 1995; Wagner, 1995/96).

In April and May 1997, a wide variety of high school students—more than 160—talked to AEL staff about particular innovations and about schooling in general. The students participated in 16 focus groups throughout Kentucky, Tennessee, Virginia, and West Virginia through AEL's Education Issues Forums. The four focus groups in each state clustered around either urban, suburban, or rural areas.

Focus group questions explored students' daily experiences with teachers and classmates. We wanted to know how students were reacting to changes in daily schedules brought about by block scheduling and changes in the school year brought about by year-round school calendars. We also hoped to learn how technology is affecting what and how students learn. Finally, we wanted to know what school experiences help or hinder learning and if students feel safe at school, believe they are getting a good education, and feel prepared for college or work. Our questions were pretested in several high schools to ensure they were understandable to a broad range of students.

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How The Study Was Conducted

AEL staff are indebted to our Board members, who advised us on the design of the study and helped us get access to schools; to the busy school administrators, who helped us arrange the focus groups and warmly welcomed us into their schools, and, of course, to the students who openly and honestly shared their views with us.

We asked principals at each school to arrange for about 10-12 high school students, preferably seniors, who represented various achievement levels, career paths, extracurricular activity involvement levels, genders, ethnic backgrounds, and attitudes toward school to participate in the AEL focus group. Principals also helped by distributing and collecting parent consent forms and arranging an appropriate setting for the focus group in the school.

What we learned from the students cannot be generalized to the entire high school population of the AEL Region, the states, or the schools the students represented. Focus group data is qualitative; it does not permit us to talk about frequencies, means, or standard deviations. However, the depth of knowledge gained from a small number of students provides insights about ways that education innovations, typically designed by state policy makers and implemented by local educators, play out in the day-to-day lives of students.

The information collected is reported in two ways. Responses of students across all four states are summarized here. The responses of students in individual states are available separately, as one-page inserts to this report.

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Student Voices Across the Region

Student opinions across all four states were remarkably similar.

Block Scheduling

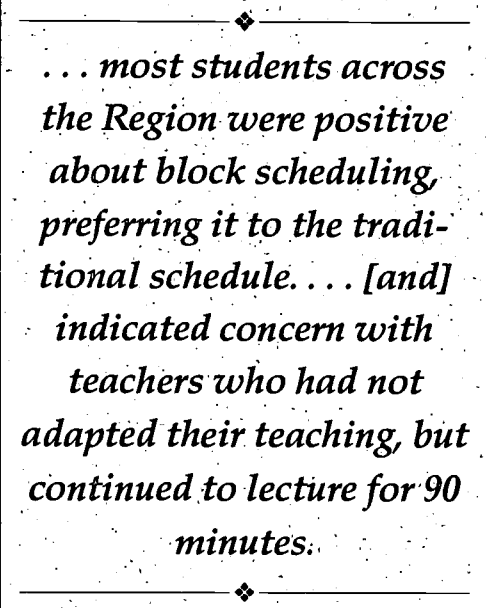
Overall, most students across the Region were positive about block scheduling, preferring it to the traditional schedule. Students in all four states said that they liked the way that block scheduling provided increased class time for science, performing arts, vocational education, and other "hands-on" classes. They also liked the "college-like" nature of the block schedule. Those who had alternating-day block schedules liked seeing teachers and holding classes every other day.

Students in three states observed that they could get their homework fully explained or completed during the longer class periods provided by block scheduling. In at least two of the four states, students said they also like having only four subjects at a time, the opportunity to accrue more credits toward graduation, longer time to do library research, increased interaction with teachers during class, and the increased flexibility to work after school.

Students also noted some other concerns with block scheduling. In all four states, students indicated concern with teachers who had not adapted their teaching, but continued to lecture—now for 90 minutes. Students in three states said that a missed day of school was difficult to make up—it was like missing two days of classes on a traditional schedule. Students in two states mentioned they had experienced some problems with scheduling the courses they desired and with finishing a course a full semester before they were to take state or advanced-placement standardized tests. Each of the following concerns about block scheduling were mentioned in only one state: (1) less time for clubs and activities, (2) difficulty fitting an AP course into one semester, and (3) having to take two math courses in the same semester.

Technology

Students in all four states talked about technology in terms of computers, and three major issues were mentioned consistently: (1) the quality of the equipment and the variety of software, (2) computer accessibility, and (3) computer literacy. Some students reported good equipment and a variety of software including word processing, spread sheets, and presentation packages. Others reported old equipment, broken equipment, too little equipment, and only word processing software. While some students reported unlimited access, others explained that access was restricted to computer labs or rooms where teachers had computer expertise. They remarked that teachers' computer knowledge varied widely. Finally, the opportunity for students to learn computer literacy varied from school to school. Some students wished they had been better prepared for using computers. For example, they would have liked a class in keyboarding skills.



School-To-Work Opportunities

While the School-To-Work program is a national initiative, students in the focus groups did not seem familiar with the term. Instead, students mentioned vocational education, cooperative school-work programs or job shadowing, internships, apprenticeships, and college visit opportunities—activities in which they or other students participated. Most often, however, students talked about school-to-work opportunities in terms of their personal after-school work experiences.

School Safety

Although school safety was discussed by students in all four states, they generally expressed little concern for their safety. Fighting was described as minimal or nonexistent. Students were aware of limited drug and alcohol abuse, but cigarette smoking was a bigger problem. To discourage smoking, schools tended to establish strict rules against smoking and locked or removed restroom doors.

As a safety measure, several schools had closed campuses and, at some, students were not permitted to go outside during lunch. Some schools also limited the number of trips students could make to their lockers. Students felt these measures were unnecessary and contended that adults were overreacting to news stories about school violence.

Quality of Education

Students in all four states were asked to rate the quality of their education. Generally, students gave their schools above average or high ratings. Most said they got a good education, but some students said they would like

more challenging courses. Some students reported that their school had a good or broad curriculum, but others said they would have liked greater variety. Several students recognized that the quality of education varied from school to school across the state, as well as from course to course within a school.

Learning

Students we heard across the Region generally agreed that they knew they had learned something when they could teach it to someone else or recall it instantly. When asked about the most important things they had learned in or out of school, most responses related to personal rather than academic learning. Lessons learned typically included time and stress management, self-discipline, how to stand up to others, and taking responsibility. Students described these lessons in the context of applying for and deciding on postsecondary education plans, as well as in day-to-day high school experiences.

Students reported that school was not the only place they learned. In addition to teachers, students said friends, family members, and people in the community and at work helped them learn. They also said schools help them learn by hiring good teachers, keeping class sizes small, providing computers, changing to block scheduling, and offering opportunities for real-life activities such as a mentoring or job-shadowing program. Students believed their learning was sometimes hindered by disruptive students, limited course offerings, restricted access to computers, inadequate facilities, unequal treatment, and too few guidance counselors. Students articulated the importance of their school counselor. Several expressed deep appreciation for the assistance they received with the college application process.

Teaching

Without exception, students from all four states described teachers as the key to learning. They said they learn best from teachers who care about students and the subjects they teach, teachers who make learning interesting and fun but still challenging to students, teachers who have a sense of humor and patience, and teachers who are willing to stay after school to help students. Students indicated they are less likely to learn when teachers lecture, use lots of worksheets, or talk down to students.

. . . students gave their schools above average or high ratings. . . . [Students] also said schools help them learn by hiring good teachers, keeping class sizes small, providing computers, changing to block scheduling, and offering opportunities for real-life activities such as a mentoring or job-shadowing program.

Grades and grading policies were mentioned in two states. Grades were important to students, especially to those applying to colleges. Students were frustrated when it wasn't clear to them what was required to get an A. They were also concerned about inconsistencies in grading practices among teachers; among advanced placement, honors, and regular courses; and from school to school.

Student Activities

Students reported different levels of involvement in student activities. At some schools most students were involved; they felt that clubs and sports were seen as an important part of student life and learning. At another school, block scheduling had eliminated the time period set aside for such activities, and students expressed their displeasure with that. A few students saw sports as a point of contention, asserting that some sports were seen as more important than others, certain athletes received special privileges, and girls' and boys' sports received unequal treatment.

Inclusion and Diversity

Only a few students talked about the integration of students with special needs into regular classes. They mentioned the benefits to all students, as well as the disadvantages when some students felt the class could not progress as rapidly as it would otherwise.

Some minority students described inequality they had experienced at school. They felt teachers had low expectations for them, and they found it difficult to be admitted to the more challenging classes.

Parent Involvement

Students in only two states mentioned parent involvement. Some reported that, for the most part, parents didn't know what was going on at school. When they were involved, it was with PTA, sports, band, and performing arts. Students reported that their parents tended to be too busy to get involved in school activities, but some students spoke of ways parents could contribute to student learning. At one school, parents served as the audience for a Challenge Academics tea in which students demonstrated and exhibited what they had accomplished in English. At another school,

parents and community members participated in an International Night, where each classroom focused on a different country.

Ways To Use This Report

While the data reported in this report may be interesting reading, we believe it is important to ask, "How can I use this report?" We have listed some ideas that came to mind when we asked that question. Perhaps you can think of more.

1. Share the report with school faculty to stimulate a discussion of the implications of the study for your school.
2. Share the report with parents to stimulate a discussion about the effects of innovations on students in your school.
3. Use the report to show others an example of the kind of information they/you might collect from students in their/your school to assist in developing school improvement plans.
4. Call for information about the Focus Group Facilitator's Guide developed for the study and conduct focus groups schoolwide to get specific information about your own school.

Student Voice

Most students remarked that they have little or no voice in school decisions. Students would like to have a greater impact on the school and its policies. They would like to be treated more like adults. Even students who served on site-based councils contended that they didn't have a strong voice. In contrast, some students at one school felt empowered. They reported that they had been invited to serve on the principal's advisory council and, in the future, expect to be asked to evaluate teachers.

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Implications

The data from the 16 schools in four states suggest at least two implications:

1. School staffs can learn more about students' perceptions of the quality of education and the school environment by talking with a variety of students about their learning experiences.
2. Students have ideas and suggestions about improving the implementation of innovations based on their personal school experiences.

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AEL state coordinators were responsible for planning the 1997 Education Issues Forums and preparing this report of findings. State coordinators are: Sandra Orletsky, KY; Jane Hange, TN; Patricia Ceperley, VA; and Hobart Harmon, WV.

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AEL's mission is to link the knowledge from research with the wisdom from practice to improve teaching and learning. AEL serves as the Regional Educational Laboratory for Kentucky, Tennessee, Virginia, and West Virginia. For these same four states, it operates both a Regional Technology in Education Consortium and the Eisenhower Regional Consortium for Mathematics and Science Education. In addition, it serves as the Region IV Comprehensive Technical Assistance Center and operates the ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools. Information about AEL projects, programs, and services is available by writing or calling AEL.

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Let's Ask the Students . . . Kentucky

AEL staff talked with 44 students in four rural high schools in central and western Kentucky in April 1997. We heard from a mix of students. Ethnic diversity was good and students were involved in many school activities.

AEL focus group facilitators led each two-hour session using a field-tested interview guide. Field notes and audio recordings were grouped for analysis and reporting. No individual students or schools are identified in the following summary.

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Innovations

In consultation with the Kentucky members of AEL's Board of Directors, we found the innovations of most interest to be block scheduling and the alternative calendar. We chose schools in which one of these innovations had been adopted. Two high schools had two or more years' experience with block scheduling, and two had at least two years' experience with alternative calendars. Staff also heard about technology, curriculum, grading, community involvement, and school safety.

Block Scheduling

On the whole, students reacted favorably to block scheduling. They liked having four 90-minute classes per day, a schedule that simulates college and makes it easier to work after school.

In classes such as arts, labs, and band, students liked having the time to see a project to completion. They also liked the opportunity to have homework fully explained during class.

Some teachers, students felt, hadn't adjusted well to the change, but most relied less on textbooks and made class more interesting. Block scheduling allowed a wider variety of courses to be taken in a school year and a better selection of courses generally.

Disadvantages of block scheduling included less curriculum integration and team teaching, as well as the difficulty of making up a missed day. Students expressed concern about forgetting material, especially math, if too much time passed between courses.

Alternative Calendar

At the two schools where an alternative calendar had been adopted, the schedules were similar—nine-week class sessions, broken up by two weeks off, then three weeks off, then six or eight weeks off for summer break. This transition to a year-round calendar generally got good grades from students. They felt they had less burn-out and were able to remember material between sessions.

The alternative calendar created other positives—smaller classes (which students felt were caused largely by the departures of students/families who weren't happy with the new calendar); family atmosphere; a simulated, real-world experience; and the opportunity for more field trips.

Students were less happy about how some teachers handled the new calendar. They didn't like work assigned over a break and objected to being tested when they returned from one.

The shorter summer break had financial consequences for students who needed to work; they didn't feel they could earn as much when they only worked after school. And as much as they liked the new calendar, students thought they and their parents should have been given more input into the decision to try it.

Technology

Students at all four schools seemed to recognize that they had better equipment and access than they would have in many other schools. All schools had computer labs and up-to-date software (often Windows 95) and most had Internet capabilities. At one school, students use PowerPoint and take classes in desktop publishing and design. At another school, students learn to operate a computerized cash register and take video classes in conjunction with their school TV station, which records games and school board meetings. At another school, students said their equipment was "great" and they were "always purchasing more," and that perhaps too much emphasis was being given to technology.

These high school students felt that they hadn't been well prepared for so much computer use, saying they lacked keyboarding skills and had to spend more time doing their work as a result. The problem was exacerbated by difficulties in finding time in their own schedules and in the computer lab schedules to complete assignments. Some problems with broken equipment and student misuse of computers also came under discussion; at a school with one supervised and one unsupervised lab, equipment in the supervised lab generally was in working order.

Curriculum

Students' reactions to curriculum varied widely. At two schools, we were told there was a shortage of vo-tech classes but a good variety of other courses; at another, we heard the overall course selection was poor. One group reported strong math, science, agriculture, and business courses, but weak arts and language choices. This same group noted that video production and drama were available as extracurricular activities.

Students preferred non-lecture class formats and "interesting teachers" and disliked being expected to "fit the mold."

Community/Parent Involvement

Some students felt that their parents were "clueless" about what goes on at

school, while others had parents who were active in PTA and sports. The students generally understood that their parents were too busy to attend events, but some seemed to want more adult support. They thought students should work harder at letting parents know "how important it is to be involved."

School Safety

Students thought this was a bigger issue for adults than it needed to be. One of the four schools had a gun-related incident in recent years—one student, one gun—and no one we heard from expressed great concern about safety. One group, however, did think their school had seen more fights in the past year than previously, and another thought that "today's middle school students are much tougher" than those at the high school.

We did hear some complaints about cigarette smoking and drug use, marijuana in particular. One group told us the marijuana is "grown here in the county and sold at the schools in the city," but no other drugs were mentioned.

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Quality of Education

Kentucky students had a fairly good understanding of their schools and weren't shy about expressing their ideas for improvement. When asked about quality of education, they tended to rank it 3 or 4 on a 5-point scale. They felt that some students who didn't deserve it were being passed: "If they do not come to school and do not work, the school shouldn't pass them." Students at one school said its college prep courses were good, but vo-tech weak. At another school, we heard the opposite.

Generally, students felt they weren't being challenged enough, although they felt math and science were stronger than English and the arts. One group said their school's chemistry class was harder than an introductory college course.

KERA and KIRIS

These students went through the before-and-after of KERA and had plenty to say about what they didn't like. One complained that "under KERA, poor grammar is considered creative writing." Several thought the portfolios in 12th grade were meaningless, as students have already completed the college application process and don't even see the grades until after they've left high school. Portfolios also came under fire for inconsistency among teachers—some teachers don't integrate portfolio development into the regular schedule, but rush students through them a few days before they're due. Several students did credit the portfolios with helping them become better writers.

Students couldn't understand why they don't see a reward from KIRIS; they know its results can make a big difference to their teachers and think they should also have some incentive to do well.

Learning

Students' most important learning experiences during the past year included "balancing time," "stress management," putting forth "a minimum effort to get good enough grades," not having to have a career choice, the "importance of being a mother," how to "stand up for yourself and what you believe in," people have different ways of coping with problems, "can go further if we have a positive attitude," and the importance of doing "110%" and taking responsibility.

As for how schools helped students to learn, teachers who were willing to "go beyond the boundaries of high school" and were supportive of both academic and athletic endeavors were praised. Students approved of no tolerance policies on drugs, fighting, and weapons.

Teaching

Though they understood that teachers were still adjusting to either block scheduling or the alternative calendar, students were impatient with those who continued to present lessons in the same tired ways. Lectures and videos earned the most disapproval, with "boring" teachers running a close second. Students appreciated teachers who respected them and were patient, making them feel comfortable. "Making learning fun," "class discussions," and "making them [students] think" were also cited as indicators of good teaching.

School Changes

The students we talked to, like most teenagers, felt they were subject to too many unnecessary rules, such as dress codes and closed campuses (one school required a note signed by the principal before 8:30 a.m. for a student to leave the building during the school day). They put part of the blame for the excessive number of rules on the site-based councils and the school administration.

Students also objected to cases of unfair treatment. In one example, they mentioned being held in classrooms for three hours while dogs searched the school for drugs.

Naturally, students would like better food in the cafeteria and better facilities overall. They would like to see more involvement from parents and wish principals would show a stronger presence.

The students' biggest wishes were for "more freedom" and "more input." They wanted to be "treated like adults." At three of the four schools, they complained that administrators never engaged them in adult dialogue and, therefore, students felt they had no voice in their own education. The students were fairly knowledgeable about Kentucky's site-based councils and the role they play in school decision-making but felt that wasn't enough. Students seem to want a voice in their educational experience. ❖

Let's Ask the Students . . . Tennessee

Focus group interviews were conducted in April 1997, in each of four suburban, small-town high schools in eastern Tennessee. A total of 42 students, primarily seniors, participated. The students reflected diversity in gender, ethnicity, course-taking patterns, and career plans.

AEL focus group facilitators led the two-hour discussions using a field-tested interview guide. Field notes and audio recordings were grouped for analysis and reporting. No individual student or school is identified in the following summary.

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Innovations

In response to questions, students named block scheduling, year-round school, and increasing responsibility as changes they had experienced. We also heard about school safety, technology, and school-to-work opportunities.

Block Scheduling

Various forms of block scheduling were in use in the four schools, and one school had a year-round calendar. Students had positive impressions of block scheduling at all schools and preferred it over the traditional schedule. They liked having only four subjects to study at one time, earning more credits in one school year than previously possible, having more time to learn in class, and both conducting a science experiment and writing the report in the same period. They also liked getting their homework done in class, having longer research periods in the library, having more time to interact with teachers in class, experiencing a schedule similar to college, and having a faster-paced school day. Students believed that classes such as performing arts, sciences, and vocational courses benefitted more from block scheduling than math and Advanced Placement (AP) classes. They viewed scheduling all sports activities after school (a result of block scheduling in many schools) as an advantage.

Some of the disadvantages included teachers who rushed to cover the curriculum, teachers who lectured for 90 minutes rather than adopting innovative methods to accommodate the schedule, having two math courses in one semester, and going without math for one year prior to taking the ACT or SAT. Also, block scheduling put more responsibility on the student to make up the extensive amount of work missed in even one day's absence.

School Safety

Students said safety was not a concern. Some students spoke of a "quiet prejudice" in their schools. They reported limited use of drugs, adding that alcohol abuse was more common. They said smoking was a big problem that had resulted in closed restrooms, restrooms with no doors, and restrooms that were too smoke-filled to use regularly. "We're going to graduate, but we're going to die from secondhand smoke," reflected one student.

Technology

Computer use has increased. In one school, students described having access to PowerPoint software to create presentations for their classes and mentioned a chemistry teacher who connected with a live teleconference via the Internet. However, they also cited classrooms that had no or old computers, teachers who did not use available computers, restricted use of some computers to certain applications, lack of daily access to computers, relegating computers to computer labs, lack of assistance in computer labs, and few basic computer literacy classes. Most students could use computers and would have preferred more in-school access to word processing.

School-to-Work Opportunities

When asked how well prepared they were for life after high school, students had difficulty responding. They hoped that changes such as block scheduling had prepared them for college schedules and increased their responsibility for learning, but they couldn't be certain. One student thought his high school education had helped somewhat, but "the classes are like dot-to-dot and college and life are not like that; we'll have to adjust."

Students praised vocational courses and school-to-work experiences such as job shadowing, internships, apprenticeships, college visits, and quality counseling about careers, but felt these were all too rare. One student had taken a nursing course in high school, currently worked in a nursing home, and planned to become a registered nurse. Another served an internship at a veterinary clinic that allowed him to learn about all aspects of the career. Another student learned to build a house and expected to build one for his family after graduation.

When asked to describe their most significant learning during the past year, they talked about learning who to trust and who not to trust; how to work with and comfort others; how to manage money and time; how to balance the demands of work, home, and school; "why the good guy doesn't always win"; and "how to be myself." Many of these lessons came as a result of assuming adult responsibilities. Most students had part-time jobs and saw their supervisors as very important teachers. Responsibility, punctuality, and customer relations were all valuable lessons learned at work. Schools were praised for teaching "communication and cooperation

that will follow you to the job—but you don't need to go to school to learn them." However, one student discovered the relevance of schooling when he helped his Vietnamese employer communicate with Hispanic workers.

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Quality of Education

Students gave their schools average to high marks. They most appreciated good teachers, block scheduling, breadth of curriculum, year-round calendar, small size, coaches, extracurricular activities, and the positive reputation of their schools. Recommendations for improvements included better facility maintenance and repair, equipment, discipline and attendance policies, and instructional strategies.

Teaching

Students described teachers as the most positive aspect of their schooling. They liked teachers who cared about students and subjects they taught, "provided reasons to know" and not just content, and tried a variety of hands-on approaches and fun projects. They also liked teachers who had a sense of humor; talked with students outside of class; and motivated, encouraged, and praised students. Finally, they said they liked teachers who provided structure and had control of the class, tried new techniques to help individual students who had difficulty, let students learn at their own pace, and respected students. While many students felt teachers were the key to high-quality education, most said they had experienced teachers who were too strict, treated seniors as small children, didn't experiment with new methods, never used the computer, graded arbitrarily, used worksheets continuously, or embarrassed or berated students. At one school, students expressed disappointment with the level of teacher knowledge.

Many students were concerned about grading systems. They felt some changes—like those that raised standards for getting A's or dropped weighted grades for honors courses—hurt their grade-point averages. Students were uncertain about what it takes to get A's—a necessity, they believed, for acceptance at prestigious colleges or universities.

Most students wanted more respect. They criticized lock-in lunch periods, closed restrooms, closed campuses, and unfair discipline and attendance policies. Students described as unfair their loss of privileges due to the misbehavior of prior classes. Students believed they could learn better in smaller classes with more computers and with teachers well-versed in the use of technology. Some students felt that school facilities in disrepair did not motivate teachers or students to do their best.

Learning

Students gave examples of when they knew they had learned something: when they could teach or help someone else, apply the knowledge or skill in another class, use the information outside of school, score well on the SAT or ACT, "get a (correct) answer on Jeopardy!" or "when the teacher doesn't call on you—she knows you know it." They believed they learn best when they have knowledgeable, caring teachers who have class control, respect them and their commitments, use a variety of hands-on experiences, encourage them, and are patient.

Disruptive students were a hindrance to learning. "I have some friends I would not want in a class with me," one student explained. Another added, "If you get in a class with bad students, the class gets labeled and nothing good happens." Personal effort was recognized as essential—"I wish I could go back to me as a freshman. I would smack myself and tell me to get to work." Other students regretted having to struggle now to earn high grades after goofing off earlier. One student explained he would make up for his lack of self-discipline by joining the Navy as soon as he graduated. Another student said, "Students control their own education. If they want to learn, they can."

Other Topics

AEL staff raised other topics for discussion. Inclusion, the integration of students with special needs into regular classes, was discussed at only one school. There, students introduced the benefits for specially challenged peers and themselves—"our school is nice for them, and it's good for us" to realize the unique strengths of each person. Parent involvement was described as minimal in all schools. Students felt that schools did not encourage parent involvement in academics. They recognized that parents could assist their learning, but few provided examples of such assistance. Two positive examples included a Challenge Academics tea, during which students demonstrated and exhibited what they had accomplished in English; and an International Night at a second school, in which each classroom focused on a different country and involved parents and community members in cultural events. Finally, athletic programs were acknowledged for building a positive reputation for the school, but they were also a source of irritation. Students, including athletes, discussed the resentment for special privileges extended to athletes—time out of class and more time to complete assignments. Students also described unequal treatment of girls' sports and of programs with fewer participants than football and basketball.

Finally, students said they felt change was most often initiated by administrators. Although students participated in and, in some instances, initiated attempts at school change, they felt their efforts had little affect on the school. ❖

Let's Ask the Students . . . Virginia

In May 1997, 42 students from four high schools in three urban school divisions in Virginia talked with AEL staff about their school experiences. Although the schools were in a metropolitan area, they would not be considered inner-city, urban schools. The students reflected gender and ethnic diversity, but they all seemed to be successful and engaged in school activities. Most had plans to attend college after graduation.

AEL focus group facilitators conducted each of the sessions. Field notes and audio recordings were grouped for analysis and reporting. No individual student or school is identified in the following summary.

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Innovations

Questions invited students to tell us their perceptions of recent innovations in education.

Block scheduling is a widely adopted innovation in Virginia, and the effect of block scheduling on students was of great interest to AEL and its Virginia Board members. Therefore, we selected high schools that had implemented some type of block scheduling.

Virginia students talked about four school changes: (1) block scheduling, (2) curriculum, (3) technology, and (4) safe, drug-free schools. Students also responded to questions about the quality of their education.

Block Scheduling

The students spoke favorably and at length about their experiences with block scheduling. Block scheduling differed dramatically from school to school. Some followed a 4 x 4 block—students take four courses per semester, each course meeting for about 90 minutes. Students can complete a one-year course in one semester. Others have alternating-day block schedules where core courses take the full year to complete, but most classes meet for 90 minutes. Still others had 90-minute periods on Tuesday and Thursday, with 45-minute classes on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday.

Students said they thought science, higher-level math courses, and art benefitted from the longer class period. Foreign languages, music classes such as band and chorus, and lower-level math worked best with shorter, daily class periods. Students in the alternating-day schedule said they liked seeing teachers every other day; experiencing variety in day-to-day schedules; and having increased flexibility to schedule homework around work, sports, and clubs.

Students said missing a day of school for illness was like missing two days of a class in a traditional program. Students also criticized teachers who didn't adapt their teaching strategies to longer periods. Some also had problems with scheduling the elective courses they wanted, especially in their senior year.

Curriculum

Students commented positively about their curriculum, using words like "good" and "comprehensive." They liked the availability of Advanced Placement (AP) courses and increased course options. Some students observed that they were fortunate their school could afford to offer a wide variety of courses; they were aware that schools in other areas of Virginia could not offer as many choices.

Students said they would have liked more writing earlier in their school career and more variety and diversity in courses, such as African-American literature. Some felt some classes were too easy, and minorities felt they tended to end up in "dumbed-down" classes.

In one school, students spoke enthusiastically about integrated courses that were taught as part of the block schedule. They praised a junior year American studies class that combined English and social studies, saying, "It's good." "It's interesting." "It helps you reinforce what you learn in both subjects." "It's really a good idea."

Technology

We heard that the number of computers varies from school to school, as does student access to computers. Some students reported good equipment at their school. Others mentioned a lack of computers. Some schools had access to the Internet; others expected to get access soon. We learned that some teachers use computers and others don't. One student explained, "We have a computer lab, but teachers have to be there for us to use it." When asked about the availability of computers, another student said, "We are not where we should be, but we are getting there." Students believed that computer literacy was not required to graduate.

Safe, Drug-Free Schools

Generally, students were not concerned about their safety. Students at one school initiated the conversation about how their school was safer today than it was their freshman year. Fighting, which used to be a daily occurrence, had completely stopped. So had smoking, which students described as "really bad" when they were ninth graders. Drugs, too, were no longer evident. They attributed the improvements to the establishment of strong rules and locked bathrooms—the very characteristics they would like to change at their school. "There are other ways to solve the problem," observed another student. "Students in upper grades can be good role models for younger students."

Students at more than one school had to stay inside the building all day. Although no incidents were reported, students observed that fears of drive-by shootings stimulated by news stories gripped adults with "excessive paranoia." Students at another school said their school was safe, then added, "Much better than [another school division]."

African-American students felt they had experienced discrimination. One student said, "It just becomes an everyday part of life." Another had experi-

enced low expectations and had to insist on being admitted to advanced courses. She said, "You can't let teachers get away with it; not saying anything is the worst thing you can do."

Quality of Education

Questions invited students to share their perceptions of the quality of education, quality of learning, and preparation for life after high school. Generally, students from all four Virginia high schools gave their schools high marks. Their comments included, "It is good, but not perfect," "Topnotch," "You can't have a school where everyone is happy," and "Others who are not as involved in school activities may not rate it as high." In fact, at one school, the students agreed that if they had children, they would send them to that school, because they felt it was safe, offered a good education, was a good size, and had a lot of community support. Some mentioned that their school "had more opportunity than schools in [another] part of the state" and "was a good facility—[other school divisions] didn't have books or lockers." They wondered how students in those schools could learn.

Teaching

Not surprisingly, students described their school most often in terms of their experiences with teachers. They explained that they learn best when teachers are very knowledgeable—"absorbed with the topic," "know their subject and appear to want to learn more," "make the subject come alive," are "enthusiastic," "patient," "excited," "creative," "humorous," and "don't act like it's just a job."

Students also indicated they learned best when teachers use a variety of teaching strategies. They mentioned teachers who "use visuals," "experiments," "hands-on activities," "simulations," "*no* worksheets," and provide "challenging work."

In addition, students said they learn best when teachers show they care. They mentioned teachers who "talk to students not down to students"; "focus on students, ***not*** on getting through the material"; "help students think, figure things out"; "are willing to help after school"; "answer questions when asked"; and "show you respect."

Grades were important to the students. Although they generally found grading to be fair, they had experienced teachers who weren't. They complained about inconsistencies in grading practices between advanced placement and regular classes. Students who transfer find they may have to adjust to grading scale differences between schools. Students admitted that they had learned to "play the game to beef up their grade-point average."

Learning

When students identified the most important things they learned in or out of school, most were associated with personal, not academic, topics. Some mentioned lessons such as taking "responsibility" and "achieving balance in life." Others told us they learned "how to be a strong person when things don't go your way" and that it's important to "stand up for what you believe; don't be shy." Others said "that personal efforts lead to success," "It is important to work hard to get what you want," and "It's important to challenge yourself to prepare for later."

Lessons in time management were a common theme. Students said they had learned "to prioritize and not procrastinate" and "to get things done." One student said, "Deadlines are hell! I missed the deadlines for some of my college applications," and another said, "I procrastinated and didn't get into the college I wanted."

One student said he had learned "the importance of having a positive attitude"; another learned that "everyone in life has the same desire—to find a place to fit in"; and still another found that "name brand isn't everything when it comes to college; less well-known schools may be better."

Students stated that you know you have learned something when "you can explain it to others," "when you can teach others," "when you don't have to think about it—it just comes automatically," "you feel a sense of confidence," and "you understand the concepts, not just memorization."

Students said things that helped them learn included "practice," "paying attention in class," "taking good notes," "interested and interesting teachers," "being motivated," "applying what you've learned; learning by doing," and "the people around me—my community."

Activities

"Football and basketball dominate the athletic program" at one school. Some students maintained that "girls' sports were getting stronger." Several students viewed sports as contributing to "balance in life" and their "personal growth." Sports provide an "outlet for frustrations and stress that built up during the school day," and serve as "a community, a good place to be with one's friends."

Involvement in clubs help them "escape study hall," declared some students. "Club membership," added another student, "looks good on college and job resumes." Students who belong to clubs at one school are required to do community service, such as tutoring other students. Students were pleased about growth in club membership at one school; they attributed growth to enthusiastic club sponsors and student leadership. Students also like to participate in a program in which high school students go to the middle school to recruit students as a way to ease the younger students' transition to high school.

Clubs and sports are important, explained one student: "If you only go to class, school is like jail." But others noted, "Too many activities can interfere with learning."

Finally, at least one school we visited is already listening to students. Their opinions are solicited by the principal, who selects students to serve on an advisory council. Next year, students said, they expect to be asked to evaluate teachers. ◆

Let's Ask the Students . . . West Virginia

AEL staff visited four rural high schools in April 1997 and spoke with 46 seniors. The students reflected diversity in gender, course-taking patterns, academic ability, and career interests. Students also reflected views typical to small town, rural living: everyone knows everyone and personal relationships with teachers are common. While the students sometimes felt they didn't have a reference point for comparing the quality of their schools to others, they were quick to point out that they had knowledge about "things" outside their community—they were not "isolated and sheltered" from the rest of the world.

AEL staff conducted focus groups with the students using a series of predetermined questions. We found that students in three of the schools had similar views on many topics; the fourth school's students offered different perspectives on several of the questions.

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Innovations

Interview questions were developed to learn student perceptions of recent innovations in education, as well as of the quality of education, quality of learning, and their preparation for life after school. In West Virginia, innovations of interest were school safety, block scheduling, technology, school to work, and inclusion. All four schools we visited had adopted block scheduling.

School Safety

No student from the four rural schools reported any major problems, with students generally feeling very safe—one of the benefits of rural life, they thought. Occasional fights and some smoking in bathrooms were mentioned, but they said drug problems were minor. One group did say that, although their high school was fine, the junior high was "full of problems."

Block Scheduling

Most students liked block scheduling—where it was implemented properly—praising it for providing enough time for lab classes and other hands-on work. They also enjoyed working in groups and getting a feel for what college classes will be like. At the fourth school, the response was more negative, largely because lunch break had been shortened from an hour to 30 minutes. As a result, students lost time they formerly had available for club activities during lunch. Students at another school complained about less club time, too.

All students had complaints about teachers who hadn't changed their teaching styles to fit the longer classes. Ninety-minute lectures and more worksheets drew much criticism. Scheduling problems were also mentioned, specifically the difficulty of getting required classes into a less-flexible routine. However, students admitted it would be easier for kids who started with block scheduling as freshmen. The seniors we spoke with switched to block schedules in the middle of their high school careers.

Three of the groups said they "hated it at first," but now they and their communities seem to be pleased with block scheduling. Students at the fourth school said "no one is a strong fan."

Technology

West Virginia students had plenty to say about their schools' shortfalls in technology. Many felt handicapped by their inexperience and limited opportunities to use computers. One group reported they had no access at all. Students in the fourth school reported limited access due to two restrictions: they couldn't use computers unless they paid lab fees, and the teachers didn't know much about computing so they had difficulty teaching students. One teacher reportedly didn't want students using the Internet for fear that they'd find "sex pictures."

Some students said they learned basic keyboarding skills in lower grades but didn't have enough opportunities to learn more skills. In general, the students said they were interested in and understood the importance of technology, but the initiative came too late to benefit them in their high school experience.

School-To-Work Opportunities

Students had little, if any, experience with the National School-To-Work initiative—one school had none and another said it wouldn't be in place until next year. Students in the fourth school had no experience, but did mention that "we do have voc-ed 'over there'" (meaning a vocational center) and those kids "actually learn something—marketing, construction, nursing assistant—and get a diploma that says you are already something."

Two schools had co-op programs in place, and their students spoke well of the "real-life work experiences" they provided, although some of the jobs were described as "not relevant."

Inclusion

Inclusion drew mixed reviews from students, with comments ranging from "inclusion students hold the class back" to inclusion is "a real growth in social skills for all students." Several students commented that some teachers didn't seem to like the policy, but tolerated it. Students acknowledged that many "special ed" students aren't really mentally challenged, but simply had "poor home life." One school had a partners club that paired disabled students with others and organized outings for club members.

Quality of Education

Students felt they weren't always being challenged; they described many classes, particularly lower level or non-college prep ones, as "bonehead," "watered down" and "dumbed down." They wished their schools had offered a better variety of courses and more computer, foreign language, science and higher math classes, and they felt they really didn't learn how to develop study skills.

Learning

Students reported that their experiences over the past year had taught them several valuable lessons: "the real world is a much bigger step than we've ever taken," meeting deadlines is important, "you're going to have to work for a living," "no two people are the same," and, when dealing with teachers, "do them how you would like yourself to be done."

You know you've learned something, the students said, when you can "help someone else," "use it without thinking about it," "never forget it," or "understand your French, science, or math teacher."

Students explained that schools helped learning by keeping many classes (college prep more than others) small, providing hands-on experience, relating lessons to real life—as in one school's well-liked mentoring program—and by having teachers who are willing to work "one on one" and who take the time to really explain something.

Schools hindered student learning by having limited course offerings, restricting access to computers, not having enough money for equipment and facilities, and being understaffed in some areas, particularly counseling. Students at all schools complained that counselors were overworked and didn't have the time to advise them properly or help them meet college application deadlines. Three of the groups agreed that their counselors tried hard and really cared. The other group described their counselor as "having their own problems," which interfered with helping students.

Unequal treatment also hindered learning, according to some students. In a small school where everyone knows everyone else, who your family is can affect the way you're treated and the grades you receive, they thought.

Teaching

Students readily praised teachers who "talk to you as an individual," create a "good learning atmosphere—quiet—not a bunch of goof-offs," "have a good sense of humor," and make learning fun.

However, students criticized teachers who continued to offer only lectures in class. With block scheduling, sitting still and taking notes for 90 minutes "puts people to sleep." Some teachers, especially at the fourth school, gave "way too much busy work." Students reported that they often had to do worksheets in class, and even had to write down the questions—presumably a way for teachers to fill the longer class period.

School Changes

The students we spoke with all wanted open campuses, at least during lunch if not all day. "We had it 20 years ago, but now it's like a prison here." At the fourth school, students could only go to their lockers twice a day and had to carry their school handbooks when out of class—"so if you say, 'Nobody ever told me I couldn't,' they say, 'Oh yes, it says right here.'"

The poor quality and limited selection of cafeteria food received several mentions, as did dirty bathrooms. One group wanted more parking spaces for students; others wished for better buildings.

Students thought it would be great if parents got involved with more than athletics and that athletics often get too much attention. They suggested providing recognition in other areas, such as band and academics.

Long bus rides between home and school drew criticism, as did early school starting times. Many objected to fees and expenses for participating in some athletic events and lab classes.

Overwhelmingly, students agreed that they have little to no voice or impact. As one student put it, "They [administration] worry about the little things, and let the big things go." ❖

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