Voices of Students on Engagement:

A Report on the 2006 High School Survey of Student Engagement

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"I wish school could be intellectually challenging as well as academically challenging."

— HSSSE 2006 Student Respondent

Introduction & Overview

In response to Question 34 on the 2006 High School Survey of Student Engagement (HSSSE), which asks students if they would like to say any more about their answers to the questions on the survey they just completed, one student wrote, "I wish school could be intellectually challenging as well as academically challenging." This discernment between what is "academically challenging" — the curricular content, class work, standardized tests — and what is "intellectually challenging" — the discussions and activities that push students to think and interact on a deeper, more conceptual level — reflects both the student's articulation of a desire for a different kind of schooling and the challenges that educators face in understanding and strengthening student engagement.

Engagement is about relationship; engagement is not a solo activity. The ways in which the word "engagement" is used in a variety of contexts outside of education highlight the relational and interactive nature of the concept of engagement: two people become "engaged" when they commit to entering a permanent, ongoing, and intimate relationship with each other; two forces become "engaged" in battle when they confront each other, committing to an antagonistic, violent relationship; a performer who commits to working in a particular venue for a set amount of time, creating a temporary relationship with the venue and with an audience, is said to have agreed to a "limited engagement."

Engagement within the school context is also about relationship. Student engagement can be described as the student's relationship with the school community: the people (adults and peers), the structures (rules, facilities, schedules), the curriculum and content, the pedagogy, and the opportunities (curricular, co-curricular, and extracurricular). There are many ways in which a student may engage with the school community; the degree to which a student is "engaged" in school is dependent on the quality, depth, and breadth of the student's relationship with these various aspects of the life and work of the school.

Measuring and understanding student engagement is a challenge for both schools and researchers. Achievement can be investigated through assessments, test scores, and other quantifiable measures. Studying student engagement, on the other hand, can seem like measuring the "un-measurable," as engagement is heavily dependent on interaction, collaboration, and perception. Most important in this process of exploring student engagement is hearing and understanding what the students themselves say and believe about their relationship to the school community. The High School Survey of Student Engagement investigates the attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs that students have about their work, the school learning environment, and their interaction with the school community, providing a forum through which schools can better understand the perspectives of their students and bringing these critical voices of students into conversations about school reform and school improvement.

Four key questions from the survey serve as a starting point for this report. Students were asked how they feel about the following statements related to their high school:

- *"If I could select a high school, I would go to the same school again":* 61% said they "agree" or "strongly agree"
- *"I care about my school":* 70.5% "agree" or "strongly agree"
- *"I am engaged in school":* 72% "agree" or "strongly agree"
- *"I am an important part of my high school community":* 55% "agree" or "strongly agree"

Responses to these four questions indicate that a majority of students in the HSSSE 2006 pool of respondents are content with their high school, care about their high school, are engaged in school, and feel they are an important part of their high school community. This is good news. However, in a "No Child Left Behind" world, in schools which play a key role in shaping the intellectual and social development of students, just having a majority may not be enough. Of particular concern is the fact that nearly half of the student respondents do not feel they are an important part of their high school communities. For high schools attempting to create learning

communities in which students are active, engaged, and achieving, student responses to these questions provide important information that can be used effectively for planning and school improvement.

Participating schools use their data from the High School Survey of Student Engagement to understand what their students think about the life and work of their high schools, and to improve structures and practices at their individual schools. This overview report highlights findings from across the entire pool of HSSSE respondents in 2006 — 81,499 students in 110 schools within 26 different states — providing a window into students' thinking within high schools of many varieties: large, small, and midsize; East, West, and Midwest; urban, suburban, and rural. The report first provides a profile of HSSSE 2006 schools and respondents, then details selected findings from HSSSE 2006, and concludes with strategies schools have employed to strengthen student engagement.

TABLE 1. HSSSE 2006 Participating Schools by Region

Region	States with HSSSE 2006 Schools	Number of Schools	
Northeast	DE, MA, ME, NH, NJ, NY, PA	13	(12%)
Southeast	AL, FL, LA, TN, VA	19	(17%)
Midwest	IL, IN, KS, MI, MN, MO, OH, WI	61	(56%)
Southwest	NM, OK, TX	7	(6%)
West	CA, CO, WY	10	(9%)

Profile of HSSSE 2006 Participating Schools

In Spring, 2006, 110 schools from 26 different states in the U.S. participated in the High School Survey of Student Engagement. The average student enrollment at a HSSSE participating school in Spring, 2006, was 1,010; the smallest participating school had an enrollment of 37, and the largest participating school had an enrollment of 3,881.

Schools by Region

Each of the five regions of the country — Northeast, Southeast, Midwest, Southwest, and West — was represented in the pool of participating schools in 2006, though the majority of the schools were located in the Midwest. Table 1 presents the schools by region, along with the states represented within each region.

Schools by Community Classification

HSSSE 2006 participating schools were situated in a variety of contexts: urban, suburban, town, and rural. About a third of the 2006 schools were classified as urban, about a third were classified as suburban, about a quarter were classified as rural, and the remaining schools were situated in towns. Figure 1 presents the percentage of schools located in each of the four locales.

School Sizes

HSSSE 2006 participating schools ranged in size from 37 students to 3,881 students; the mean student enrollment of participating high schools was 1,010 students. Thirty-four schools had enrollments of 500 or fewer students, 27 schools had enrollments of between 501 and 1000 students (inclusive), 38 schools had enrollments of between 1,001 and 2,000 students (inclusive), and 11 schools had enrollments of 2,001 or more students. Figure 2 shows the percentage of schools within each size range.

Figure 1. HSSSE 2006 Participating Schools by Community
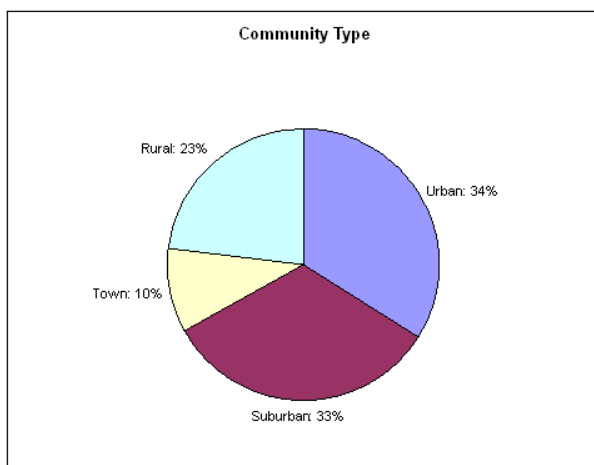
Figure 2. HSSSE 2006 Participating Schools by School Size
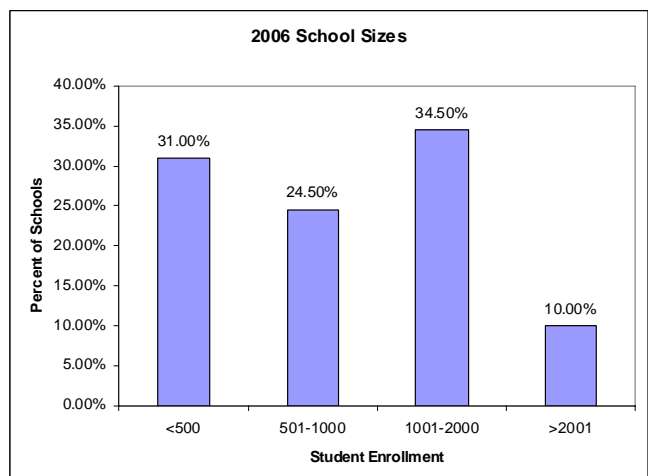
Profile of HSSSE 2006 Participating Students

In 2006, 81,499 students participated in the administration of the High School Survey of Student Engagement; these students accounted for 73% of the students enrolled in participating schools. Students reported on a number of demographic characteristics, providing a picture of a diverse pool of respondents.

Students by Grade Level

In 2006, 27% of HSSSE respondents were in grade 9, 29% were in grade 10, 25% were in grade 11, and 19% were in grade 12. Most of these students — 87% — began attending their current high school in grade 9. Figure 3 presents the breakdown of HSSSE 2006 respondents by current grade level; Figure 4 presents the breakdown of HSSSE 2006 respondents by the grade in which they started attending their current high school.

Students by Sex/Gender

HSSSE 2006 respondents were almost evenly split between males and females, with slightly more females (51.5%) than males (48.5%) completing the survey.

Students by Race/Ethnicity

HSSSE 2006 respondents were asked to identify themselves by race and/or ethnicity. Choices given were: (1) American Indian, Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian, or other Native American, (2) Asian, Asian American, or Pacific Islander, (3) Black, African, African American, or of Caribbean origin, (4) Latino, Hispanic, or of Spanish origin, (5) Middle Eastern, or (6) White, White American, or European. Students also had an alternate option, "I prefer not to respond." Students who identified themselves within two or more race/ethnicity categories were classified as "Multiracial." Figure 5 presents the breakdown of HSSSE 2006 respondents by race/ethnicity.
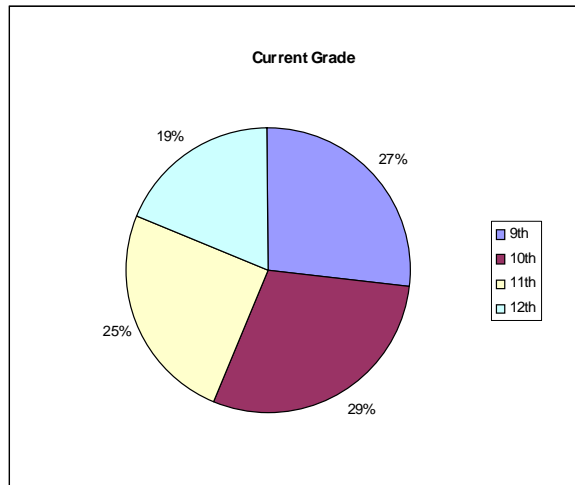
Figure 3. HSSSE 2006 Respondents by Grade Level

Figure 4. HSSSE 2006 Respondents by Grade Level on Entering Current High School
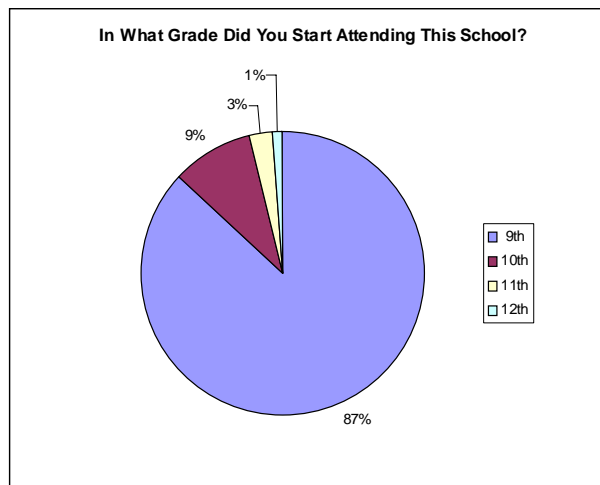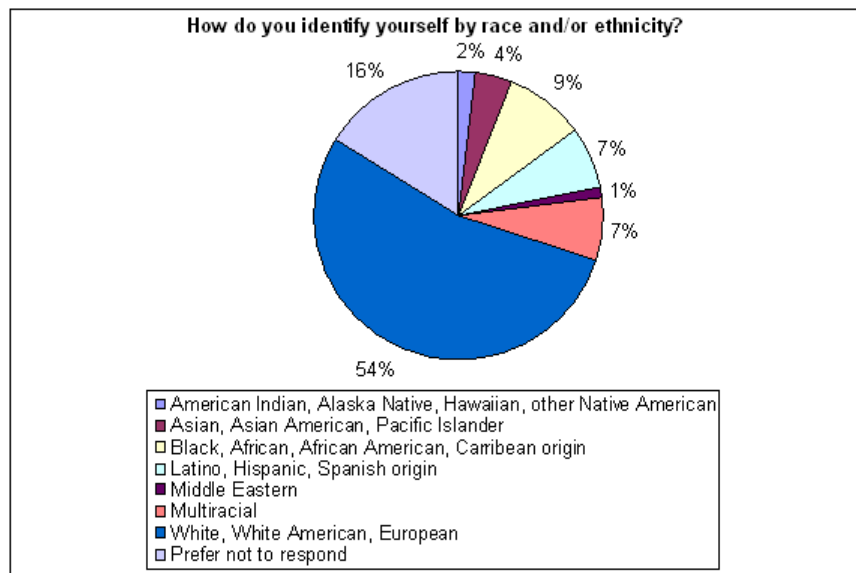

Figure 5. HSSSE 2006 Respondents by Race/Ethnicity

Students by Free/Reduced Lunch

Whether or not a student participates in a free or reduced-price lunch program in high school is an indicator of the socio-economic status of the student and the student's family. Of the HSSSE 2006 respondents, 21% reported being eligible to receive a free or reduced-price lunch at school, 58% reported that they were not eligible, and 21% did not know if they were eligible or preferred not to respond to the question.

Students by Primary Language at Home

Eighty-five percent of the HSSSE 2006 respondents report that English is the primary language spoken in their homes, 8% report that a language other than English is their primary home language, and 7% report that more than one language is spoken equally in their homes.

Students by High School Grades

Two out of three HSSSE 2006 respondents report that they receive either "Mostly As and Bs" or "Mostly Bs and Cs" in their high school classes. Among HSSSE respondents, 17% report that they receive "Mostly As," 39% report that they receive "Mostly As and Bs," and 29% report that they receive "Mostly Bs and Cs." For the remaining grade options, 10% of the respondents report that they receive "Mostly Cs and Ds," 3% report that they receive "Mostly Ds and Below," and 1% either don't know or attend schools where grades are not used.

Students by Academic Track

Students were asked which of the following categories — career/vocational, general/regular, honors/college preparatory/advanced, or special education — describes their academic track or most of their classes. Students were also given the option to mark "don't know." Three out of four HSSSE 2006 respondents were primarily in either "general/regular" classes or "honors/college prepara-

Figure 6. HSSSE 2006 Respondents by Academic Track
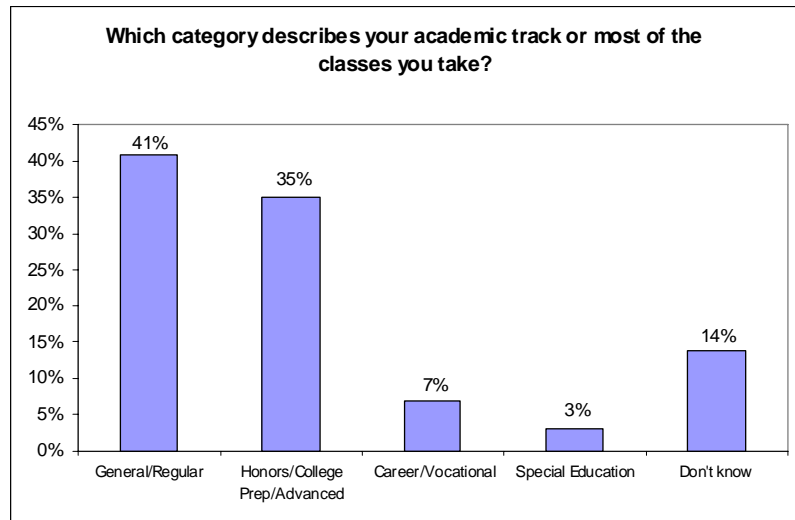
tory/advanced" classes. Figure 6 presents the breakdown of HSSSE respondents by academic track.

Why Do Students Go to School?

In building a foundation for understanding the ways in which students engage with learning in school and with the school community, it is important to know why students go to school. Almost three out of four students responded to the question, "Why do you go to school?" by saying, "Because I want to get a degree and go to college." Nearly as many students complemented this academic purpose for being in school with a socially-based response, "Because of my peers/friends." More than half of the students stated a legal reason as well, "Because it's the law."

It is critical for schools to recognize students' academic purpose for being in school as well as their social purpose. Important to note as well is that fewer than half of the respondents go to school because of what happens within the classroom environment ("Because of what I learn in classes"), only about a third of the respondents go to school because they like being in school

("Because I enjoy being in school"), and fewer than one-fourth of the respondents go to school because of their instructors ("Because of my teacher[s]").

In order from most common response to least common response, here is how students responded to the question, *"Why do you go to school?"*:

- Because I want to get a degree and go to college: 73%
- Because of my peers/friends: 68%
- Because it's the law: 58%
- Because I want to acquire skills for the workplace: 47%
- Because of what I learn in classes: 39%
- Because I enjoy being in school: 34%
- To stay out of trouble: 24%
- Because of my teacher(s): 22%
- Because there's nothing else to do: 22%

Boredom and Engagement

Boredom is one sign of a lack of engagement in the classroom and school environment. Students were asked, "Have you ever been bored in class in high school?" A great majority of the students responded that they are bored at least every day, if not in every class.

Two out of three students are bored in class in high school at least every day; 17% of the respondents are bored in every class in high school. Only 2% of the students surveyed have never been bored in high school.

Here is how students responded to the question, *"Have you ever been bored in high school?"*:

- Never: 2%
- Once or twice: 4%
- Once in a while: 27%
- Every day: 50%
- Every class: 17%

Students were then asked, *"If you have been bored in class, why?"*:

- Material wasn't interesting: 75%
- Material wasn't relevant to me: 39%
- Work wasn't challenging enough: 32%
- No interaction with teacher: 31%
- Work was too difficult: 27%

Three out of four students state that the reason they are bored in class is that "Material wasn't interesting," and 39% state that "Material wasn't relevant to me." Academic content is clearly an issue for students in their engagement within the classroom. Quite important as well is the level of interaction between teacher and student; nearly one out of three respondents (31%) indicate that they are bored in class because they have "No interaction with teacher."

Dis-engagement

Dropping out is a way for students to "dis-engage" from the school environment. Recent articles calling the U.S. "Dropout Nation" (Thornburgh, 2006)[1] and pointing to both the prevalence of dropouts across the nation and the high cost to states and society of dropouts (Bridgeland, DiLulio, & Morison, 2006; Levin, Belfield, Muennig, & Rouse, 2007),[2] indicate a growing dropout problem; further evidence indicates that students see dropping out as a viable option, whether or not they understand the consequences in terms of personal costs.

In connection with dropping out and "dis-engagement," students were asked a series of three questions:

- *Have you ever skipped school?*
- *Have you ever considered dropping out of high school?*
- *If you have thought about dropping out of high school, why?*

Some key student responses to these questions:

- 50% of the respondents have skipped school either "once or twice" (34%) or "many times" (16%)
- 22% of the respondents have considered dropping out of high school, either "once or twice" (15%) or "many times" (7%)
- Among those who have considered dropping out of high school, the most prevalent reasons given were: "I didn't like the school" (73%), "I didn't like the teachers" (61%), and "I didn't see the value in the work I was being asked to do" (60%)
- Of particular note is that 24% of the students who have considered dropping out of high school — approximately one out of four of these students — indicated that a reason for considering this option was that "No adults in the school cared about me"
- Of the students who have considered dropping out of high school, the reasons they gave for considering this option are:
    - I didn't like the school: 73%
    - I didn't like the teachers: 61%
    - I didn't see the value in the work I was being asked to do: 60%
    - Family issues: 42%
    - I needed to work for money: 35%
    - I was picked on or bullied: 28%
    - No adults in the school cared about me: 24%
    - The work was too easy: 19%

Students who have skipped school many times are most likely to have considered dropping out of high school many times as well. Schools can use this information to identify a key risk factor for dropping out. Rather than viewing skipping school solely from a disciplinary perspective (i.e., a behavior to be punished), approaching students who skip school from the perspective of dropout prevention and intervention may yield effective results in reducing the risk of these students dis-engaging from the school community.

Time and Priorities

Time-on-task is an often-used measure of student engagement. The logic goes that the more time spent on a particular task, the more engaged the student is with that activity. However, a critical aspect of the quality of engagement with any particular task is the importance students place on that activity. HSSSE 2006 participants were asked both how they spent their time and how they rate the importance to them of particular activities. Tables 2 and 3 present student responses to these two questions — how much time they spend on particular activities and how important these activities are to them — focused on activities associated with engagement in the life and work of high schools.[3]

Interestingly, though students report spending very little time on activities related to academic work — for example, "Doing written homework" and "Reading and studying for class" — they report that these are among the most important activities to them. Conversely, some of the activities that respondents say they spend a great deal more time on — such as "Watching television and/or playing video games" and "Surfing or chatting online" — are rated by respondents as being relatively low in terms of importance to them.

- 43% of respondents report spending 0 or 1 hour per week doing written homework; 83% report spending 5 hours or fewer per week doing written homework
- However, 80% of the respondents report that, to them, doing written homework is "somewhat important," "very important," or a "top priority"
- 55% of respondents report spending 0 or 1 hour per week reading and studying for class; 90% of respondents report spending 5 hours or fewer reading and studying for class
- However, 73% of the respondents report that, to them, reading and studying for class is "somewhat important," "very important," or a "top priority"
- 66% of respondents spend some time each week working for pay; 21% of

TABLE 2. Number of Hours Spent in a Typical Seven-Day Week on Particular Activities by HSSSE 2006 Respondents

Activities	Number of Hours				
	0	1 or fewer	2-5	6-10	10+
Written homework	7%	36%	40%	12%	5%
Reading/studying for class	12%	43%	35%	7%	2%
Reading for self	16%	40%	30%	9%	5%
Participating in school-sponsored activities	32%	17%	21%	13%	17%
Practicing a sport / musical instrument	30%	12%	23%	16%	19%
Working for pay	34%	13%	18%	13%	21%
Volunteer work	48%	30%	16%	3%	2%
Exercising	8%	22%	36%	18%	15%
Watching TV / playing video games	6%	24%	39%	18%	13%
Surfing / chatting online	21%	27%	30%	14%	9%
Talking on the phone	8%	32%	32%	15%	13%
Socializing with friends outside of school	4%	10%	32%	27%	27%

TABLE 3. Importance of Particular Activities to HSSSE 2006 Respondents

Activities	How Important				
	Not at All	A Little	Somewhat Important	Very Important	Top Priority
Written homework	6%	14%	34%	37%	9%
Reading/studying for class	8%	19%	33%	32%	8%
Reading for self	16%	29%	33%	18%	4%
Participating in school-sponsored activities	24%	16%	21%	27%	11%
Practicing a sport / musical instrument	24%	12%	19%	30%	16%
Working for pay	19%	16%	26%	29%	11%
Volunteer work	28%	27%	28%	14%	3%
Exercising	7%	14%	29%	38%	12%
Watching TV / playing video games	25%	36%	25%	9%	5%
Surfing / chatting online	31%	30%	25%	10%	4%
Talking on the phone	17%	30%	31%	17%	6%
Socializing with friends outside of school	4%	9%	25%	42%	20%

respondents spend 10 or more hours per week working for pay
- 48% of respondents do not spend any time doing volunteer work; however, only 28% say that doing volunteer work is "not at all" important
- 70% of students spend two or more hours per week watching television and/or playing video games; only 39% rate these activities as "somewhat important," "very important," or a "top priority"
- 53% of students spend two or more hours per week "surfing" or chatting

online; only 39% rate these activities as "somewhat important," "very important," or a "top priority"

- 60% of students spend two or more hours per week talking on the phone; 54% rate talking on the phone as "somewhat important," "very important," or a "top priority"
- 86% of students spend two or more hours hanging out/socializing with friends outside of school; 87% of respondents rate socializing as "somewhat important," "very important," or a "top priority"

Support from Adults

Support from adults — at least one adult — is critical for students to remain present in school and is a foundation for student engagement. Much of the research on student engagement focuses on students' need for a connection with an adult in the school community. Seventy-eight percent of the HSSSE 2006 respondents agreed or strongly agreed that "There is at least one adult in my school who cares about me and knows me well." However, more than one out of five students (22%) disagreed or strongly disagreed with that statement. Looking at where that adult support comes from, students reported feeling the most support from teachers and the least support from administrators.

Student responses to the statement, *"I feel supported by the following people,"* broke down as follows:
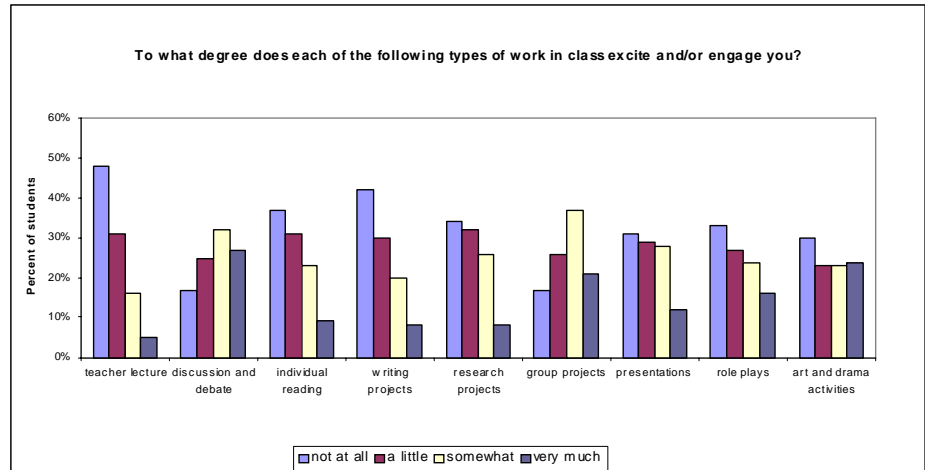
- Teachers: 81% agree or strongly agree, 19% disagree or strongly disagree
- Administrators: 60% agree or strongly agree, 40% disagree or strongly disagree
- Counselors: 73% agree or strongly agree, 27% disagree or strongly disagree
- Other adults (secretaries, custodians, etc.): 61% agree or strongly agree, 39% disagree or strongly disagree

School Structures and Safety

Students often have difficulty becoming and remaining engaged in environments they feel are unsafe or unfair. While the majority of students feel safe in their schools and feel they are treated fairly, a large number of students do not feel the same way:

- I feel safe in my school: 78% agree or strongly agree, 22% disagree or strongly disagree
- This school's rules are fair: 53% agree or strongly agree, 47% disagree or strongly disagree
- I am treated fairly in this school: 72% agree or strongly agree, 28% disagree or strongly disagree

Figure 7. HSSSE 2006 Respondents' Views on Various Pedagogical Methods

To what degree does each of the following types of work in class excite and/or engage you?

Legend: not at all — a little — somewhat — very much

Pedagogical Possibilities

Students were asked to identify the kinds of work in class — the methods of teaching and learning — that would excite and/or engage them. Figure 7 presents students' responses to this question. Overall, students are most excited and engaged by teaching methods in which they learn with their peers; these methods include discussion and debate (83% are "a little," "somewhat," or "very much" excited/engaged), and group projects (83% are "a little," "somewhat," or "very much" excited/engaged). Students are also engaged by activities in which they are active participants, such as presentations (69% are "a little," "somewhat," or "very much" excited/engaged), role plays (67% are "a little," "somewhat," or "very much" excited/engaged), and art and drama activities (70% are "a little," "somewhat," or "very much" excited/engaged). Students are least engaged in activities in which they do not play an active role, such as teacher lecture (only 52% are "a little," "somewhat," or "very much" excited/engaged, while 48% are "not at all" excited/engaged).

Dimensions of Engagement

Engagement is a complex construct, and the research literature, while at times conflicting, supports a "multifaceted" approach to understanding and analyzing student engagement (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004).[4] While schools often make productive use of analyzing students' responses to individual questions, it is critical to look at groups of questions linked together within particular aspects of engagement. In analyzing the HSSSE 2006 data, three primary dimensions of engagement were utilized: *Cognitive/Intellectual/Academic Engagement, Social/Behavioral/Participatory Engagement,* and *Emotional Engagement.*

Cognitive/Intellectual/Academic Engagement describes students' effort, investment, and strategies for learning — the work students do and the ways students go about their work. This dimension, which focuses primarily on engagement during instructional time and with instruction-related activities, can be described as *engagement of the mind.* Questions that were grouped in this dimension of engagement include questions about homework, preparation for class, classroom discussions and assignments, and the level of academic challenge that students report.

Social/Behavioral/Participatory Engagement captures students' actions in social, extracurricular, and non-academic school activities, including interactions with other students — the ways in which students interact within the school community. This dimension can be thought of as *engagement in the life of the school*. Questions that were grouped in this dimension of engagement include questions about extracurricular activities, students' interactions with other students, and students' connections to the community within and around the school.

Emotional Engagement emphasizes students' feelings of connection to (or disconnection from) their school — how students feel about where they are in school, the ways and workings of the school, and the people within their school. Largely focused on students' internal lives, but not always expressed in observable actions and behavior, this dimension can be described as *engagement of the heart*.

In looking at their data, schools may focus on one or more of these dimensions of engagement. High schools that are attempting to improve academic programs and transition students to postsecondary educational opportunities may focus more heavily on Cognitive/Intellectual/Academic Engagement. High schools that are trying to improve support networks for students — through advisories, interventions, etc. — may examine Emotional Engagement more closely.

An Engagement Gap?

Schools across the United States continue to spend considerable time and resources working to close gaps in achievement on standardized assessments. The data from the 2006 High School Survey of Student Engagement indicates that there may be another type of gap that exists within high schools. Among the HSSSE 2006 respondents, there are noticeable gaps in the levels of engagement across the three dimensions of engagement: *Cognitive/Intellectual/Academic Engagement, Social/Behavioral/Participatory Engagement,* and *Emotional Engagement.*

With so much focus on the achievement gap, the HSSSE 2006 data suggest that there is another gap for schools to pay attention to: *the engagement gap.* Further research will need to focus on the nature of the engagement gap, and its possible connection to the achievement gap. This is an issue for researchers to investigate more closely, and for school communities to explore and address through concrete action steps. Addressing the engagement gap is an important first step toward engaging all students in a school community.

Some of the findings of an analysis of the three dimensions of engagement for all HSSSE 2006 respondents are as follows:

- Girls report being more engaged across all three dimensions than boys.

- White students and Asian students report being more engaged on all three dimensions than students of other races.

- Across academic tracks, students in honors/college preparatory/advanced classes report being more engaged on all three dimensions than students in other tracks.

- Special education students report being less engaged on all three dimensions than students in other academic tracks.

- Students in general/regular education classes and students in career/vocational classes report approximately equal levels of engagement on all three dimensions, and fall between the other two tracks in terms of levels of engagement on all three dimensions.

- Students who are not eligible for free or reduced-price lunch programs report higher levels of engagement on all three dimensions than students who are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch programs.

- Students report being less engaged on all three dimensions in each successive grade from grades nine through twelve — i.e., across grade levels, students in grade 9 report being most engaged on all three dimensions, students in grade 10 report lower levels of engagement than students in grade 9, students in grade 11 report lower levels of engagement than students in either grade 9 or grade 10, and students in grade 12 report lower levels of engagement than students in all other grades.

Question 34: Qualitative Data on a Quantitative Survey

The last question on the survey, Question 34, asked students, "Would you like to say more about any of your answers to these survey questions?" Providing students with an opportunity to freely share their thoughts in an open-response format, at the end of a fill-in-the-bubble survey, yielded a wide range of valuable data on students' thinking about engagement and their high school experience.

While the quantitative data can be scored, tabulated, and "crunched" into means, percentages, and counts, the qualitative data from Question 34 presented greater challenges for reporting and analysis. The benefits to schools of this kind of data on student thinking, however, are tremendous. Student comments were categorized by content of response; some samples of pertinent comments and recurring responses are presented here (to the extent possible, student quotes are presented as they were written on the surveys).

✦ ✦ ✦

There were many positive comments about the schools that students attend:

At our school college is made accessible [sic] to everyone. We also stress diversity a lot.

*** is an awesome school and everyone is blessed to come here.

School is good!

✦ ✦ ✦

Students who like their teachers and/or staff often named specific adults in the building:

I love Mrs.*** and there are many teachers here that have had a huge impact on my education and my life.

My lit teacher is the best lit teacher I ever had. My Geo teacher enjoys/ respects my opinions.

Mr.*** should get some sort of recognition. He in my opinion is an amazing teacher/person.

✦ ✦ ✦

There were qualifications that some students put on positive comments. One example follows:

When I said I go to school because of my teachers, it's only for the 1-2 that care.

✦ ✦ ✦

Many students made strong negative comments about their schools, focused on a general dislike of the school as well as particular areas in which they felt the school was lacking or certain aspects of schooling that the students felt were overemphasized:

If I had the choice to go back, I never would have let my parents send me here.

This school promotes grades and success very much but not at all developing individuality or being a good person.

All our school really cares about is getting good grades on the standardized tests not about life after high school.

We spend way too much time preparing for our state tests we should instead be learning more productive material.

✦ ✦ ✦

Safety, rules, and discipline are areas of concern for a number of students:

I feel unsafe in my school.

I don't feel safe in school because there are so many fights and I'm getting sick of it.

I generally do not like this school. Every morning I wake up wishing I didn't have to go. I am scared I will get beat up.

I hate the rules here. They are too strict and need to mellow down. That's most of the reason I hate this school.

The admin should revisit its policy application and certain rules which prohibit freedoms.

Ok I think *** is the worst school ever they do not have good discipline and students do not respect teachers.

I hate the way this school doesn't enforce the school rules until when [sic] it is almost over.

✦ ✦ ✦

As with comments about teachers and staff whom they liked, students who didn't like adults in the building often were very specific about what and whom they did not like:

Mrs.***, please be more approachable and easier to talk to. Students will like you more.

Ms.*** doesn't teach at all she hands out work sheets doesn't even tell we [sic] what to do and says due in 10 min.

I feel that some of these teachers don't like me for who I am.

The reason I am bored in class is because of calculus. The teacher is very strange, yells a lot, belittles people, and says inappropriate things.

Sometimes I don't feel treated fairly by administration because they favor some students over others.

I feel especially like our school's counselors don't care for the students.

While some students commented on how classes were too challenging, others commented on how classes were not challenging enough, and some students wrote about how their classes were just not interesting:

Schoolwork takes up too much of my time and is extremely challenging.

I enjoy learning but the pressure for college success is often intimidating and the workload is tremendous.

Our school needs to be more challenging. Students fall asleep because the classes aren't really that interesting.

In ques 15 & 16 the answers given may project me as a bad non-studying student. I study not because I need not. High school is boring.

In all classes I think there should be more interestive [sic] activities + descussion [sic] to keep the students [sic] attention.

School is easy. But too boring. Harder work or more work is not the answer though. More interesting work would be nice.

We should be required to do a certain amount of hands on activities in our classes + some tests should be oral.

✦ ✦ ✦

Students freely offered their schools recommendations about what they believe the school needs:

I don't think this school promotes extracurricular activities enough.

Place less value on things like football.

High schools need to focus more on helping students with college and their future. We are not encouraged to be ourselves.

There's not enough emphasis on arts in this school.

Teachers and Programs make this school - Please get us a better band program!

The art programs lack finance and the ability to grow.

✦ ✦ ✦

Discrimination — in the form of racial prejudice, the dominance of cliques, and favoritism toward certain students or ideas — was identified by a large number of students as a problem in schools:

Cheerleaders/Jocks get special treatment, plain and simple.

I think my school is very close minded [sic]. Being a minority at my school has been one of the most difficult…

This school isn't always fair with sports and grades.

*There are a lot of "clicks" [sic] at ***. Kids aren't nice to each other. Many people are made fun of. The Honor Code is a joke.*

This school is horribly unfair to conservative male students. This needs to change.

*** * * is a very closed-minded school. Almost all students and teachers are racists and don't encourage education after high school.*

✦ ✦ ✦

Finally, one of the most prevalent ideas that students wrote about in response to Question 34 was that, despite their efforts to fill out the survey and communicate their beliefs, nothing would change as a result of expressing their views:

These surveys are pointless because you guys will do nothing even if there is a problem.

I don't believe you will use my answer so this is pointless.

Why do you ask these questions when we know that your [sic] not going to change high school?

This questionnaire was absolutely ridicclous [sic]. My answers (and those of the other students) aren't going to change this school.

Why would you want students to take this servey [sic]…are you even going to try to help the schools?

✦ ✦ ✦

While it is evident that many students used the space in Question 34 to express a wide range of views — kudos and critiques, analysis and recommendation, frustration and excitement — the overwhelming number of comments from students that their efforts to express their views were "pointless" since they were sure no action would come from this project speaks to the need for students to be taken seriously if they are to be engaged in school. Students seem to be looking to be respected and acknowledged as important parts of their high school communities; taking students seriously and taking action on their ideas is a step toward creating a more engaged student body and an engaging school community.

Using HSSSE Data

Participating HSSSE high schools receive a comprehensive and customized data report of their students' responses to survey questions. As a result of the depth and breadth of the data in the report, there are a wide range of action steps that schools can take to improve their structures and practices. Many 2006 participating schools have already begun to dig into their data and implement strategies to create more engaging learning environments. This section highlights two such effective strategies.

A large urban high school learned through their 2006 HSSSE data that many students felt that adults in the building did not know them or support them. The school had been focusing for quite some time primarily on raising achievement and test scores of students, and as a result of their HSSSE data, decided to put some time and energy into improving the support for students within the high school. This year, the school has begun to implement "advisories" — regular meetings of small groups of students with a teacher for academic, social, and emotional support — in an effort to make the school feel more intimate for students, to connect students to the school community, and to strengthen the connections between adults and students in the building.

Two small high schools — one urban and one rural — found that their students were not as engaged academically as they had hoped and thought the students would be. To address this issue, while focusing on the HSSSE data, these schools plan to involve students in the analysis of the engagement data in a variety of ways: (1) create focus groups of students to talk more about their thoughts on the survey questions; (2) have students participate with staff members in looking at the data together and planning action steps for the school based on their collaborative analysis; and (3) use the survey data in academic classes as content (e.g., look at statistics, charts, and graphs in math classes, look at research on engagement in a humanities class, learn to interview each other

to get more information and then write about it in an English or social studies class).

Each of these examples highlights schools that looked at their HSSSE data, decided their priorities, and began a series of action steps to address the issues raised by students in their survey responses. The survey data provided these schools with students' perspectives, and the schools are using what they've found to make important changes to their learning environments.

Conclusion: On the Value of Valuing Student Voices

What is the purpose of schooling in high schools today? Is it to get students to pass classes and standardized tests, get a high school degree, and move on? Or is it to engage students deeply in learning, to plant seeds of intellectual interest that will carry students into the next stages of education and work? On the High School Survey of Student Engagement, many students say that their primary purpose for being in high school is to get a degree and go on to college, but many also say that, while they are in high school, they want to be intellectually, academically, socially, and emotionally engaged with the life and work of their high schools.

The current educational environment is shaped by a sharp focus on accountability; in this context, passing rates, graduation percentages, and standardized test scores are the most common barometers of high school success. But the students who participate in HSSSE are looking for something more in their high school experience: to be actively involved in their learning, to be intellectually challenged, to be taken seriously as individuals, and to mean something within their high school communities. When given the opportunity, students are very clear and eloquent in their beliefs about schooling and education, and their voices — as expressed through the HSSSE survey — can be effectively used to bring about important changes in

the cultures, structures, and practices of individual high schools.

HSSSE data indicate that students believe there is much work to be done in high schools to create actively engaging teaching and learning communities for all students. Students seem to become less engaged as they move through their high school years. There are gaps in levels of engagement that deserve attention: girls tend to be more engaged in high school than boys; White and Asian students report being more engaged than students of other races; students in honors and advanced classes appear to be much more engaged than special education students, with general and vocational students in the middle; students of lower socioeconomic status report being less engaged than students of higher socioeconomic status. These gaps are important to focus attention on, and to close. There needs to be more research investigating the potential link between the engagement gap and the achievement gap. Certainly it is possible that engaging students more actively in the life and work of high schools will have an effect on levels of achievement; this is an important issue still to be studied.

Schools that participate in the High School Survey of Student Engagement are ready to hear what students have to say about their experiences, their priorities, their interactions in high school, and their relationship to the school communities of which they are a part. These schools have begun to use their data to make important changes and improvements, and are seeing the enormous benefits of understanding and strengthening student engagement in their high schools.

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End Notes

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

4. Fredricks, J.A., Blumenfeld, P.C., & Paris, A.H. (2004). School engagement: Potential of the concept, state of the evidence. *Review of Educational Research, 74*(1), 59-109.

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High School Survey of Student Engagement

**More about the High School Survey of Student Engagement
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