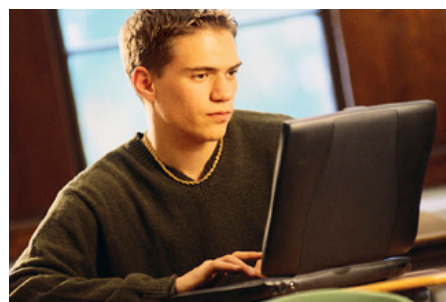


# MY VOICE NATIONAL STUDENT REPORT (GRADES 6-12) 2010



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## Executive Summary

Students who have aspirations have the ability to dream and set goals for the future while being inspired in the present to reach those dreams. The presence of high aspirations is fostered by the Quaglia Institute for Student Aspirations' 8 Conditions that Make a Difference®: Belonging, Heroes, Sense of Accomplishment, Fun & Excitement, Curiosity & Creativity, Spirit of Adventure, Leadership & Responsibility, and Confidence to Take Action. These Conditions provide an organizing structure for the report.

The *My Voice*™ Student Aspirations Survey assesses various aspects of student aspirations by asking students to respond to 63 statements about the 8 Conditions, as well as a set of demographic questions. For the present report, the *My Voice* Survey was completed by 19,444 students in grades 6-12 during the spring of 2010. Forty-three schools from six different states (from the South, Midwest, and Northeast regions of the United States) representing various sizes and socioeconomic backgrounds were included.

Results show that while there are a number of positive signs across these Conditions, the overall picture suggests there are many areas in which today's schools must improve if our students are to reach their full aspirational potential. This overall message is reflected in the results for the Condition of Belonging. Some points of encouragement can be found in this Condition; for example, nearly three-quarters of students report feeling accepted for who they are at school, and a relatively small proportion (17%) say that have difficulty fitting in at school. However, the greater theme for Belonging was one of disconnection; less than half of students think their teachers care about their problems and feelings, feel they are a valued member of the school community, or are proud of their school.

Student reports for the Heroes Condition look similar. On the positive side, about three-quarters of students have a teacher who is a positive role model, and the vast majority of students feel their parents care about their education. At the same time, only about half of students believe their teachers care about them as individuals, care if they are absent from school, or feel they have a teacher with whom they can talk if they have a problem. Respect among students and teachers in the school setting is generally low.

Results around Sense of Accomplishment are somewhat more promising, though there remains room for improvement. Three-quarters of students reported that they are encouraged to practice good citizenship and that teachers recognize students who are kind and helpful. Roughly nine in ten students believe getting good grades is important to them. Despite this, a notably lower percentage of students (72%) actually put forth their best effort in school, and even fewer (62%) feel that their teachers recognize them when they do. Nearly one in five give up when they encounter difficult schoolwork.

Unfortunately, students do not typically report schools to be places where they experience much Fun & Excitement. Less than half of students say they enjoy being at school. Only slightly above one-third think their teachers make school an exciting place to learn. Roughly half report that school is boring. At the same time, seven in ten believe learning can be fun, suggesting dividends are likely to be paid to schools which seek to improve this Condition.

The results for Curiosity & Creativity are more positive, though again they point to needed improvements. Roughly three-quarters of students report enjoying learning new things, feel that what they learn in school will benefit their future, and say their teachers present lessons in different ways; about seven in ten report learning new things in school that are interesting to them. At the same time, only two-thirds report that creativity is encouraged in their school, and even fewer (59%) feel inspired to learn in school. Barely four in ten feel their classes help them understand what is happening in their everyday lives.

Similar pluses and minuses are evident in the responses indicating Spirit of Adventure. On the upside, at least eight in ten students report pushing themselves to do better academically and desire to do their best in school. On the downside, most students do not report liking challenging assignments, and most do not feel that fellow students are supportive of each other in their school. Approximately one-quarter of all students are reluctant to challenge themselves because they are afraid they might fail. And if they do make mistakes, less than two-thirds of students feel their teachers will help them learn from them.

Results for Leadership & Responsibility show that while most students are relatively confident in their leadership skills (roughly two-thirds see themselves as leaders and good decision makers), their impressions of the school environment suggest they are not typically given opportunities to actualize these capacities. Indeed, just over one in three students feel that other students see them as leaders. Moreover, less than half of students feel they have a voice in decision making at school or believe that teachers are willing to learn from students.

Perhaps the most encouraging of the Conditions results are for Confidence to Take Action. Clear majorities of students (at least eight in ten) report high goal-striving and confidence in their ability to be successful, along with some sense of the kind of person they want to become. Fewer, but still a reasonably high number of students report teachers believing in them and expecting them to be successful (74%). Still, only about two-thirds of students report confidence that they can make a difference in the world and that school is preparing them well for their futures, which certainly leaves room for improvement.

Beyond reporting on the Conditions, the results were broken down by male versus female, and (separately) by middle school versus high school. On the whole, there are few gender differences of practical significance. Females typically report higher effort and goal-striving, and greater enjoyment of being at school. Similarly, the differences between students' reports in middle school and high school are, for all practical purposes, relatively small. The differences that do exist suggest that students in middle school put in more effort and are more likely to feel school is preparing them well for their futures, and that teachers communicate more often with their parents. Additionally, bullying is reported to be more of a problem in middle school than high school.

Overall, we find the results of the 2010 *My Voice* (grades 6-12) National Student Report in places rather encouraging, and in others quite eye-opening. In general, students report relatively high levels of confidence in themselves, interest in learning, and desire to set and achieve their goals. At the same time, their perceptions of the school conditions that might foster their aspirations suggest fairly high levels of boredom and disengagement, a relative lack of relevance of school to their daily lives, generally low levels of respect among teachers and students, and rather mixed impressions of the supportiveness of their teachers. Taken together, students' general self-confidence and desire to achieve, coupled with schools' apparent struggles to engage and support them, may be a recipe for reduced performance, dropout, and ultimately a squandering of the full potential of our youth. If schools are to be places in which teaching and learning thrive, this must change. Listening to the voices of students is the first step.



## The Role of Student Aspirations in Today's Schools

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

In order for students to have and sustain high aspirations, the conditions that enable them to reach their goals must be in place. These Conditions are known as the 8 Conditions that Make a Difference and are a critical, often overlooked, part of education and school improvement initiatives. The 8 Conditions have been identified and defined by Dr. Russell J. Quaglia, an internationally known leader in the study of student aspirations. The 8 Conditions are: Belonging, Heroes, Sense of Accomplishment, Fun & Excitement, Curiosity & Creativity, Spirit of Adventure, Leadership & Responsibility, and Confidence to Take Action. The 8 Conditions make a difference because they help schools live out the three Guiding Principles of Aspirations work: Self-Worth, Active Engagement, and Purpose.

### Developing Students' Self-Worth:

#### *Belonging, Heroes, and Sense of Accomplishment*

Self-Worth begins when students experience a sense of Belonging: They feel like they are part of the school community while being recognized and appreciated for their uniqueness. Students also experience Self-Worth when someone in their lives believes in them. They need Heroes: people they can look up to, respect, and learn from. To develop Self-Worth, students also need a Sense of Accomplishment. They must be recognized as much for their effort, perseverance, and citizenship as they are for high grades and good test scores. As students build Self-Worth, they are more likely to persevere through difficult tasks and be inspired to take the steps needed to reach their goals.

### Fostering Students' Active Engagement in Learning:

#### *Fun & Excitement, Curiosity & Creativity, and Spirit of Adventure*

Active Engagement means that students experience Fun & Excitement in their learning. They become so involved they almost lose track of time and space. At the end of the lesson, they wonder, "Where did that time go?" Actively engaged students are not afraid to ask, "Why?" or "Why not?" about the world around them. Curiosity & Creativity are alive in the way they learn, fostering inquisitiveness and a desire to satisfy their minds with new discoveries. Engaged students also have a Spirit of Adventure. They are not afraid to try new things, or to take on healthy challenges, regardless of whether they might succeed or fail. With Active Engagement, learning becomes important in and of itself.

### Encouraging a Sense of Purpose:

#### *Leadership & Responsibility and Confidence to Take Action*

Schools must challenge students to think about their Purpose—who they want to become as well as what they want to be. To reach this goal, students need to explore what it means to have, and create, a successful and rewarding life. Purpose is about being responsible, accountable, and confident. To develop Purpose, students need the opportunity to assume Leadership & Responsibility in their lives. They must learn to make decisions and understand the consequences of their choices. When students have Purpose, they have the Confidence to Take Action towards a meaningful, productive, and rewarding future. They believe in themselves and are motivated to reach their dreams.

In order to measure the 8 Conditions that Make a Difference in today's schools, the *My Voice*<sup>™</sup> Student Aspirations Survey was developed.

### The *My Voice* Student Aspirations Survey

The *My Voice* Student Aspirations Survey assesses various aspects of student aspirations by asking students to respond to 63 statements about the 8 Conditions, as well as demographic questions. Students respond to the 8 Conditions statements on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree. The survey takes approximately 15 minutes to complete. By asking students how they perceive their school environment, *My Voice* provides educators with a powerful tool for understanding both what motivates and inspires students to achieve, and how well students believe their school is meeting those objectives. *My Voice* is a powerful tool for initiating innovative, meaningful school change.

## My Voice National Student Report (Grades 6-12)

The *My Voice* National Report is organized around the 8 Conditions. In each section, the Condition is defined and data on the survey statements about that Condition are described. The data are reported in percentages based on the combined number of students who responded Strongly Agree or Agree to each statement. The results are then discussed in relation to key aspects of the Condition. Separate sections are dedicated to gender differences and changes between middle school (grades 6-8) and high school (grades 9-12).<sup>1</sup>

### Demographics for the *My Voice* National Report

The *My Voice* Survey was completed by 19,444 students in grades 6-12 during the spring of 2010. Forty-three schools from six different states (from the South, Midwest, and Northeast regions of the United States) representing various sizes and socioeconomic backgrounds were included. Forty-nine percent (49%) of the students surveyed were female and 51% were male. Grades 6-12 were represented as follows:

Grade Level	
Grade 6	19%
Grade 7	23%
Grade 8	23%
Grade 9	10%
Grade 10	8%
Grade 11	10%
Grade 12	8%

The participants identified themselves as being from a range of racial and ethnic backgrounds<sup>2</sup>:

Race/Ethnicity	
White	83%
Black or African American	9%
Hispanic/Latino	5%
American Indian or Native Alaskan	3%
Asian	3%
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	1%
Other	6%

<sup>1</sup> All aggregate statistics reported for the full 6-12 sample were weighted to have even representation of each grade; the section showing differences between middle and high school levels was not weighted by grade.

<sup>2</sup> Respondents were permitted to indicate more than one race/ethnicity.

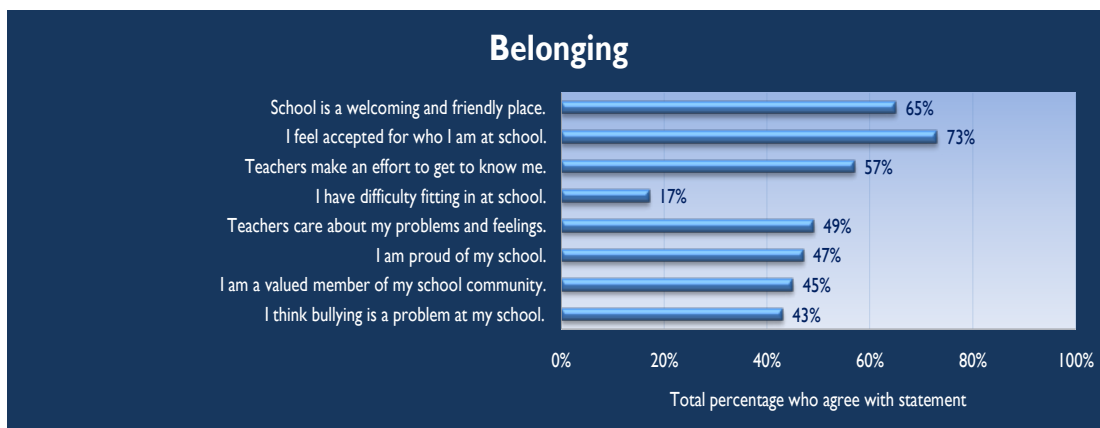
## CONDITION I. BELONGING

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

### Students' Perceptions of Belonging

There are two key aspects to the Condition of Belonging in schools. First, students must perceive school as a community in which they feel connected, safe, and supported. Sixty-five percent (65%) of the students surveyed agreed with the statement "School is a welcoming and friendly place," while 57% agreed that their teachers make an effort to get to know them. Just under half (47%) of all students reported they are proud of their school, and 43% of students surveyed agreed bullying is a problem at their school.

The second key aspect of the Condition of Belonging is that students feel valued for who they are as individuals. Seventy-three percent (73%) of the students surveyed agreed with the statement "I feel accepted for who I am at school," while 45% of students reported that they were valued members of the school community. Forty-nine percent (49%) believe teachers care about their problems and feelings, and 17% said they have difficulty fitting in at school.



### Discussion

Evidently, many students do not experience school as a place they feel safe, supported, or connected. These findings may surprise teachers and school leaders who make an effort to get to know their students and to create a sense of community within the school building. If we are to increase the number of students who feel connected to

their school, we must ask students how they would foster a welcoming and supportive school environment. What does a welcoming school look like to students? How do boys and girls define bullying differently? If we listen to the voices of students and how they understand the Condition of Belonging, we may also see more positive results in the area of school pride, which less than half of the students surveyed say they feel.

Students' feeling of acceptance is relatively positive, with approximately 7 out of 10 students feeling accepted for who they are at school. However, the finding that less than half (45%) of the students feel valued for who they are is cause for concern. Acceptance is important, but not enough; feeling valued for who they are, and truly cared about as individuals, helps students develop a sense of self-worth. The finding that less than half of the students surveyed believe their teachers care about their problems and feelings is also troubling. While most teachers would claim they care deeply about their students, it is critical teachers show they care in ways that are meaningful to their students.

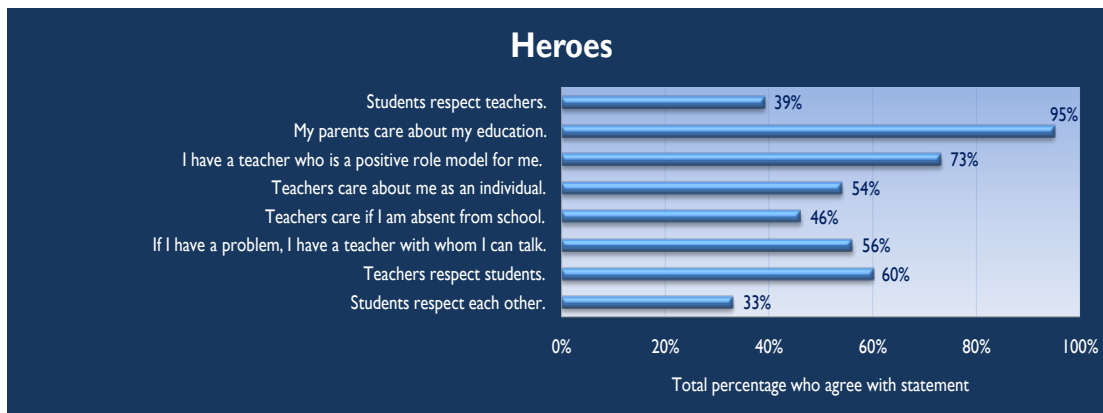
## CONDITION 2. HEROES

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

### Students' Perceptions of Heroes

The Condition of Heroes emphasizes the critical ways teachers believe in, support, and inspire students. In response to *MyVoice* statements about this Condition, 73% of students surveyed said they have a teacher who is a positive role model. Just over half of the students agreed that “Teachers care about me as an individual” (54%) and “If I have a problem, I have a teacher with whom I can talk” (56%). Less than half (46%) of the students agreed that “Teachers care if I am absent from school.”

The Condition of Heroes is also about respect, not just between teachers and students, but students and one another. Just 39% of students surveyed said students respect teachers and even fewer reported students respect each other (33%). Teachers fared somewhat better, with 60% of students agreeing with the statement “Teachers respect students.”



## Discussion

Students' responses to these statements tell us three critical things. First, although teachers have the potential to inspire and support students, they are not consistently doing so in ways students recognize. The finding that nearly three fourths of students say they have a teacher who is a positive role model is encouraging. Yet far fewer students report that teachers respect students, are concerned about them as individuals, or care if they are even present in their classes. One conclusion is that even though many students find a role model among their teachers, they have less favorable perceptions of teachers' attitudes toward them in general. These findings reveal a need for everyone in the teaching profession, not just a "cool" or select few, to capitalize on the inherent opportunity to be a hero by showing students they genuinely care and are ready and willing to support them.

Second, these results emphasize that students perceive a general lack of respect in their schools. While just over half believe teachers respect students—a worrisome result in itself—the fact that even fewer think students respect teachers is troubling. The challenge of engaging students in their learning increases significantly if there is an essential lack of respect on either side. Perhaps most alarming, however, is that just 1 in 3 students believes students respect one another. Students, too, are in a position to be supportive of their peers and role models in the learning environment. In a climate of disrespect, the chances of such student-to-student support will be difficult to foster.

Third, clearly most students believe their parents care about their education. This figure might challenge educators who believe one of the difficulties of teaching is a lack of support and care for education in the home. With nearly all students reporting that they have parents who care, we are left wondering if the issue is parents not caring the way we want them to.

### CONDITION 3. SENSE OF ACCOMPLISHMENT

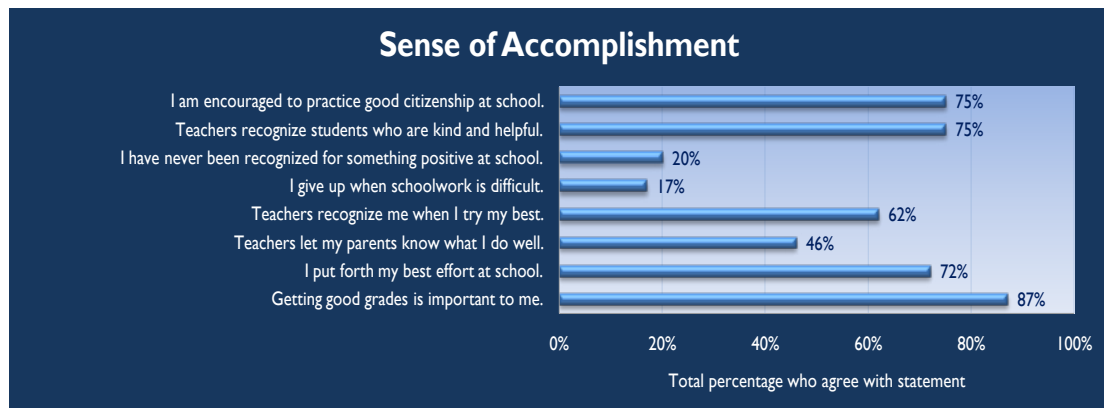
The Condition of Sense of Accomplishment recognizes effort, perseverance, and citizenship as signs of a student’s success. Educators have traditionally used a narrow view of accomplishment as it refers to academic achievement, innate ability, or who is “best in the class.” Sense of Accomplishment, however, is viewed in terms of personal growth and effort, not just through measurable outcomes and countable successes. Schools can celebrate their students’ accomplishments in visible ways. Taking time to recognize and support students’ efforts can help motivate them to persevere through difficult tasks, creating an appreciation for hard work and dedication.

#### Students’ Perceptions of Sense of Accomplishment

When asked questions about traditional forms of academic accomplishment, 87% of students surveyed agreed with the statement “Getting good grades is important to me.”

When asked questions about their effort and perseverance, 17% of students surveyed agreed with the statement “I give up when schoolwork is difficult.” Conversely, 72% said they put forth their best effort at school. Sixty-two percent (62%) of students surveyed said teachers recognize them when they try their best.

When asked about whether accomplishments are recognized or citizenship is celebrated in their school, 20% of students reported they have never been recognized for something positive at school. Seventy-five percent (75%) stated teachers recognize students who are kind and helpful, with the same percentage reporting that they are encouraged to practice good citizenship at school. Forty-six percent (46%) of students reported that teachers let their parents know what they do well.



## Discussion

Students appear to understand that schools expect them to achieve academically. While for those in a profession that highly values academics, the percentages could be higher, the majority of students say that getting good grades is important to them.

Although most of the students surveyed say they want to succeed in school, they are not necessarily putting forth the effort needed to achieve: close to one fifth of them give up when they encounter difficult schoolwork. Seven out of ten students say they try their best in school. Even fewer (62%) feel their teachers recognize them when they do try their best. The gap between wanting to achieve and putting in and sustaining the effort to meet that goal needs to be examined, as does the role teachers play in recognizing effort and perseverance.

The fact that so few students believe their teachers let their parents know what they do well is reflective of the need to communicate and celebrate student accomplishments. The data overall also reveal that schools need to do a better job of encouraging and recognizing student accomplishments of all kinds, including good citizenship. Schools traditionally recognize certain types of successful outcomes—high grades, athletic victories, etc. Yet all students need to be recognized for their unique talents and interests, as well as for the effort expended—even when the outcomes are not the ones originally hoped for.

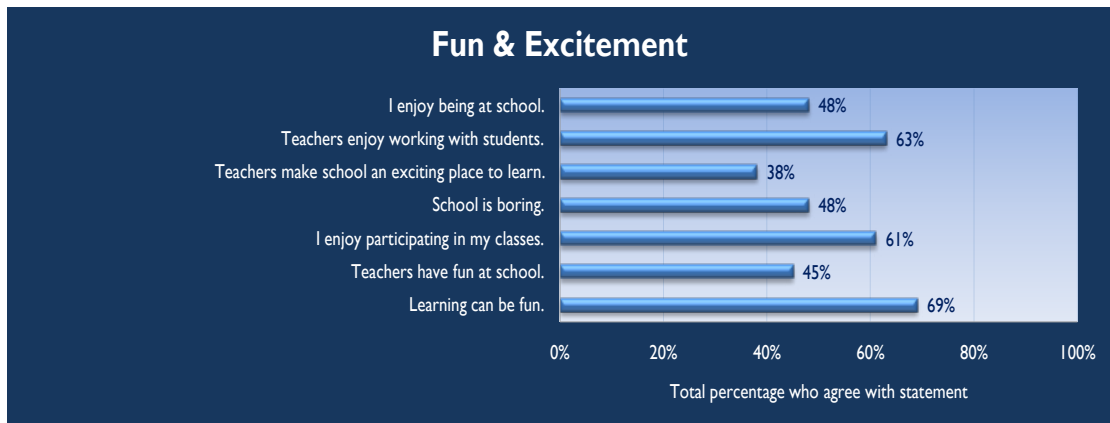
## CONDITION 4. FUN & EXCITEMENT

The Condition of Fun & Excitement is characterized by students being inspired. They are actively engaged and emotionally involved in their school work. Students who exhibit Fun & Excitement are usually self-confident, curious, and prepared; they are willing to meet the challenges of the day. To foster Fun & Excitement in schools, students need to be offered new opportunities, as well as meaningful challenges, that are connected with their individual interests. The first three Conditions—Belonging, Heroes, and Sense of Accomplishment—help establish a learning environment in which students can feel safe to have fun together in learning.

### Students' Perceptions of Fun & Excitement

Fun & Excitement is first and foremost about students being engaged in their learning. To be actively engaged in learning, students must find it enjoyable and worthwhile. Forty-eight percent (48%) of students surveyed said they enjoy being at school and 61% said they enjoy participating in their classes. While a higher percentage (69%) of students agreed with the statement “Learning can be fun,” 48% of students also agreed with the statement “School is boring.” This suggests that for at least some students, it’s possible for learning to be fun though school is failing to make it so.

The Condition of Fun & Excitement is in part determined by a teacher’s willingness to foster this Condition. However, in general students do not perceive teachers as especially engaged in the learning process. Sixty-three percent (63%) of students agreed with the statement “Teachers enjoy working with students,” and just 38% agreed that “Teachers make school an exciting place to learn.” Forty-five percent (45%) of students agreed with the statement “Teachers have fun at school.”



### Discussion

The percentage of students who believe learning can be fun is positive. Though this figure could certainly be higher, its importance is clear when contrasted with the high number of students who remain bored in school and say they do not enjoy being at school. Schools must capitalize on students’ belief that learning can be fun and employ methods that effectively engage students in the learning process.

Students’ perceptions of their teachers’ engagement in the learning process is even more striking. Students typically do not see their teachers as individuals who enjoy working with them. Whether this perception is true or not, these percentages should be an area of professional concern for all educators; educators must find ways to make clear to students that they enjoy working with them and are passionate about their role as educators.

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

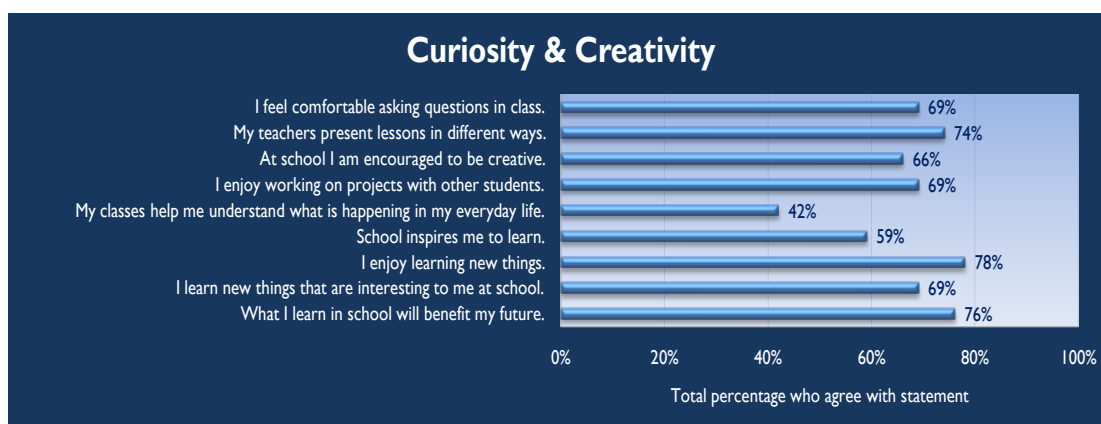
## CONDITION 5. CURIOSITY & CREATIVITY

The Condition of Curiosity & Creativity is characterized by inquisitiveness, a strong desire to learn new or interesting things, and an eagerness to satisfy the mind with new discoveries. Curiosity triggers students to ask “Why?” while creativity gives them the initiative to ask “Why not?” The intensity of Curiosity & Creativity tends to diminish over time due to the habituating effects of the environment. To sustain student motivation, schools can devote extra attention to creating learning environments that promote questioning and creative exploration.

### Students’ Perceptions of Curiosity & Creativity

The Condition of Curiosity & Creativity encourages students to experience the joy of exploring new ideas. When asked about their current learning, 78% of students surveyed stated they enjoy learning new things. Sixty-nine percent (69%) said they learn new things that are interesting to them at school.

To foster Curiosity & Creativity, educators must encourage students’ inquisitiveness and demonstrate the relevance of studying new material. Questions about Curiosity & Creativity in the classroom yielded mixed results. Sixty-nine percent (69%) of students agreed with the statement “I feel comfortable asking questions in class,” and the same percentage reported that they enjoy working on projects with other students. Seventy-four percent (74%) of students surveyed agreed with the statement “My teachers present lessons in different ways,” and 66% agreed with the statement “At school I am encouraged to be creative.” Just 42% stated their classes help them understand what is happening in their everyday lives, though 76% agreed with the statement “What I learn in school will benefit my future.” In regard to inspiration, 59% of students agreed that “School inspires me to learn.”



## Discussion

Statements about the Condition of Curiosity & Creativity reveal that 3 out of 4 students surveyed like to learn new things. Fewer, however, said that school inspires them to learn new things that are interesting. How can these percentages be improved? Students must feel safe and be engaged enough in their learning to ask “Why?” and “Why not?” Yet the data show approximately 1 out of 3 students do not feel comfortable asking questions in class. To foster genuine learning—and many of the skills being called for in the twenty-first century—students must have the chance to be creative while they are learning. Affording students the opportunity to be creative will help establish a learning environment that is inspiring to students; a necessary change, as just 3 out of 5 students report that school inspires them to learn.

In terms of relevance, approximately 2 out of 5 students said they see the connection between their current learning and their everyday lives. For students to maintain an active interest in learning, they must see a present value in it. They must be able to connect what they are studying to their world in some tangible way that leads them to ask questions and seek answers.

Interestingly, approximately 3 out of 4 students believe what they learn in school is going to be helpful to them in the future. What does it mean if our students do not see school as relevant to their current lives, but do think it is beneficial for their future? If we do not make learning relevant and inherently rewarding in the present, we are failing our students—no matter how convincingly we argue they should defer the gratification of working hard in school for the sake of getting into the college or career of their dreams.

## CONDITION 6. SPIRIT OF ADVENTURE

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

### Students’ Perceptions of Spirit of Adventure

The Condition of Spirit of Adventure is about students trying new things. It is about students moving out of the paralysis of their panic zones or the complacency of their comfort zones into their challenge zone. Students face two common obstacles when they do so: a fear of success and a fear of failure. Eighty-five percent (85%) of students reported that they want to do their best in school, while 80% of students surveyed said they push themselves to do better academically. Forty-one percent (41%) of students

reported that they like challenging assignments, and 26% reported they are afraid to try something if they think they may fail. In terms of celebrating success, only 60% reported they are excited to tell their friends when they get good grades.

Another key aspect of Spirit of Adventure is whether students feel supported when they want to try new things. Support can come from many sources, including teachers and other students. Sixty-three percent (63%) of students surveyed believe teachers help them learn from their mistakes. Peers fared less well: 43% of the students surveyed stated students are supportive of each other.



## Discussion

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

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

Finally, the finding that approximately 3 out of 5 students believe teachers help them learn from their mistakes suggests students who try something new, and fail, need more sustained support so they do not give up. Deep understanding often follows failure, which is part of the self-correcting process of learning. Schools must also explore how students can be encouraged to support each other’s healthy risk taking so all students embrace new ideas and challenges throughout their education.

## CONDITION 7. LEADERSHIP & RESPONSIBILITY

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

### Students’ Perceptions of Leadership & Responsibility

The Condition of Leadership & Responsibility is twofold: students must develop decision-making skills and have meaningful leadership opportunities. Only then can they be truly responsible leaders who make a difference in their community. Sixty-nine percent (69%) said they are good decision makers. Seventy-one percent (71%) of students also stated teachers encourage students to make decisions.

In contrast to these relatively consistent percentages, when asked about leadership in their school, just 42% of students agreed with the statement “Students have a voice in decision making at school,” and 46% of students reported they know the goals their school is working on. Forty-nine percent (49%) of students reported that teachers are willing to learn from students. Only 37% of students surveyed agreed with the statement “Other students see me as a leader.” When asked questions about themselves as leaders, 63% of students surveyed agreed with the statement “I see myself as a leader.”



## Discussion

The findings here reveal that although many students see themselves as leaders, this self-perception does not necessarily translate into leadership opportunities and action. This is most apparent in the fact that approximately three fifths of students see themselves as leaders, while just over one third believe other students see them as leaders. For the Condition of Leadership & Responsibility to thrive, students' sense of leadership cannot remain a merely internal phenomenon; students must manifest leadership in actions that are recognized by their peers and their communities, beginning at their school.

This discrepancy is perhaps explained by the findings about decision making and leadership opportunities. While the majority of students say they see themselves as good decision makers, just over two fifths of the students say they are aware of the goals their school community is working on or that students have a voice in decision making at their school. This reflects the need to foster students' self-reported decision making skills with the meaningful opportunities to create change at school, an initial step of which is clear and open communication about the goals in the learning community and an invitation to help achieve them.

Another opportunity to foster Leadership & Responsibility in students exists in teachers' everyday interactions with students. With less than half of students reporting that teachers are willing to learn from students, it becomes clear that taking time on a daily basis to listen to and learn from students would provide countless opportunities to place students in leadership roles.

It is not enough for students to see themselves as leaders and decision makers; they must put those beliefs into practice through genuine leadership opportunities. It is important to note that under three-fourths of students believe teachers encourage students to be decision makers, and that 2 out of 5 students believe students have a voice in decision making at school. This suggests that creating leadership opportunities in classrooms might be a good starting point for school-wide initiatives.

## CONDITION 8. CONFIDENCE TO TAKE ACTION

Confidence to Take Action is the extent to which students believe in themselves. It encourages them to dream about their future while being motivated to set goals in the present. This Condition is at the heart of what educators ultimately strive for: instilling in their students a confidence in and expectation of success. Confidence to Take Action is characterized by a positive and healthy outlook on life and by looking inward rather than outward for approval. Schools can help build their students' Confidence to Take Action by providing support, celebrating diversity, and encouraging independent thinking. By enhancing the quality of academic and personal growth, schools empower students to become active and involved members of their learning community.



### Students' Perceptions of Confidence to Take Action

The Condition of Confidence to Take Action is the capstone of the 8 Conditions framework, and also a goal of all educational ventures: to provide students with enough belief in themselves to set goals for the future and take steps in the present to reach those goals. When asked questions about goal-setting, 80% of students surveyed reported they think it is important to set high goals, and 81% said they work hard to reach their goals.

The ability to set and reach for goals is directly connected to a positive view of one's future. Ninety-two percent (92%) of students surveyed agreed with the statement "I believe I can be successful." In contrast, 74% of students agreed that teachers believe in them and expect them to be successful. Eighty-three percent (83%) said they are excited about their future, while 79% reported that they know the kind of person they want to become. Just 67% agreed with the statement "I believe I can make a difference in this world."

Finally, when asked about the connection between school and their future, 88% of students surveyed agreed with the statement "Going to college is important for my future," while just 67% said their current school is preparing them well for the future.

### Discussion

There is a difference between dreaming about the future and taking the steps needed to reach those dreams. The Condition of Confidence to Take Action is defined by the successful integration of these two processes, and the majority of students surveyed appear to know it is important both to set high goals and work hard to reach them. Nonetheless, one fifth of the students do not see goal setting as important. Educators must ask why as many as one third of students do not see a clear connection between school and the future they imagine for themselves. One explanation might be that not all students envision futures that benefit from scholastic efforts, yet nearly nine in ten students believe going to college is important for their future. What does this tell us

about students' understanding of the steps it takes to reach the goal of attending college and the role their present schooling is playing in that process? We must understand what it means that only three quarters of students think their teachers believe in them and expect them to be successful. Teachers play a key role in helping students believe in themselves and their abilities to reach their goals. If students don't perceive teachers believe in them, they will certainly have greater difficulty believing in themselves.

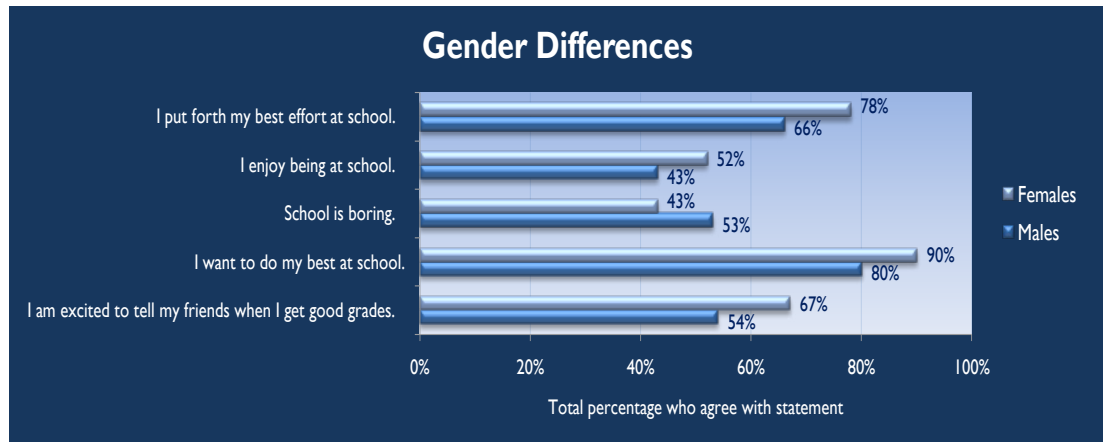
Finally, while 92% of students think they can be successful, just over three fourths know the kind of person they want to become, and still fewer believe they can make a difference in the world. Schools must foster students' belief not only in their ability to succeed, but in their awareness of who they want to become and their ability to be engaged citizens who contribute to the world around them.



## GENDER DIFFERENCES: GRADES 6-12

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

### Differences of 9%<sup>3</sup> or greater between males and females in grades 6-12



Specifically, fewer males than females said they enjoy being at school. More males than females also said school is boring. These results suggest that fewer males than females experience school as a place which actively engages them. As the 8 Conditions framework suggests, students who are not engaged in their learning are less likely to reach their fullest potential. Educators must learn from students why so many males say school is boring and they do not enjoy being there.

Educators must ask male learners to describe a motivating learning environment and to talk about what interests them. Teachers must then find ways to tap into these interests throughout the school experience.

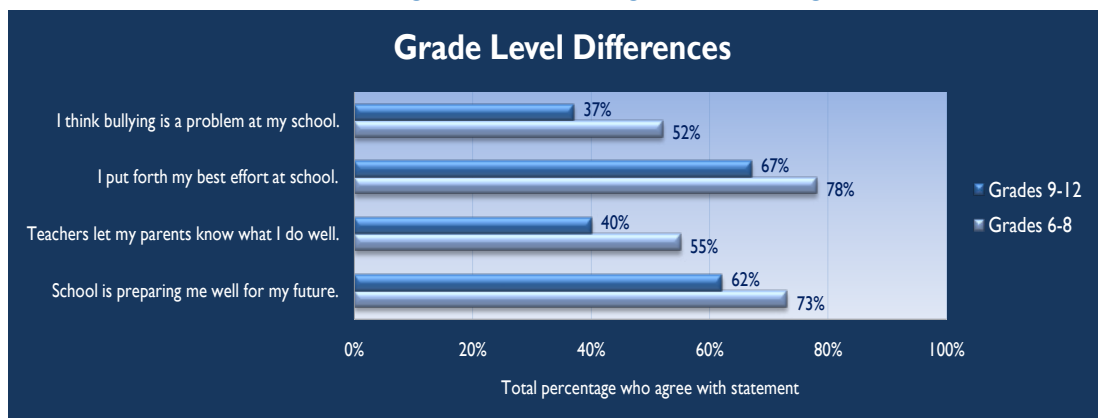
The fact that males seem to be less invested in what is happening in school than females do may provide clues for some of the other apparent gender differences around males' attitudes toward school. Is their purported relative lack of emotional engagement a reason males are less likely to view academic achievement as important, less interested in announcing their scholastic success to peers, and less motivated to put in the time and effort needed to succeed in school? Does their relative lack of enthusiasm toward school cause males to report putting in less effort and experience less desire to be successful in school than their female counterparts? As a matter of gender equality, educators have a responsibility to ask males about their effort, about their perception of grades, and about why they think school is or is not important.

<sup>3</sup> The 9% cutoff was chosen as it represents differences that are both statistically and practically significant given the gender sample sizes and variability in the responses.

## GRADE LEVEL DIFFERENCES: GRADES 6-8 and 9-12

Some grade level differences also emerged from the national data: overall, the number of students in agreement with *My Voice* Survey statements decreased between middle school (grades 6-8) and high school (grades 9-12). Whether the statement asked about students' impressions of their teachers, their school, or themselves, in general fewer high school than middle school students responded positively. In other words, according to these *My Voice* national data, one trend is that the longer students are in school, the less likely they are to experience school as a place that fosters certain aspects of their aspirations.

### Differences of 11%<sup>4</sup> or greater between grade 6-8 and grade 9-12 data



Several statements stand out from the national data as having especially strong decreases (11% or more) between middle and high school. The only particularly encouraging trend from middle to high school is revealed in the finding that fewer high school than middle school students think bullying is a problem at their school. However, the fact that more than one third of high school students still see bullying as a problem is nonetheless disconcerting.

Less positive than the trend with bullying is the decrease between middle school and high school around effort in, and relevance of, school. Despite the fact that the stakes are higher as students move from middle to high school, fewer students in high school than middle school say they put forth their best effort at school. Additionally, fewer high school students believe school is preparing them well for their future—a future they are closer to than those in middle school! Isn't it a cause for alarm that as students prepare to graduate and participate as adults in society—whether through college or the workplace—they perceive less connection between school and their future goals?

The finding that fewer high school students attest that their teachers let their parents

<sup>4</sup> The 11% cutoff was chosen as it represents differences that are both statistically and practically significant given the middle and high school sample sizes and variability in the responses.

know what they do well allows for various interpretations. For some, this may be a developmental issue as maturing adolescents seek greater autonomy from their parents. Teachers sensitive to that growing need for autonomy may shift responsibility, and therefore feedback, about school away from parents and on to students. Or, responding to that need for autonomy, parents themselves may be stepping back from a supervisory role over an older child's schoolwork and not passing on all of a teacher's feedback to their child. Whatever the explanation, teacher-to-home communication must remain vibrant so that students receive the message that all the adults in their lives care about and are willing to support their learning. Certainly, the recipe for successful outcomes for students and their families requires communication between teachers and parents that includes the positive feedback, as well as reasons for concern.

## CONCLUSION

The 2010 My Voice National Report reveals both positive and negative findings around each of the 8 Conditions that Make a Difference. While schools should take time to celebrate and learn from their accomplishments, they must simultaneously commit to making improvements in all areas. By listening, respecting, and responding to the voices of students, educators can create learning environments that will allow students to reach their fullest potential.

Among the concerns represented here, attention must be paid to gender differences and the fact that, overall, fewer males than females see their educational environment as engaging. There are also some notable downward trends between middle school and high school that are worthy of further investigation and an ongoing dialogue with students. It is naïve and ignorant to expect students to stay in school, let alone graduate and take the next steps toward reaching their fullest potential, if every year they are in school they feel less relevance and less willingness to put in their best effort.

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

As educators dedicated to positive reform in today's schools, it is our responsibility to explore in-depth the *My Voice* data so that we can fully understand and appreciate how students perceive their learning environments. In doing so, we will gain insight into students' fears, frustrations, hopes, and dreams. Only then can we honor and validate student voice, and be better prepared to make necessary changes in the teaching and learning environment; changes that ensure all schools promote all students' self-worth, active engagement in the learning process, and a sense of purpose.

## My Voice National Student Report (Grades 6-12)

### Statements by Condition

<b>Belonging</b>	<b>Total in Agreement</b>
School is a welcoming and friendly place.	65%
I feel accepted for who I am at school.	73%
Teachers make an effort to get to know me.	57%
I have difficulty fitting in at school.	17%
Teachers care about my problems and feelings.	49%
I am proud of my school.	47%
I am a valued member of my school community.	45%
I think bullying is a problem at my school.	43%
<b>Heroes</b>	<b>Total in Agreement</b>
Students respect teachers.	39%
My parents care about my education.	95%
I have a teacher who is a positive role model for me.	73%
Teachers care about me as an individual.	54%
Teachers care if I am absent from school.	46%
If I have a problem, I have a teacher with whom I can talk.	56%
Teachers respect students.	60%
Students respect each other.	33%
<b>Sense of Accomplishment</b>	<b>Total in Agreement</b>
I am encouraged to practice good citizenship at school.	75%
Teachers recognize students who are kind and helpful.	75%
I have never been recognized for something positive at school.	20%
I give up when schoolwork is difficult.	17%
Teachers recognize me when I try my best.	62%
Teachers let my parents know what I do well.	46%
I put forth my best effort at school.	72%
Getting good grades is important to me.	87%
<b>Fun &amp; Excitement</b>	<b>Total in Agreement</b>
I enjoy being at school.	48%
Teachers enjoy working with students.	63%
Teachers make school an exciting place to learn.	38%
School is boring.	48%
I enjoy participating in my classes.	61%
Teachers have fun at school.	45%
Learning can be fun.	69%

## My Voice National Student Report (Grades 6-12)

### Statements by Condition

<b>Curiosity &amp; Creativity</b>	<b>Total in Agreement</b>
I feel comfortable asking questions in class.	69%
My teachers present lessons in different ways.	74%
At school I am encouraged to be creative.	66%
I enjoy working on projects with other students.	69%
My classes help me understand what is happening in my everyday life.	42%
School inspires me to learn.	59%
I enjoy learning new things.	78%
I learn new things that are interesting to me at school.	69%
What I learn in school will benefit my future.	76%
<b>Spirit of Adventure</b>	<b>Total in Agreement</b>
I like challenging assignments.	41%
I push myself to do better academically.	80%
Students are supportive of each other.	43%
I am afraid to try something if I think I may fail.	26%
Teachers help me learn from my mistakes.	63%
I want to do my best at school.	85%
I am excited to tell my friends when I get good grades.	60%
<b>Leadership &amp; Responsibility</b>	<b>Total in Agreement</b>
Students have a voice in decision making at school.	42%
I see myself as a leader.	63%
Other students see me as a leader.	37%
Teachers encourage students to make decisions.	71%
Teachers are willing to learn from students.	49%
I am a good decision maker.	69%
I know the goals my school is working on this year.	46%
<b>Confidence to Take Action</b>	<b>Total in Agreement</b>
I believe I can be successful.	92%
I believe I can make a difference in this world.	67%
Teachers believe in me and expect me to be successful.	74%
Going to college is important for my future.	88%
I work hard to reach my goals.	81%
I am excited about my future.	83%
I think it is important to set high goals.	80%
I know the kind of person I want to become.	79%
School is preparing me well for my future.	67%