



Students Speak:

How Kentucky Middle and High School Students View School



Focus Groups conducted in the Fall of 1997
For the Partnership for Kentucky Schools
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Report Summary

The Partnership for Kentucky Schools believes that student voices should be an important part of the dialogue about Kentucky schools — how the schools are doing and how they can be improved. Students are clearly central to the education enterprise and have a unique perspective and important views to contribute, yet traditionally they have been under-represented or absent entirely when important conversations and decision-making about Kentucky public schools take place. The Partnership has launched a series of activities aimed at helping to correct that imbalance by bringing students into the dialogue with adults, and by highlighting student views when decision-making is taking place. Earlier Partnership efforts brought students, business leaders, and educators together to consider their respective views on basic questions about public education in Kentucky.

In its latest effort, the Partnership conducted a set of eight focus groups in the Fall of 1997 that aimed at developing a picture of the school experience as students see it. Participants were randomly chosen middle school and high school students. The major findings from these focus groups not only reinforce some of what most adults have known or suspected about student views of school, but also provide new or deeper insights that present challenges and opportunities for the adults who are most directly responsible for what happens in Kentucky schools.

The study focused on four research questions:

1. How are Kentucky's public high school and middle school students experiencing school?
2. What teaching strategies seem most successful and least successful to middle and high school students?

3. What impacts have school efforts at academic improvements made on students' learning and on their attitudes toward learning?
4. Do student views differ in significant ways as a result of differences in gender, grade point average, grade level, urban/ rural status, school performance on the statewide assessment, school size, or middle school/high school difference?

Research Question 4, which aims to discover whether differences in student views can be explained by differences in circumstances, cuts across the other three questions. Before describing the major findings for Questions 1-3, it is important to note that the answer to Question 4 is "No." In other words, students in all groups hold highly consistent views of their schools. It made no difference whether students came from rural or urban schools, high performing or low performing schools, middle or high schools, large or small schools. No significant difference could be attributed either to gender or to different grade point averages. Unless an exception is expressly stated, the major findings in this report reflect consistent student views across all eight groups in the four selected schools.

Major Findings

Research Question 1: How are Kentucky's public high school and middle school students experiencing school?

Finding 1:

Students experience schools as places defined primarily by the search for order and the effort to control students. From the student perspective, order and control are the main interests of the adults at school. The principal is the most visible player in this drama. Students view principals at worst as negative authority figures in constant combat with students, and at best as boosters of school pride and the extra-curricular life of the school. Students typically do not connect the principal to the academic work of the school.

Finding 2:

Students feel powerless to influence their schools' policies and practices. Students say their views and concerns have no impact on their schools. Students report that adults at school often do not respect students or consider them to be capable people.

- A. In the struggle over rules and regulations, students feel they always lose. They have no say in the determination or

enforcement of the rules. Students often view both the rules and their enforcement as arbitrary, misguided, or unfair to certain individuals.

- B. In academics, students have to live with the teachers to whom they are assigned. Students' assessment of those teachers — what they teach, how they teach, how they treat students — seems to make no difference in either the teachers' performance or in students' enforced presence in those teachers' classrooms.
- C. Students feel that they are often not treated with respect. They feel that they are treated as younger than they are, less responsible than they are, and less capable than they are.
- D. Students find the physical conditions and status of equipment at their schools often deficient. These and other factors diminish students' sense of pride in belonging to their school community, and students regret the decreased pride.

Research Question 2: What learning and teaching strategies seem most successful and least successful to middle and high school students?

Finding 3:

Students confidently assess the quality of teaching they experience. With minimal exception, different students familiar with the same teacher make highly consistent judgments about the quality of that teacher's teaching. In addition, students apply highly consistent standards when forming those judgments. In all schools students see good teachers and bad teachers. Students want teachers who:

- ▶ care about their students;
- ▶ know their subject matter and show enthusiasm for teaching;
- ▶ know how to make learning fun and use humor when appropriate;
- ▶ show how learning is applicable to "real life;"
- ▶ manage a classroom well;
- ▶ try to relate to their students as young people;
- ▶ acknowledge both good and bad behavior;
- ▶ treat all students fairly and with respect;
- ▶ are willing to answer questions and explain information adequately.

Research Question 3: What impacts have school efforts at

academic improvements made on students' learning and on their attitudes toward learning?

Finding 4:

Students are not clear about their own responsibilities for learning. They demonstrated little or no experience in thinking of themselves as active partners in a learning enterprise.

Finding 5:

Students do not see a coherent, school-wide philosophy or orientation that makes a difference in individual teacher practices. They describe wide divergence in the way individual teachers teach.

Finding 6:

Where students are aware of the impact of reform efforts (usually referred to as "KERA," the Kentucky Education Reform Act of 1990), they see the efforts as something apart from crucial learning, something extra to do in addition to more important learning tasks. Students reflect teacher resentment toward what teachers view as interference and unnecessary mandates from the state associated with reform efforts.

Introduction

Imagine for a moment that everything you can know about middle schools and high schools must come from students, and imagine that these students will do their best to describe their views of what school is like. Set aside, as much as you can, your own notions about schools, and set aside your fears that students may not make informed judgments or form accurate impressions of school. Be prepared to hear what school looks like through student eyes.

In eight focus groups in the fall of 1997 the Partnership for Kentucky Schools asked students who attend four different public schools in Kentucky to provide a picture of their world in school. The focus groups were part of ongoing efforts by the Partnership to include student views in the dialogue about improving public education in Kentucky by listening to students and taking their views seriously. Earlier Partnership efforts brought students, business leaders, and educators together to discuss basic questions about public education. The present effort is aimed at broadening the dialogue by providing information that is itself useful to the broader education community and that also can serve as a springboard for thoughtful discussion about the local student experience in many schools and communities throughout the state.

The Partnership and the researchers trained high school seniors who were Governor's Scholars to conduct the focus group interviews. The research team chose this innovative approach for two reasons. First, they believed that student participants would be less inhibited in their responses if fellow students led the groups and if no adults were present in the room. Second, the Partnership viewed the student interviewers' training and experience as an important piece of its commitment to increase students' abilities to design and lead meaningful conversations in their own schools and communities. Males and females participated in single gender focus groups, each conducted by a team of Governor's Scholars of the same gender and not from the target school district.

The Partnership chose both the schools and the individual student participants according to a careful design. The schools represent intentional contrasts along several dimensions. Two of the schools included in this study are high schools, two are middle schools. Two are rural, two are urban. According to the *Kentucky School and District Accountability Results for 1996*, which was current

when these sessions were conducted, the study included one school in each of four categories: “reward,” “successful,” “improving,” and “decline.” One middle school has fewer than 500 students; the other has nearly twice that number. One high school has fewer than 750 students; the other has more than 1,500.

Similarly, students from each school were randomly selected to represent a range of different characteristics. Of the 98 participants, 50 were female, 48 were male. Each group included a mix of students on characteristics such as race, grade level, and grade point average.

The strategic selection of schools and students reflected one aim of the research, which was to identify differences in student views of teaching and learning that might be tied to the differences in school or student characteristics. Significantly, student responses varied little on the basis of these characteristics. Students of all ages, from all types of schools, of either gender, and at all levels of grade point average held mostly similar views about their experiences in school. The overall consistency of the reported student experience is striking. Except where explicitly noted, the six findings below apply consistently despite the differences among types of schools and types of students included in the study.

Major findings

Six major findings emerged from analysis of the eight focus groups:

- ▶ Students see adults at school as more preoccupied with order and control than with learning.
- ▶ Students feel powerless to affect their schools’ policies, practices, and conditions, and feel a lack of respect from adults.
- ▶ Students make definite, consistent judgments about good and bad teaching.
- ▶ Students seem unaware that, as learners, they could assume specific work responsibilities.
- ▶ Students demonstrate no knowledge of their schools’ overall academic framework, philosophy, or orientation.

- ▶ Students, following teachers' leads, resent what they know of the Kentucky Education Reform Act's impact on their schools.

Students see adults at school as more preoccupied with order and control than with learning.

When students in this study spoke about their schools, academic subjects did not hold center stage. Instead, the students focused primarily on adults' systems for controlling student behavior.

I think some teachers focus more on tardies than they do on anything else.
— High School Female

Students' descriptions of life at school present a strong contrast between the way adults in schools regulate student behavior and the way adults approach academics. Students see and talk about the extent and detail of rules and regulations that govern behavior at their schools, and about the amount of energy that adults devote to devising and enforcing the rules. Students do not talk about energy that adults devote to devising and implementing academic philosophy or goals for the school. The students in all eight groups focused their attention on what is happening with behavior, rules, and regulations rather than on what is happening with academic subjects.

Students see the principal as the chief determiner and enforcer of rules and regulations, the one who sets the tone for student behavior and for adult relations with students regarding student behavior. Students seem unaware that the principal has anything to do with teaching and learning in the classroom. This is true whether they view the principal as benevolent or malevolent.

Some students cite a conflict that arises at times between enforcement of disciplinary rules and larger educational goals, as in this exchange:

- ___: If you walk into the... door while the bell's ringing, it don't matter, they'll push you right back out.
- ___: That's like slamming the door on your education.
[High School Male]

These aspects of the system of rules and regulations drew the most student comments:

- ▶ the administration of the punishment system for tardiness

and for misbehavior of various kinds;

- ▶ rules controlling movement in the halls;
- ▶ the intricacies of the dress code and its enforcement;
- ▶ the restrictions on seating and conversations in the cafeteria.

*...just by going to a
dress code, that
ain't going to
change problems.
—High School
Male*

Students are full of highly charged, ready opinions about the rules governing behavior. They view themselves as under siege, in a constant struggle for independent expression and personal freedom, with adults at school as the opponents. Students believe the main issue is regulation of their actions, and they do not like it.

Although students recognize the need for order within their schools, they resent the existing rule structure and find it alienating. They feel that discipline needs to be balanced with some degree of flexibility.

In addition to wanting more freedom to make personal choices about appearance and behavior, students want more freedom to socialize with their friends at school. They feel that this can happen without interrupting the school day or interfering with their education. Their conversations suggest that they are more concerned with social interaction with their peers than with anything else.

Managing impressions — those they make on others and those others make on them — appears to be a central preoccupation of middle school students, and is only slightly less central for high school students. Students are most likely to answer any question that asks about school experience in general and what would make it better by reference to their social life, and the desire for more time for it in school. As one student put it:

I just want a bunch of free time, so I can talk to all my friends that are in school. [Middle School Male]

Because rules and regulations dominate student thinking about their schools, any shift in the way those rules and regulations are promulgated and implemented tends to color student thinking about all aspects of the school. For example, one of the target schools experienced a change in principals, from one whom the students viewed as actively interested in students and supportive of them and their activities, to one whom students consider nearly despotic.

Students perceive the change of principals as making a major difference in their school, and having a significant negative impact on everything, even though their comments never tied the change directly to academics.

You have to have a good principal before you can have a good school. If you've got a principal that's into everything...into...every activity and everything up there, then it's going to be a better school than to have a principal who just don't care. You can do whatever with this and these clubs, you teachers do what you want to. Now if you've got a...an involved principal, it makes it a lot better.
[High School Male]

Students feel powerless to affect their schools' policies, practices, and conditions, and feel a lack of respect from adults.

Students believe that administrators rarely if ever take student views and interests into account, and that the teachers who do are exceptions. Although most students identified some teachers or guidance counselors with whom they feel comfortable discussing their ideas or desires, the students indicated that such people are difficult to find and insufficient in number.

Few students feel that they can discuss their needs with administrators with any success. Even in those schools where the principal is well-liked, students still feel that he/she needs to spend more time with them and pay attention to the entire student body, instead of just the discipline problems or highest achievers.

The prime person of our administration would have to be our principal, Mr. (NAME DELETED). Unless you are the president or the captain of something, you're lucky he knows that you even went to his school....[High School Female]

Students also feel they have no control over teacher competence and performance, yet are greatly affected by these factors. Students are convinced that their assessments of teaching effectiveness make no difference in who teaches them, and how well. Students feel themselves to be subject to the whims and vagaries of the system, left to manage as best they can with the teachers to whom they are assigned.

Many students feel they should have greater freedom in choosing their classes and greater input as to the structure of those classes. Students in one school recounted a story about a teacher one student described as “the best teacher I have honestly had in high school” [High School Female] who was forced to leave the school after one parent, who objected to some facet of the teacher’s personal life, reportedly threatened to ruin the principal’s reputation if the principal did not get rid of the teacher. One of the students said of the firing, “... they didn’t consider us and the way we learned.” [High School Female]

Students also believe they are not treated with respect or empathy. They feel that they are treated as younger than they are, less responsible than they are, and less capable than they are.

...the faculty don’t have...most of them don’t have respect for you, so you try your best and do everything you can do, and you still can’t earn respect from them, and they’re always down on you. [High School Male]

I think there should be a law that the teacher has to listen to what you’ve got to say. [High School Male]

I think that we should have faculty and staff who just listens to the students, because most of the time now, it’s like they just ignore us, it’s like we don’t exist. And when they do talk to us, it’s like, ‘Well, you’re a toddler, you’re a two-year-old; we don’t care; we’re older, we know better.’ They don’t know what we want; they don’t know how we feel. [High School Female]

A key part of the feeling of lack of respect comes from students’ views that school rules are often developed by adults arbitrarily, and that they are then enforced arbitrarily.

The thing that they need to change the most, just like everybody said the whole time, is the double standards. They need to have a specific way of doing things and stick with it, no matter who you are or what you do. [High School Female]

...They make all the decisions for us and they don’t ask...us...anything. [Middle School Female]

Students are keenly aware of the conditions in which they are expected to learn. Those conditions include building maintenance;

[I’d like] More freedom, better teachers, something other than chicken for lunch. —High School Male

equipment for learning and for student support; food quality and choices. Students spoke at length and in great detail about the sorry physical conditions of their schools, particularly unsafe and unsanitary bathrooms, lack of smoking areas, unappetizing cafeteria food, crowded hallways, and inadequate lockers. Students view the physical conditions at their schools as evidence of a lack of respect for student privacy, comfort, and satisfaction.

Less frequently and less vehemently, some students complained about resource issues that are more directly related to academics, such as overcrowded classrooms, inadequate supply of computers, and insufficient capacity of the computers that are available. Students view these conditions as interfering with the quality of learning and the quality of teacher-student relationships.

We should have better computers to get on the Internet with...we're supposed to be able to get on the Internet now, but we've got computers that are slow... — Middle School Male

Students attach meaning to the physical conditions at their schools. Bathroom stalls that do not close suggest lack of respect for student privacy. Failure to enforce “No Smoking” rules in the restrooms speaks simultaneously of disregard for student health and comfort, erratic enforcement of rules, and failure to accord 18 year-olds the decision-making authority they deserve as legal adults. Students interpret the locker searches and the presence of law enforcement officers and drug-tracing dogs to which some are subjected as signs of no trust between the adults and students in that school. The poor quality and lack of satisfactory choice in cafeteria food, and the regimentation some students experience during lunch, suggest to them their powerlessness in the face of indifferent authority. Old or inadequate computers and technical equipment state to students that their learning needs are not important. Overcrowded buildings, hallways, and classrooms suggest to students that no one cares if they are herded somewhat roughly from place to place, and that they exist more as numbers than names.

The fact that adults allow the problematic physical conditions to persist contributes to a pride deficit — students report that school pride is in short supply. In addition, these are not conditions students would choose if choice were possible, and yet students are compelled to spend time in whatever conditions their schools provide. For most students in this study, poor physical conditions coupled with the adults’ concentration on controlling student behavior add up to schools that are inhospitable, low-pride places at best, and prisons at worst.

Students make definite, consistent judgments about good and bad teaching.

Students have definite ideas about who teaches well and who teaches poorly, and they care a great deal about good teaching. Student perceptions of the proportion of those who teach well in their schools varies some, but students from every school cited numerous teachers who teach well and numerous teachers who teach poorly.

I think I would do more hands-on activities. I don't... like just sitting in the desk all day reading out of books. I would do things that would get the kids involved.
— Middle School Female

A major unspoken assumption that underlies student comments about the quality of teachers and the teaching they receive is that students know how to assess teaching. Students talk to one another as if everyone agrees about the quality of the work of individual teachers, as if everyone knows that Ms. X does a good job and that Mr. Y is a “joke teacher.” In fact, students’ assessments of their teachers’ effectiveness nearly always elicited complete agreement from fellow students. Any disagreements typically were minor, reflecting shades of difference in assessment rather than differing overall judgments. No student mentioned someone as a good teacher whom other students wanted to characterize as a bad teacher, nor did any students rise to the defense of a teacher whom other students described as teaching poorly.

Just as with the overall judgments about the quality of individual teachers, student views of what standards to apply in reaching judgments about good or bad teaching are highly consistent. These standards are implicit and accepted without question when students talk about teaching. In addition, even though many students do not prefer having to work hard in their classes, their judgments about effective teaching usually are not dependent on how hard a teacher makes them work. As one student stated:

Mr. (NAME DELETED) is a pretty cool teacher...except you have to work too hard in his class, but he's still a pretty cool teacher. He's...one of the best ones out there. [Middle School Male]

I would make it hard, and I would make sure the children learned... — High School Female

In fact, some students — typically females — complained that most of their classes are too easy, and are not preparing them well for life as independent adults.

...I want the knowledge and the ability to do the work for college because at (SCHOOL NAME DELETED) the work is very easy and it's not preparing us... [High School Female]

In their judgments about teacher effectiveness, students distinguish first between those teachers who care about students and those who seem not to care very much. More than anything else, students want teachers who care about them. Here are some general comments about caring teachers.

There's a lot of teachers that want to be your friend, and there's a lot of teachers that don't really care. [High School Female]

...some of them should show that they care more about the students. [High School Female]

They don't want to be there, and then you don't want to be there, so they really don't care if you learn anything or not. They just get there and get their paycheck and go home. [High School Female]

They really care. Most of them really do care about...how you do in their class, but if you're having personal problems, there's a couple of my teachers that I know that they would be the first people that I would go to before anybody. I wouldn't even go to the counselor. I would go to this teacher. [High School Female]

Students view capability as the second of the two essential ingredients of effective teaching. Students assess teacher capability on the basis of how teachers demonstrate mastery of their subjects, convey information, manage their classrooms and make learning engaging. As students see it, caring and capability are woven together in many ways to produce at least eight dimensions of effective teaching, presented here.

Effective teachers know their subject matter and show enthusiasm for teaching it.

Both the male and female students from one school praised a particular teacher repeatedly for the depth of her knowledge and for her commitment to making teaching engaging. One student said, "...she had deep insight into what she was teaching, and she taught it well." [High School Male]

Students value a teacher who both cares about the subject matter and can convey that caring to students with some energy. Enthusiasm is one of the antidotes to dull and boring teaching, and students clearly do not want to be bored.

- ___: I walked in the class last year and he's...he's like, Okay, are you excited? We're ready. We're going to learn math. And he erased the board...
- ___: He said, 'We're lovin' math.'
- ___: ...he's like, Lovin' it, diggin' it, we're lovin' math.
- ___: He made it fun.
- ___: He was so cool about everything. He was energetic and he had all kinds of energy. [High School Female]

Effective teachers know how to make learning fun, and use humor when it is appropriate.

Students like games, puzzles, simulations, activities, field trips, videos — anything that provides them with a break from straight lecture or written work assigned from the text. Even though students do not use a significant set of diverse terms to describe the teaching practices they prefer, they still found a variety of ways, in all groups, to praise teachers who make learning interesting.

- ... I think there's another way to learn besides just sitting there, and you sit and write and they talk. [High School Female]

I would try to teach it, make it fun like Mr. (NAME DELETED) does, because the kids really seem interested and they don't give him any trouble. [Middle School Female]

Yeah, I like one of the teachers because he shows videos and we do hands-on projects and stuff like that. [Middle School Male]

I prefer having games because last year we had all kinds of review games and stuff, and this year we just go over it and have the test or we just go over it. [Middle School Females]

I think with the field trips there'll be more hands-on, that'll make that class more...a lot more interesting. [High School Male]

I wouldn't keep the kids in the classroom all the time. I'd take them outside, because I know they get bored. [Middle School Male]

...you learn a lot from her, because she...she does make it fun. She's interesting, she's witty, she's funny, and you don't sit there...you barely...you barely feel like the class has gone by when the bell rings. [High School Male]

And like our physics class last year, we had several projects with...making water balloon shooters and...it was fun. And we had Internet topics. We got to go on the Internet and look up stuff and that teaches us how to use computers...[High School Male]

Students also appreciate humor and respond to teachers who display an appropriate balance of humor and seriousness.

Compared to my science teacher I had last year, I would try to be like him this year because he makes learning fun...he jokes with it, but then when it's time to get serious enough, gets serious with it. [Middle School Female]

There's a time to bear down, there's a time to joke around and everything. [High School Male]

Effective teachers show how learning is applicable to “real life.”

Students resist learning that they cannot connect to something meaningful in their present or future lives. Middle school students in particular questioned the value of the curriculum and expressed a desire to learn only the “basic stuff.”

*...most teachers
care if you pass.
— Middle School
Male*

...[I would like] classes that you would actually care about, that’s going to help you, like business classes and stuff that you can take in middle school, that you’ll need once you get out and get a job, that prepares you to do speeches and stuff like that. [Middle School Female]

Effective teachers manage a classroom well.

Most students appreciate teachers who maintain effective control of their classrooms without resorting to yelling or indiscriminate punishment. Students connect teachers who are engaging with well-behaved students, recognizing that students respond with good behavior and high levels of performance to those teachers who possess a combination of flexibility and control.

[There are]... classrooms where the teachers let the students misbehave and then ones where they take control. [High School Female]

Effective teachers try to relate to their students.

Students want their teachers to remember what it is like to be a young person and to occasionally put themselves in their students’ place. Students appreciate those teachers who try to relate to them on a personal, empathetic level.

They should relate to that and try to...come down on our level instead of being more like a grownup. [Middle School Female]

He tries to put himself in your shoes and understand your age and...he tried to understand what a teenager would want out of a class and he gave it to you. [High School Female]

About the academic stuff, they've got our classes rated from smart people to practically dumb people, and . . . and I don't like that, because that kind of puts people in a bad situation. It cuts them down to where they feel like they're nothing. — Middle School Male

Effective teachers acknowledge both good and bad behavior.

Students dislike those teachers who concentrate most of their time and energy on good students. At the same time, they resent those teachers who focus unreasonably on troublemakers. Students want teachers to recognize both good and bad behavior and performance in the classroom. Students feel it is unfair for teachers to punish an entire class for the behavior of just a few, and they object to teachers who, as one student put it, “consider you as a class instead of as a set of individuals.” [High School Male] Students prefer teachers who praise or use positive reinforcement rather than those who always yell or threaten punishment.

Instead of harping on all the bad ones, acknowledge the good ones and say to the other ones, ‘Do better next time.’ Don’t make them feel bad or feel stupid... [High School Female]

Teachers spend too much time learning about the kids that are bad and the kids that don’t pay attention, because they’re constantly writing them up and yelling at them, writing them up, whatever, or maybe not doing anything. But they don’t pay attention to the kids that are trying to do the work and trying to get an A in the class. And they’re like, ‘Well, this kid ought to be first priority because he’s disrupting my class.’ Well her working or trying to work with that kid or whatever is disrupting all the other people. [High School Female]

Because some teachers...they're just always yelling at you and telling you the bad stuff, but you need to know the good stuff, too. [High School Female]

Effective teachers treat all students fairly and with respect

Students value teachers who do not have favorites and do not play favorites. They also value teachers who respect them and do not label them as a certain kind of student or prejudge them on the basis of previous teachers’ accounts.

There’s some teachers who will grade you based on whether or not they like you. [High School Female]

I just think the favoritism needs to go... [High School Female]

They shouldn't judge you over one incident. Like if you make one little mistake, they'll judge you for the whole year, and that's not right. [Middle School Male]

In some schools, students reported that athletes receive special treatment. Students suggested that teachers were pressured to treat athletes more leniently in terms of both behavioral infractions and grades.

I've only been there two years and I really don't like the way they are, because if you're in sports the teachers will jack up your grade just so they don't get hollered at. [High School Female]

Students value teachers who treat students equitably, given individual student circumstances. Students themselves differentiate between students with natural ability and those who must work harder to learn, and they believe that effort as well as natural ability deserves to be rewarded.

For people who don't make the grade and they try real hard, they should get something too. [Middle School Male]

Some students also object to the inherent favoritism that allows high-performing students extra rewards like field trips or exclusive clubs. Many who lack the high grades feel that their effort should also be rewarded or acknowledged.

...I don't think it's fair for only certain people, only smart people to get to go places and other people don't. [Middle School Male]

Effective teachers are willing to answer questions and explain information.

Students make a sharp distinction between those teachers who are willing and those who are not willing to explain information and answer questions in ways that make sense to students. For all students, this is a central component of good teaching.

My favorite's my math teacher because...he enjoys answering the questions. [Middle School Male]

...it depends on if the teacher explains it more, because if they don't explain it, then really I don't like this class because I don't get it, and you always get bad grades. [Middle School Female]

She's not the kind that puts off other people, like other students trying to help you; she'll help you. It may take her a while to get to you, but she'll help you, and she's been probably the best math teacher I've had. [Middle School Female]

...he explains stuff so well and...you can go into his class and don't know anything that's going to be in that class, and you don't know how to do anything, and you leave knowing how to do everything he's taught that whole year. [High School Female]

*I think some teachers need to try to listen to the students more and try to help them better understand what we're learning...
— Middle School Male*

Students at one middle school described particular problems with unapproachable teachers who do not provide help when students ask for it, but instead tell students to direct their questions to someone else in the class. The students realize that this especially causes problems when no one in the class understands, and they resent these teachers' unwillingness to rectify such situations.

I don't think that we get that much good education from some of the teachers, because we will ask them to explain whatever they said to us because we don't understand it, and then they'll just say, Ask the person next to us, beside you, and they don't understand either. [Middle School Male]

Students know that some teachers are at times unwilling to explain because those teachers want students to be more self-reliant, while other teachers are unwilling to explain because they don't want to make the effort.

...I had to do the work on my own... He wouldn't come to me, 'Did you need help?' I'd have to come to him. If I needed help, I would have to come to him and then he'd just...it'll just be like that. And work I had to do on my own, unless I needed help, I didn't understand it, I would go to him and ask him. He would be like, 'Okay, I see what the problem is,' and he'll explain it to me. But he really made me independent. [High School Male]

Some of the teachers just seem like they want to get home. They don't really care what happens during the day with the students and stuff. [Middle School Male]

Students seem unaware that, as learners, they could assume specific work responsibilities.

While students are sharp and consistent in assessing teacher performance, they are much less clear about their own responsibilities and how to carry them out. Particularly in middle school, as noted above, students long for teachers who explain content and make it accessible. Although this emphasis on explanation is less sharp among high school students, students still give particularly high marks to teachers who take some of the work out of learning, make it clear what they expect of students, and then offer help as students attempt the work.

A few students — more typically female than male — said they know they need to learn study skills and to acquire knowledge. One group of high school females drew clear linkages between knowing how to learn and being independent or being confident when undertaking new activities. Here, three of them suggest the potential they see in learning during high school.

___: When I walk away from high school, I want to know that I've learned the right way to study because that's a big deal when you get to college, because studying on your own, doing your own thing, and I just...I hope that I've learned good study skills.

___: One thing I want to take away from high school... I guess throughout the course of high school I've tried to become as independent as I possibly can from my parents and stuff, because I know if I try to rely on them all the time, then when I did try to go away...go away to school or whatever, I wouldn't be able to take care of myself and I'd be calling home every five minutes, I don't know how

to wash my clothes. So I guess I just want to be prepared to be able to make it on my own.

___: Be in the real world.

...our Social Studies teacher, Mr. (NAME DELETED), he explains everything really, really well and then he makes it fun so you're not falling asleep in his class. And he gets involved with the class and he's real active. — Middle School Female

Middle school students particularly want to be able to study only those things that interest them, and only those subjects they expect to benefit from in the future.

...the stuff that they're teaching us, I'm always wondering, 'Why am I going to have to know how to do this?' So I just think that they should really teach us things that's really going to benefit us, instead of teaching us stuff that I don't really care about learning, and I'm sure no one else does.

[Middle School Female]

Even though some middle school students recognize that they do not know much about what will be useful in the future, and that general knowledge may prove useful, they are skeptical that they will be able to use history, grammar, algebra, or knowledge of the periodic table of elements.

___: We already learned all that stuff, and I don't learn from dead people. I learn from people that is alive.

___: And history can't change, so it's the same thing over and over again, but we have to keep taking it.

[Middle School Male]

As noted earlier, both middle and high school students know a great deal about what the adults at their schools expect in terms of rules and regulations governing student behavior. Many students are preoccupied with these expectations. In the arena of learning, however, students did not report asserting particular interests in learning particular topics. Beyond resisting some of the subjects the schools require, students seem to have no sense of responsibility for making learning their work while at school.

Students demonstrate no awareness of their schools' overall academic framework, philosophy, or orientation.

Students' ready assessments of teachers have a familiar ring. The conversation in this study about good teachers, bad teachers, enthusiastic or bored teachers might have taken place in any recent

decade in most any public school in the United States. The familiarity and seeming normalcy of these student views obscure a significant omission. Seven years after the implementation of comprehensive education reform legislation in Kentucky, these Kentucky students do not talk about or seem to recognize any predominant learning framework or academic philosophy their schools might espouse. Instead, their comments suggest that they experience the teaching/learning environment much as other students in other places might. For them, the framework for learning shifts from classroom to classroom, from teacher to teacher, and from subject to subject.

Even with the steady undercurrent of dissatisfaction about inconsistent implementation of the policies governing student behavior, students still know a great deal about their schools' overall approach to discipline. The research sought evidence that students have similar understanding about their schools' approach to academic performance, and hoped to discover what students think about their school's approach. The findings are that students hardly think about these issues. Quick and easy answers in other areas give way to pauses and halting responses when the questioning turns to changes students have noticed in what their schools want students to learn and know. Responses to questions about academic approaches are fewer in number and significantly more limited than responses to questions about rules and social activities. Students also exhibit less interest in the general subject of learning goals.

With minor exception, these students describe life at school as though no reforms in teaching and learning practices and strategies have taken place. They seem unaware that systematic efforts have been made to improve academics, and they believe that what happens in the classroom currently is pretty much as it has been.

Some responses indicate that they see no change. One typical response: "I don't really notice anything different." [High School Female]

Other responses focus primarily on changes in teaching personnel: teachers perceived as good or bad who have recently left or arrived.

*...if you take pride in your school, you're going to take pride in yourself; and if you take pride in yourself, you're going to take pride in your work. So it's all a building-block process. You have to have your basic pride in yourself and then in your school and everything in order for you to actually want to do the work and keep working. Otherwise, you're just going to sit there and not accomplish anything...
— High School Male*

- ___: ...they're getting a couple more teachers in who will actually teach you stuff and everything. They're getting rid of some of the slacker teachers.
- ___: But then, again, the best ones are retiring...[High School Male]
- ___: There's a lot of new teachers.
- ___: Do they teach different?
- ___: No. [High School Male]

Students demonstrate no awareness that the school as a whole can and does make choices that affect what happens in individual classrooms, except for the bureaucratic functions of assigning teachers and students. Students seem to have no expectation that there could be any consistency or cohesion in academics. Even when they speak of changes, they do not see those changes as linked to any consistent school policy or approach to academics. Their responses suggest a view that the nature of the academic experience is inconsistent and fragmented, dependent on the choices and characteristics of individual teachers. Student views of what happens in the school academically are therefore mostly limited to evaluations of the attitudes and actions of individual teachers.

Two exceptions are worth noting in order to make it clear that they support rather than weaken this finding. The first exception is that some students do talk about some classroom practices often associated with academic reform, such as increased reliance on hands-on learning strategies or group projects. One typical comment:

- ...they'll group things for different classes, and get everybody three to a group and stuff like that. That...that helps out a lot easier because you've got other people's point of view on it...[High School Male]

In students' descriptions, however, these practices seemed the exceptions rather than common procedure, and they seemed to occur only in isolated classrooms. Students did not report any widespread use of any single approach to teaching and learning in any of the participating schools.

Students reported a second set of changes that are based in reform, but that also do not represent comprehensive, coherent changes in academic strategy. Students are quite aware of the new assessment practices — particularly the increased focus on writing — resulting

from the state assessments implemented after the passage of the KERA. One school in the study has conducted a campaign urging good performance on the assessment in order to improve the school's rating. The campaign appears to have been a systematic and widespread effort to influence students positively toward hard work on the assessment itself. For example, students reported being warned of dangers to their own futures from being associated with a school that received the lowest rank on the state's assessment.

Yet even in this school with the greatest expressed concern about the outcome of the assessment, students reported no significant, concerted change in classroom practices throughout the school year. The information campaign focused on student effort directly related to components in the state assessment. The students did not report any similar school-wide effort to change regular and ongoing teaching/learning strategies. In this school, as in the others in the study, students describe all assessment activities, but particularly portfolios, in ways that suggest the activities are divorced from regular classroom practices.

The two exceptions suggest that Kentucky's assessment program has introduced some changes into some classrooms, and has created a new focus on student performance on the assessment itself. According to students' reports, these experiences are not related to an articulated philosophy their schools have adopted to guide teaching and learning practices across the curriculum, in and out of classrooms. As far as the researchers could discern, any comprehensive efforts of this sort have not made a significant impression on the students in this study.

Students, following teachers' leads, resent what they know of the Kentucky Education Reform Act's impact on their schools.

Students describe the assessment processes in their schools in terms that suggest they view the assessment as alien, unnecessary, and forced on them by a power far outside their community. These students' experiences with assessment appear to constitute their whole conception of KERA.

Although this study did not directly solicit any views on KERA, students often brought the subject up themselves in response to questions about whether they had noticed any changes in the way teachers teach. Some students expressed the opinion that “the state” is interfering with real learning by insisting that teachers inflict excessive writing and other extraneous efforts on the students. Some of these students believe that KERA-related activities (or anything labeled as such) are a nuisance and a counter-productive intrusion, something added in to the school day rather than an intrinsic part of it. One student summed up the general feelings this way:

It’s good that they want to improve our schools but it’s not...it’s not good to come in and interrupt your learning.
[High School Female]

Another said:

I think it’d probably be a lot easier if the teachers weren’t confined by a lot of the state regulations that they were given, especially the KERA setup... [High School Male]

Some comments reflect confusion about what KERA is attempting to change.

I don't even think KERA should be in effect because it puts too much emphasis on teaching just certain stuff when you could be working hands-on, and that’s how most, a lot of people learn more, when they do stuff hands-on instead of having to study certain things that are going to be on the test.
[Middle School Male]

They want you to write about something you have no chance to learn about. [High School Female]

Generally, these unsolicited student views on KERA suggest that students take their information about KERA from their teachers. They report that their teachers blame KERA for inappropriate interruptions in learning, and students say they share their teachers’ views.

...the teachers come in and go, ‘Okay, I don’t really want to waste my time or whatever, but today we have to do an Open-ended Response Question again.’ [High School Female]

Teachers hate it [KERA], students hate it, administrators, everybody hates it. Every teacher I have ridicules it. [High School Male]

Conclusion

The findings from this set of focus groups are consistent in most ways with the findings from a focus group study conducted by the Partnership in 1993 that included two student groups. The picture of school as seen through the students' eyes remains much the same, except that some students are now aware that "the state" is making an effort to change academic learning through KERA. Students remain alienated from the rules and regulations their schools impose, and resent many of the ways adults routinely treat young people at school. Students are focused on the social connections with their peers, and often view educators through a relationship lens as well, speaking definitely about which teachers "like" which students, and which principals don't. Students see great inconsistencies in the quality of teaching and feel unable to have much impact on the teaching process. They have vague ideas about life after school and little conviction that school is preparing them adequately for it. School remains a place defined for students by its non-academic aspects.

Appendix A

Methodology

A. Background

In October and November, 1997, the researchers conducted eight focus groups for the Partnership for Kentucky Schools. These focus groups consisted of middle school and high school students from four geographically dispersed parts of the state.

B. Purpose

The researchers conducted the focus groups in order to discover how students in Kentucky are experiencing school and to listen to student views so that these views become an integral component of the ongoing dialogue about improving public education in the state. This research built upon earlier efforts by the Partnership for Kentucky Schools that brought students, business leaders, and educators together to consider their respective views on basic questions about public education.

C. Format

A total of 98 students participated in the eight focus groups, each of which lasted approximately two hours. Two public middle schools and two public high schools participated in the study; fifty middle school students and 48 high school students participated. Two groups, one of males and one of females, took place at each school. Group size ranged from 11 to 14 students. The groups were made homogenous by gender, and mixed on all other factors, with same gender facilitators, in order to create an open, comfortable climate. Two facilitators led each focus group, asking participants questions related to the following topics:

- Their school experiences as high school and middle school students in Kentucky;
- Their views concerning successful and unsuccessful learning and teaching strategies;
- Their awareness of school efforts at academic improvement and the impact of these improvements on students' learning and their attitudes towards learning.

The researchers designed the focus group questions to elicit statements reflecting the participants' current perception of what it is like to be a student in Kentucky's public schools. The questions were framed in a way to attain a broad picture of the wide array of school experiences that students encounter on a daily basis, as well as to gain an understanding of what students consider to be the most important aspects of their schools and what changes, if any, they notice recently in their schools. The questions encouraged dialogue that revealed some of the attitudes and values

underlying participants' opinions.

D. School selection

The researchers selected the schools for the study on the basis of a number of criteria, with the aim of finding four public schools that represented significant geographic and educational differences within the state of Kentucky. Two of the participating schools in the study are located in urban areas; two are located in rural areas. Two are middle schools, two are high schools. Each school represents a different assessment rating, as determined by the *Kentucky School and District Accountability Results, Accountability Cycle 2*, produced in 1996 and in effect when these focus groups took place. The study included one school each in the following assessment categories: "reward," "successful," "improving," and "decline." The schools in the study also represent differences in size and student body composition.

E. Participant recruitment

The researchers contracted with the PTSA or PTSO of each of the selected schools to recruit the participants for each focus group. The researchers gave these organizations a profile of the desired groups, with the aim of each group resembling the student body composition of the school as much as possible in terms of grade level, academic achievement, and race. The researchers also trained these organizations to conduct a scientific random sampling. The PTSA's or PTSO's recruited a total of 152 students, of whom 98 appeared and participated. PTSA/PTSO representatives came to each site to assist with registration. Each student was required to return a parental consent form to the recruiters one week prior to the focus group. Children of teachers, school board members, school council members, or other public and private school employees were not included in the focus groups. Further detailed information about participants is presented in Appendix B.

F. Facilitator selection and preparation

The research team trained Governor's Scholars to lead these focus group sessions, with two purposes in mind. First, the research team intended to reduce the inhibition of the participants in their responses, to create more freedom of expression than might have been possible if adults had conducted the groups. Second, the research team wanted to boost the participating facilitators' skills and abilities so that they could design and lead meaningful conversations in their own schools and communities.

The facilitators were all Governor's Scholars, Kentucky high school seniors who had recently completed an intensive summer program of academic enrichment. As part of the Governor's Scholars program, students may choose to become "Education Ambassadors," concentrating some of their energies during their senior years on promoting positive education policies. The research team invited all Education Ambassadors among the 1997 Governor's Scholars to participate in the half-day training on focus group facilitation. More than 100 Education Ambassadors completed the training. The researchers invited those who completed the training to volunteer if they were

interested in facilitating one of the eight focus groups. The research team then chose the facilitators by lot from among those who volunteered, and assigned the facilitators to groups that were outside their own school districts. Researchers assigned two facilitators and one alternate to each focus group, with female facilitators conducting female student focus groups, and male facilitators conducting male focus groups.

G. The structure for supporting the facilitators

Each focus group took place in a facility with adjoining rooms. As the trained student facilitators conducted the focus group session in one room, a video camera connected to a monitor in an adjoining room made it possible for researchers to follow the facilitation closely. At a prearranged point in each session, one facilitator stepped out of the primary room and checked with researchers about the need to make any adjustments in either the questions or the group engagement practices the facilitation team was using. This arrangement made it possible for researchers to provide coaching and support for facilitators; if necessary, researchers could have intervened directly in the facilitation process. Facilitators disclosed the researchers' presence to the student participants as part of the opening remarks in each session.

H. Caution about generalizing to a larger population

This study, based on a set of focus groups, is a form of qualitative research, which permits exploration of opinions, values, attitudes, and perceptions of a relatively small number of people in some depth. Unlike quantitative research, which examines precise responses of a random sample of respondents in order to predict how larger populations would respond to the same questions, qualitative research aims to discover previously unknown opinion patterns, describe points of view in detail, and generate insights based on lengthier investigations with a small number of people. The results of qualitative research cannot be used to predict the responses of larger populations with statistical accuracy. Instead, qualitative research results are intended to deepen understanding of complex issues, questions, and problems as a carefully selected cross-section of people see them.

APPENDIX B
Demographic Data

High School 1 Students
N=25

Gender	Race		Grade Level				Average Grade Performance					
	White	African American	9	10	11	12	A	A/B	B	B/C	C	Below C
Male	11	2	1	7	2	3	5	0	5	0	3	0
Female	8	4	1	4	1	6	4	0	6	2	0	0
Total	19	6	2	11	3	9	9	0	11	2	3	0

High School 2 Students
N=23

Gender	Race		Grade Level				Average Grade Performance					
	White	African American	9	10	11	12	A	A/B	B	B/C	C	Below C
Male	11	0	0	4	2	5	1	0	6	0	3	1
Female	12	0	2	1	6	3	4	0	6	0	1	1
Total	23	0	2	5	8	8	5	0	12	0	4	2

All High School Students
N=48

Gender	Race		Grade Level				Average Grade Performance					
	White	African American	9	10	11	12	A	A/B	B	B/C	C	Below C
Male	22	2	1	11	4	8	6	0	11	0	6	1
Female	20	4	3	5	7	9	8	0	12	2	1	1
Total	42	6	4	16	11	17	14	0	23	2	7	2

Middle School 1 Students

N=26

Gender	Race		Grade Level			Average Grade Performance					
	White	African American	6	7	8	A	A/B	B	B/C	C	Below C
Male	9	3	2	4	6	0	3	4	0	4	1
Female	12	2	2	4	8	6	0	4	0	4	0
Total	21	5	4	8	14	6	3	8	0	8	1

Middle School 2 Students

N=24

Gender	Race		Grade Level			Average Grade Performance					
	White	African American	6	7	8	A	A/B	B	B/C	C	Below C
Male	12	0	1	6	5	5	0	3	0	4	0
Female	11	1	1	5	6	4	0	5	0	3	0
Total	23	1	2	11	11	9	0	8	0	7	0

All Middle School Students

N=50

Gender	Race		Grade Level			Average Grade Performance					
	White	African American	6	7	8	A	A/B	B	B/C	C	Below C
Male	21	3	3	10	11	5	3	7	0	8	1
Female	23	3	3	9	14	10	0	9	0	7	0
Total	44	6	6	19	25	15	3	16	0	15	1

All Students

N=98

	Race		Grade							Average Grade Performance					
Gender	White	African American	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	A	A/B	B	B/C	C	Below C
Male	43	5	3	10	11	1	11	4	8	11	3	18	0	14	2
Female	43	7	3	9	14	3	5	7	9	18	0	21	2	8	1
Total	86	12	6	19	25	4	16	11	17	29	3	39	2	22	3