



CRACKS IN THE CLASSROOM FLOOR:

The Seventh Grade Year in Five Philadelphia Middle Schools

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A Report for the
Philadelphia Education Fund

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This is the second report in a series that is looking at a cohort of Philadelphia middle school students during their three-year sojourn from sixth to eighth grade. This longitudinal study, commissioned by The Philadelphia Education Fund (PEF) with funding from The Pew Charitable Trusts, seeks to detail the student effects of the School District of Philadelphia's introduction of content and performance standards.

Data for this report came from interviews with 189 students (97 males and 92 females) from five schools. The schools served predominantly low-wealth neighborhoods, and the students were mostly African-American — with some Hispanic/Latino youth. Students in the interview sample mirrored the school populations as a whole. They all were interviewed last year during sixth grade and again this year, in the spring. The interviews covered a variety of topics but concentrated on students' classroom experiences and learning (see Appendix A for the interview protocol). The cohort shrunk from 247 as these highly mobile students either left the city entirely, transferred to other schools within the district, or became more chronic absentees. Most of the students interviewed this year had progressed to the seventh grade; a few in each school were retained and one managed to skip from sixth to eighth by virtue of her age.

This report argues that while a sizable minority of the students complained that their schooling was too easy and merely a repetition of lessons learned in earlier grades, most students reported considerable "giving up" among themselves and their classmates when they were assigned either too much work or work that they did not understand. Moreover, students held "non-rigorous" ideas about what they had to do to achieve "good" grades, generally emphasizing completing one's assignments and behaving well as opposed to the quality of their work. Students hinted that grading criteria shifted as they moved from classroom to classroom.

Students also noted that as they moved from class to class, they learned and behaved differently. These differences revealed several large "cracks in the classroom floors" through which capable students fell, such as "multiple replacement or long-term substitute" teacher assignments, "out of control" or at least highly disruptive classrooms, and other "support scarce" classroom situations. In these instances, students — who already collectively demonstrated very low achievement on standardized tests (Philadelphia Inquirer, 1997) — reported that little instruction and learning took place. However, in each of the five buildings in which we conducted this study, there were "pockets" where students were motivated to stick with difficult work and to achieve at higher levels than their peers. Here, students said, their teachers refused to allow students to give up and not complete their work, attempted to engage students in interesting activities, and made

sure that they understood what they were supposed to be learning.

The difficulty that raising standards will face in these schools is not an argument that the reform attempt is foolhardy. To the contrary, the students dreamed "big." They knew they needed to complete school, and as we reported last year, they had an enduring belief that the education they were being provided was a good one. But, they had very vague and simplistic notions of what they must do to achieve these dreams.

Thus, a major "adult" responsibility within the standards movement is to be very smart, precise, and concise in figuring out the connections between higher standards and the realization of students' success in the classroom and aspirations for the future. No matter how high the standards bar is eventually raised, students will have difficulty securing a solid enough footing to make the necessary jump. Thus, without the school district providing additional preparation for students and teachers, raising standards will likely lead to increased failure rather than greater success for these students.

The report is divided into five sections. The first briefly describes the study's methods and more background on the schools and their students. The next three sections report on the major themes from this year's interviews with students: (1) the extent to which students are likely to be receptive to a toughening of the academic program they encounter; (2) the classroom conditions that will facilitate and hinder the school system's ability to support raised expectations for students; and (3) the students' aspirations for the future and their sense of what they will have to do to realize those dreams. The fifth and final section connects what students had to say to the effort to enact performance standards in Philadelphia.

About the Sample and the Study

The five middle schools in the sample were identified by PEF because of their involvement with several reform initiatives. The schools served some of the poorest neighborhoods in the city with 97 to 100 percent of the students being either African American or Hispanic/Latino and with 84 to 98 percent of the students qualifying for free lunch. The five schools drew students from surrounding neighborhoods, with average daily attendance figures ranging from 82 to 86 percent. The five schools were all organized around small "learning communities" with interdisciplinary teams responsible for instruction within the subunits. Student/teacher ratios ranged from a low of 13.4 students per teacher to a high of 21.5.

The School District has set high achievement targets for all schools, to be reached in one student generation (i.e., twelve years). The School District's achievement indicator is

known as the Professional Responsibility Index which is composed of reading, mathematics, and science scores from the Stanford Achievement Test, Version 9 (SAT-9); promotion rates; and attendance (both staff and student). To score well on the SAT-9, students must demonstrate not only basic skills, but also problem-solving, writing, and higher-order thinking skills. Each school's total index score is based on the proportion of students who have achieved at least a basic level of proficiency (a benchmark defined by the district) and the schools are expected to show improvements relative to their own baseline performance. They are not compared to other schools. All five schools in our sample had low baseline index figures (during the 1995/96 school year), but made significant progress during the second year (1996/97). Two of the schools came close to meeting their two-year growth target in the first year and three schools exceeded that growth expectation.

The sample of interviewed students included the universe of sixth graders interviewed the previous year, less those who could not be located. Each school followed a slightly different set of procedures for selecting students. However, all of them followed our guidelines that the original sample be representative of the school's racial composition, gender distribution, academic performance (low as well as high achievers), behavior, motivation, and instructional experiences (i.e. a variety of different teacher teams).

Because of our frequent visits to the schools, we were no longer strangers to the office staff, hall monitors, or classroom teachers. In addition, we visited all of the schools early in the school year to feed back students' comments from the first year's interviews. Thus, gaining entry into the schools was relatively easy.

The interview protocol (see Appendix) was structured to explore important ideas that emerged from our first year of data collection, primarily the differences students noted across classrooms and their vague notions about what doing good work meant. Each of the 189 students was interviewed individually by one of the two authors. We approached teachers to arrange a convenient time for interviewing their students.

We entered our handwritten field notes from the interviews into a computer for future review and analysis. Each of us read our respective portions of the data and then had several brainstorming sessions where we discussed the emerging themes. We then reread the data to establish key coding variables within (and sometimes across) each theme. All the interviews were then coded based on the identification process described below and an analysis of those codes led us to the data displayed in this report.

In all of the following excerpts from the student interviews, "I" stands for the interviewer and "S" is the student; the six-digit numbers identify the student, with the first three numbers being the students' unique "ID," the fourth being grade level (we coded all

students with their original sixth grade designation), the fifth being the student's race (1=African-American; 2=Hispanic; 3=Other), and the sixth being gender (1=male; 2=female). While inserting these identification codes in the text may be distracting for some readers, their inclusion provides others a means of seeing whether we relied too heavily on a few students for quotes.

Students' Receptivity to Higher Standards

The recent popular and academic presses make much of educators' reactions to the call for setting "world-class" content and performance standards (Ravitch, 1996; Gagnon, 1995). Much less attention, if any, has been devoted to anticipating students' reactions to the probability that school will become harder, or more "challenging" for them. While it is customary for reformers to think of students only as "beneficiaries" of interventions rather than "participants" (Corbett & Wilson, 1995; Fullan, 1991), it is not unreasonable to argue that the clash between new expectations and students' existing definitions of the way school is and ought to be could have important effects on adults' assessments of how well the journey to increased performance is going and their ability to make the trip a successful one.

For that reason, this section of the report takes a closer look at what students had to do to perform well in school currently, how challenging they believed their education to be, how challenging they wanted their work to be, and how they responded when they encountered work that was hard for them to do.

Performing Well in School

In our first report, we discussed what students thought it took to be successful students (Corbett & Wilson, 1997). Although students offered a wide range of characteristics of success, they overwhelmingly singled out three: getting good grades, doing what the teacher said, and completing their work. Because grades served as a key determinant of whether students moved on from one grade to another, we focused more closely this year on how one got a good grade. We asked students to talk about both what grades they received and what they needed to do to get an A.

Students generally were not very specific in stating the grades they received. For the most part, students gave their grades in terms of a range or a general descriptor. For example, in an 84-student subsample drawn from all five schools, one female claimed to have all As; four females and two males said they received all As and Bs; one female received all Bs; 34 (24 of whom were females) said they got As, Bs, and Cs; six additional students (three females) limited this range to Bs and Cs; three females and two males extended the range to include a D, and two other females and a male extended the range to in-

clude F (several others did so but remarked that they had managed to "remove" the F by completing overdue assignments); one female even said she received either As or Ds; another female added Ds to the Bs and Cs; one male and one female had all Cs; three males said they received Cs and Ds; one female and one male had Cs, Ds, and Fs; one female had all Ds; two males and one female got Ds and Fs; one female said she had several Fs; six males and three females simply gave overall descriptions, saying that their grades were either "good," "fine — except math," "all right," "fair," "a little better," "not so good" or "bad"; one female said they were "badder"; and three males and a female said "I don't know what my grades are."

The fact that individuals tended to report a wide range of grades for themselves was intriguing. Was an individual's performance really that varied across his/her classes? Or, were the requirements for success so different from classroom to classroom that an individual's learning strategies which served well in one class did not help the student as much in another? Thus, we examined students' comments about what performing well in these schools meant to better detail the wide range of opinions about grades and what it took to get good ones.

In terms of what they had to do to get an A if they wanted one, students primarily focused on completing their assignments — both in class and at home, with 93 of the 187 (43 females) noting this.

- I: What would it take for you to get an A?
S: Work, do all my work.
I: What did you do to get a D?
S: Cause I don't wanna work very well.
I: Why is that?
S: Some of the work is easy; some is just too much.
I: What do you mean by too much?
S: Like you get problems 1 through 40. (164612)

All you got to do (to get an A) is work in your classes, do homework, and do quizzes. (355611)

Eighty-eight (43 females) mentioned "paying attention," "following directions," "cutting off the talking or playing," "listening," or other aspects of exhibiting good conduct.

- I: What kind of grades are you getting?
S: Well, first report I got Bs, 2 Ds, a A, a few Cs and in the last two reports, Fs.

I: Why?

S: I understand the work, but I did bad. The third report, I thought I did better, but I didn't. This time I can tell I'm doing better.

I: How did you do better?

S: It started when I thought, "Why should I be making myself look a fool, making my mom look like she didn't give no home training."
(165611)

Thirty-four (14 females) agreed that tests played an important part in determining one's grade. However, they usually talked in terms of "passing" their tests to get an A rather than achieving a particular score on a test.

(To get an A) you got to pass your tests, turn in your homework, turn in your class work, homework.... I guess that's it. (573612)

You got to pay attention, do your work, pass tests, do class work. (360612)

Other ways to get an A included "doing extra credit," "participating," and "studying."

While these categories were among the most frequent, it may be more important that some students mentioned criteria within only one of the categories while others mentioned elements of two or more of the categories. For example, in one school, a student only emphasized "doing your work" (553612) while another added "pass your tests" (573612) to that category and still another in that building concentrated only on behavior with "listen and don't get smart" (564612). In another building, two students indicated two distinctly different paths to an A with one stating a student should "not get in with the wrong crowd, listen, and follow the directions" (353612) and the other asserting "study, do your work, and pass the tests" (368611).

These differences could have been a function of a student simply not thinking of everything off the top of his or her head in an interview, or it may have been indicative, once again, that students' perceptions of grading requirements varied from classroom to classroom. Thus, in one room a student might have been able to receive a good grade by doing all the work while in another that grade was influenced as well by the type of attitude the student exhibited in doing the work. Of course, other students noted that all of the above were helpful:

*You got to earn it, be quiet, she shouldn't have to tell you to participate, do work — you should get a A if you do all that.
(266611)*

We also asked students about what they needed to do to get an A on specific tasks. We concentrated on doing reports and projects because students had named these last year as classroom activities that they enjoyed and learned from, and because we were curious about their use of information resources in the buildings. Here, too, students perceived a wide variety of ways to do well on these activities. The answers ranged from having to be "neat" to using "correct punctuation" to writing a specified amount to providing information on all of the topics the teacher identified to demonstrating how well a student understood what he or she was talking about by using his or her own words. While collectively the students managed to cover the gamut of aspects of a good report, individually they focused on only one or two criteria and were generally vague about how these attributes became a grade.

One student concurred that most of his classmates were not sure what a teacher wanted:

I: How do you get an A on your report?

S: All right, we had a wildlife report. She looking for...she wanted us...I know what she looking for. She want us to do information but she grading on what we do when we standing up in front of the class. She don't want you to read word for word. But when I stand up, I tell you about 10-12 basic things. She say all right, I give you a A. Teachers, if they are teaching 30 people in a class, are teaching three classes and have like 90 people. She ain't gonna read it, but she will ask people to say a couple of things about what they did, but they can't cause they just wrote it down. Like with my Chipmunk project. I look for things like where they live. I wasn't looking at how big they were, everybody know that, but what they eat. Some people might not know that.

I: Do other students know what the teacher wants?

S: No. Some, when they read, they read it word for word, and she ask 'em "tell me something about it," and they say they can't. They read the words and write it down and they say they done. They read word for word and they are like "I don't know." They just read it page for page. Like I ask one girl, "Does the animal hibernate?" And she didn't know. She just wrote it down. (256611)

All of the students' answers above, but particularly the last one, hinted at another important aspect of performing well in class and how criteria differed across classrooms and that was that most students' sense of good performance seemed to be dominated by whether they did the work and behaved, not so much by how well they did the work. That is, some students focused on completing the assignment (e.g., simply getting the information) while others tried to go beyond this (e.g., looking for information that others might not know or gathering more information than was required). Students

indicated, then, that the quality of one's work appeared to play second fiddle to merely getting the work done.

Several students in one of the schools addressed this question in greater depth. Their comments suggested that, indeed, the grading requirements varied considerably from room to room in terms of how much the quality of their work played a role in the grading process.

I: Does getting an A depend on simply doing your work or on how well you do your work?

S: Some teachers grade you out for doing it, some give credit for effort, and some grade you for the correct answer.

I: Which do you prefer?

S: Effort.

I: Why?

S: Because not all people know all the stuff and with only five questions, you might not know it all and that will put your grade low.

I: Since missing one gives you an 80?

S: Yeah. (384612)

I: Does getting an A depend on simply doing your work or on how well you do your work?

S: Do it all right. (368611)

I: Does getting an A depend on simply doing your work or on how well you do your work?

S: Kind of both.

I: What do you mean?

S: To get a grade, you got to do it and most has to be right.

I: Why did you get a C in the class?

S: I don't put forth the effort. (360612)

On the other hand, another student seemed to disagree, suggesting that "putting forth the effort" warranted only an average grade, thereby making a "C" more a reward for trying rather than a symbol for not trying.

You should know how to do it, but if you try hard, the teacher should give you some kind of grade. (358612)

This higher standard for obtaining a "C," according to still another student, did not seem

to be prevalent. Her argument was that her teachers did not hold students to doing the best they could.

I: Could many of your classmates in your regular classes do the work you are doing when you go to the mentally gifted class?

S: They could probably do it if they tried; it is a lot of hard work and concentration.

I: Do your regular teachers give the students credit for being able to do better work?

S: They expect something out of you, but it is not the best you can do.

I: So what do students think of as a good grade?

S: If they pass, they think they okay, as long as they get C's.

I: But you think it is easy to get a C?

S: Yeah. (377612)

In the above discussion, we used students from one school to reflect the range of views about grading within a building. Similar examples could have been drawn on in each of the other four schools as well.

Part of the grading issue concerns what a student considers a good grade to be; and if the above small sample of students was indicative of all of the students, then a good grade tended to be viewed as "a C or above" (353612). This fit well with all of the students' comments when they shared their grades with us in the first place. Those that provided ranges with nothing lower than Cs in them did so with pride; when they ventured into D territory or below, they implied that they needed to work on their grades a bit.

Thus, this brief discussion of grades — which focused on the grades students received, what it took to get an A, and whether an A depended on only doing the work or also on doing it well — suggests two important considerations with respect to standards. First, grading requirements seemed to vary widely from classroom to classroom, and second, students looked at performing well in a fairly non-rigorous way.

Students' Views of How Challenging School Was

Grades were comparative; they provided a way for students to judge their performance relative to their peers, assuming that the teachers used a stable set of criteria in making their judgments. We also wanted to get a more absolute sense of how students looked at the work they were asked to do. So, regardless of the grades they were getting, we wanted to know how challenging school was for them. We anticipated that the answers to this question would offer a good insight into how students looked at assignments and assess-

ments that required them to meet even higher standards.

Students were mixed in their assessments of how difficult school was for them. Of the 161 students interviewed about this topic, 75 of them (36 females) said that the work they were doing was challenging or challenging enough most of the time (that is, it was appropriate for seventh grade).

However, students differed in how they defined "challenging." For example, some students said seventh grade was challenging because they had not been prepared for the work in sixth grade.

S: Some classes are hard, but I try.

I: What is hard about them?

S: When I first came to seventh grade, they were teaching stuff I didn't know about; my teacher in sixth grade wasn't teaching that much.

I: Do you feel better now?

S: Yeah.

I: What kept you trying?

S: I try cause I don't wanna fail. It would hurt if all my friends got to eighth grade and I would hate to let my parents down. (172612)

S: Compared to last year, I learn a lot; but I may fail.

I: Why might you fail?

S: I didn't learn the other stuff that other sixth graders learn. We had to start over, so I didn't know things. When we had tests, I was frustrated that I didn't understand...I was behind and I had to learn it. I don't think my teacher understood that I didn't know it. I tried to tell her but I couldn't put it into words. I was embarrassed. (154611 — the student was in a "top" section)

I: Are you learning a lot this year?

S: A lot.

I: Why do say that?

S: Because in sixth grade, we didn't do nothing. (365611)

Other students said that the work was challenging because the current teacher did not explain what students were to do in a way that they understood.

S: I be knowing it (the work) but some of it I don't know.

I: Could the teacher have done anything to make a difference?

S: The teacher could have showed me better how to do problems, like explain it more. (162612)

I: Are you doing seventh grade work?

S: Eighth grade.

I: What is it about the work?

S: Sometimes teachers mix up the words and you don't understand ... sometimes you don't know what they are saying. (564612)

I: Is the work hard?

S: It is kinda hard.

I: How so?

S: I get frustrated.

I: Why?

S: I need more help. (523612)

Thus, students identified extenuating circumstances, apart from the intrinsic difficulty of the work they were given, that caused seventh grade to be hard for them.

The remainder talked about the work as appearing to be challenging in and of itself. Still, they provided at least two definitions of challenging work. One was that there was a lot of work to do. For example,

I: Why is seventh grade being difficult for you?

S: There's a lot of work. We have a lot of homework to do in one day.

We have a lot of reports and they only give us a certain amount of time to do it. (156611)

That is, each task was not particularly difficult to understand but teachers gave students a lot of tasks to do.

The second was that the work, irrespective of the quantity, was difficult to understand.

I: So does it seem like you are doing work at your grade level?

S: It seem like I'm doing high school and college work.

I: So, do you feel challenged by what you're doing?

S: Mhmm. (171612)

S: In math we have more competition.

I: What do you mean?

S: We getting harder work.

I: Like what?

S: Fractions and stuff like that. (363611)

I: Is work this year easy or difficult?
S: Difficult.
I: Why?
S: Because sometimes I am lazy and sometimes I don't understand the work.
I: Why don't you understand?
S: No one speaks English in my house. I don't want to do it alone. I get frustrated. (414622)

Students often referred to harder work as "eighth" or "ninth" grade work.

And then some students described the increased challenge they faced as being a function of both more and harder work.

I: Do you feel like you are doing seventh grade work or doing sixth grade over?
S: Seventh grade.
I: Why do you say that?
S: It is getting harder for me.
I: By harder, do you mean you have to do more work or that the work is more difficult to understand?
S: It is both. (361611)

I: Is this year hard?
S: Yeah, you have to work hard. It is not like last year.
I: How is it different?
S: You have harder stuff and more of it. (401612)

The 62 students (30 females) that said school was too easy also had differing reasons for this. Some said they were doing the same tasks they had done in previous years.

S: Some of the teachers teach you fifth grade work. We still getting spelling words; we still write sentences.
I: Why do you think you're doing fifth grade work?
S: That teacher might not think we ready for seventh grade cause some students ain't.
I: Why is that?
S: Cause some didn't pay attention to fifth grade work. (259612)

I: Are you learning a lot this year?
S: Some of it is the same.
I: What is?
S: Like integers, fractions, cause my teacher prepared us for this year, so like we already knew it.
I: Does that get boring for you?
S: Well, it is boring. It is the same thing as sixth grade but the teacher has to explain it to the other students. But it can be fun cause you can answer all the questions. (151612)

S: It just like sixth grade cause we had the same work.
I: Could you give me an example?
S: The math. All we do is division.
I: How do you feel about that?
S: I wish we was doing harder work.
I: Why?
S: I want to learn more. (555611)

Others complained that while they did what they considered to be seventh grade tasks in their classes, they also did the same ones repeatedly.

I: Is the work hard?
S: No.
I: So it is not a challenge to you?
S: Yeah.
I: Why does it seem easy?
S: For me, I catch on real quick and we keep doing it over and over; it get boring. (157612)

Thus the students seemed split about whether their current work was beneath their grade level or mostly appropriate for/higher than their level, and the primary determinants of what harder work was were the amount of work and how difficult it was to understand what they were being asked to do.

Student Preferences for Challenging Work

In addition to asking students about how difficult they perceived their current classroom experiences to be, with a subsample of students (N=89) we also asked them whether they preferred to do easy work or to be given more challenging work. Based on observations of these students' collective behavior in classrooms, any informed speculation would favor a vote of doing easy work. However, the data revealed just the opposite. Students

