



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

were almost two and a half times more likely to side with more difficult work than easy work (44 to 18). But there was also a sizable proportion of the students (27) who preferred a balanced approach that enabled them to combine a mix of hard and easy work.

There appeared to be three clusters of explanations for students wanting to be assigned easy work. The first was for that group of students who saw school as just a task that needed to be accomplished quickly:

"I prefer easy work because you finish it faster." (116611) Another group of students lobbied for easy work because they felt more comfortable and confident doing it rather than facing the uncertainty of something new: "I like easy work because I know it and I can do it." (421622) And, finally, the third group liked easy work because they performed better: "I prefer easy work so I can get good grades." (231611)

That students preferred hard work was surprising in itself, given the previous discussions. A closer look made this even more so. First, males were more likely to prefer more difficult work than females (29 males and 14 females). This contradicted notions that males tended to be less enamored of school in the first place. Second, it would seem obvious that the better students in the sample would have been the ones that desired academic challenges. But that was not the case. When a comparison was made of the distribution of grades (from high to low), the sample of students reporting a preference for more challenging work was almost identical to the full sample. For example, just under twenty percent of the full sample described themselves as generally good students (As and Bs) and an almost equal proportion of those preferring hard work (23 percent) labeled themselves comparably.

What, then, did students have to say about challenging work? Two characteristics about hard work were most prominent in students' defense of the importance of doing hard work. The first had to do with learning. To them it was obvious; the more difficult it was, the more they learned:

I prefer harder work because the harder the work, the better you learn. (505611)

I prefer hard work because I learn more. If you do hard work, you have got to keep thinking. What you don't know, you will learn. (515611)

S: Hard work is better for you.

I: How is it better?

S: You learn more. If you do easy work, you do stuff you already know.

Hard work is real learning. (306611)

Just as prevalent as the comments about learning more, were the abstract connections that students made to the future. Essentially they argued that as they grew older, life would get more challenging, and it was better to begin facing those challenges in the present, as some of these comments illustrate.

If you always do easy work, when it gets hard like in college, you won't know how to do it. (401621)

When you grow up, the harder the work, the better the job (you will get). You need to become better educated. (407621)

I like hard work, because if you do all hard work now, later on it won't be hard. Things build on what you are doing now. (104612)

A less frequent rationale, but no less powerful, was that students talked about being bored when doing easy work (which, as one student pointed out, led to misbehavior), needing to stimulate the brain, and just being more fun than doing easy work.

I like challenging work. If it is too easy, you might go right through it and then you will be bored the rest of the day. (501612)

If you do easy work, you already know it. You don't learn anything. With hard work, more pressure makes it interesting. With easy work you act up because there is nothing to do. With hard work you just ignore others and do the work. (528612)

I prefer difficult work because you get lots of homework and homework is good because it helps out your brain. (417621)

I prefer hard work because it gives me a challenge. If there is no challenge, then it is not fun. It (hard work) is like a game. If there is no challenge to it, it isn't fun. (310611)

S: I told my math teacher she got to start giving hard work.

I: Why?

- S: Kids don't like corny stuff, but if (the work is) hard, they will sit down and do it; or else they just think they in first or second grade.
 I: What if it is easy?
 S: They do it and say that was too easy; people don't do it if it's too easy. (264612)

Thus, students claimed that making students work harder in class had several benefits. It helped to relieve the boredom of just sitting around; it made students feel like they were learning more and thereby like they would do better in the future; and it increased the chances that students who did not do work would become more engaged.

This should come as encouragement to adults committed to the standards movement. However, students offered somewhat of a contradictory tone when they discussed their reactions to the times in which they did face difficult tasks. This is the topic of the next section.

Students' Responses to Hard Work

An important question to ask within the context of local standards reform, then, was how would students — who held relatively non-rigorous definitions of what getting a good grade meant, viewed their current work as “tough enough,” and talked hypothetically about the value of challenging work — respond when either the assignments they were given became more challenging or the criteria which determined what students have to do to “pass” the assignments they were currently doing were made more stringent.

The answer, we hypothesize, will be a mixed response, with some students sticking with it and others throwing up their hands in exasperation, based on how students described their reactions to the work they were currently given. Interestingly, students tended to say that they personally did not give up very often but they reported that their classmates did frequently.

Forty-three students (22 females) claimed that they occasionally gave up when confronted with assignments that were too long or they did not understand.

- S: They should give us like not so much homework?
 I: How much do you get?
 S: Too much.
 I: What do you do?
 S: Sometimes I don't do it.
 I: What do you mean?
 S: When they give easy work, I do it. (258611)

- I: So you feel as if you have too much work to do?
 S: Mmhmm.
 I: What do you do then?
 S: Sometimes I do some of it, but they don't accept it.
 I: To get a grade, you have to complete it all?
 S: Yes, or they mark it incomplete. (156611)

- I: What do you do when the work is hard?
 S: I raise my hand.
 I: What if you still don't understand?
 S: Sometimes I ask a friend.
 I: Do you ever give up?
 S: Sometimes I give up.
 I: Why?
 S: Because I can't do it. (361611)

- I: Why did you get a D in math?
 S: Because I don't try.
 I: Why not?
 S: Because the teacher ignored me; she just write a lot of notes on the board and I don't understand it. (556612)

- S: My teacher won't help nobody...you got to do work by yourself.
 I: What do you do when the work is hard?
 S: I don't ask the teacher cause she be busy. I try a little and then give up.
 I: Why?
 S: Because, okay, I try to find the answers, but if I don't find them, I get tired of looking it up and give it up. (471622)

Half the time I be stuck on something and I won't ask the teacher. (574612)

One hundred seven students (51 females) said that they never gave up, usually explaining that they wanted to make sure they could achieve the kind of life they wanted in the future or that they wanted to learn or that they did not want to let their families down.

- I: Why do you stick with your work?
 S: Because I wanna life. I want to have luxury, have a job that will support me, have a family, have money to pay bills and have fun with it. (166611)

I: What do you do when the work is hard?
S: I ask the teacher.
I: What if you still don't get it?
S: I stay after school.
I: You with it?
S: Mmhmm.
I: Why?
S: Because I wanna learn how to do the work. (562612)

I: Do you ever give up?
S: No, I'll always do my work because I don't know who will walk in the door...
I: What do you mean?
S: Like the principal, or my mom and dad; if they walk in and I'm not working, I'll be in trouble. (358612)

The students who stuck with an assignment indicated that there were several strategies they used when the work became hard for them. Some raised their hands and asked the teacher for help immediately, others waited for an opportunity to ask the teacher on a more individual basis, still others turned to their classmates, and the remaining responses were that the person tried in some way to work it out him or herself or got a family member to help out.

While more than two-thirds of the students said that they personally did not give up, only two students said that none of the other students gave up. And one of these students' definitions of "giving up" was that no one in his class had "quit coming to school." In all, 105 (42 females) argued that the others did..."a lot."

*They just say 'I can't do it' and they try and copy from others.
(350611)*

I: What do you do when the work is hard?
S: Sometimes I don't feel like doing it, but I ask the teacher and if I still don't get it, I try to work it out and ask for more help.
I: Do others in your class give up in that situation?
S: Yeah.
I: Why?
S: Probably they think if they don't get it now, they won't get it and what's the point of doing it?
I: But why don't they ask for help like you do?

S: Probably they don't care. But, they probably do, but it's real hard and they don't want the other kids to laugh cause they can't do certain things. (353612)

I: What do others in the class do when the work is challenging?
S: Half will try. A lot are more smarter than me, but kids say it is too hard and just forget about it.
I: Is it too hard for them?
S: They could do it but it is just the fact they are playing around. We all can do the work; you just got to try. (580611)

Students, such as this last one, held a reasonably high opinion of their classmates' ability to do the work, even though they reported that others did not try. Not a single student said that there were some students who simply could not do the work if they really wanted to. However, really wanting to learn was not an attitude that was always present in every classroom. The next section takes an extended look at the interaction between teachers' classroom actions and students' willingness to work.

Classroom Environments that Affect Student Learning

One of the major findings in our previous report was that students portrayed a tremendous variety in their educational experiences from one classroom to the next within the same school building. At any moment on any given day within a school, there were students who were being academically challenged in an atmosphere conducive to learning and others who found themselves in a raucous setting where teachers worked hard just to keep the "lid on."

This year we explored this finding in much greater detail, encouraging the students — without naming names — to talk about classes (1) in which they felt they were learning a lot and in which they were not learning as much as they thought they should and (2) in which students behaved well and in which students acted up. We then explored how teachers taught and handled these classes. From these discussions emerged vivid and compelling portraits of these classrooms, both positive and negative.

In this section, we emphasize both. In the first part, we take a broad look at the differences among classrooms that students described. We then concentrate on several situations that were obvious "cracks in the classroom floor" through which significant numbers of students fell. We conclude with several examples of classrooms where the cracks appeared to have been filled and where students seemed to be gaining a solid footing from which to advance further and successfully in their academic careers.

Variation Within Schools

We looked at this variation in terms of both how much students thought they were learning and how well students behaved in classes. The student responses concerning the existence of classroom variations along these lines were overwhelming.

With respect to how much students learned in their classes, 107 (54 females) out of 146 (73 females) said that they had classes in which they learned more than others. "Learning" was left undefined, but the answers below suggested that it was typically thought of as acquiring information that had been previously unknown.

Students provided a host of descriptions of their classrooms experiences that explained their answers, falling into four scenarios. All four of these situations will be discussed in much more detail later in this section. For the moment, we will simply give a flavor of situations which affected how much students learned.

One group of students described settings in which their "regular" teacher had left for some reason and they then had experienced either a continual shuttle of replacement teachers or a long-term replacement who was ineffective.

In my class, we don't learn nothing. We just sit there. We have had five teachers this year. We have learned nothing. (325611)

Others talked about their teachers "not teaching;" for some reason, often in response to highly disruptive atmospheres, the teachers either spent all of their time correcting students, teaching only to those who wanted to pay attention, or simply "sitting at their desks" allowing students to do whatever they wished.

In the class, everybody runs around, talks, eats, mess up the classroom, make paper balls, and write on the board... They go out of control and the teacher don't pay no attention to the kids. (413622)

Still others talked about being in classes where they had trouble understanding what was being taught and they did not receive the kind of help they wanted that would remedy this.

Some teachers just tell you to do the work and don't go over it or help you. (121612)

Finally, reflecting the other side of the coin, students talked about teachers who "pressured" them into working and learning, who simply would not accept students' not paying attention and not doing their work.

In my one class, they are excellent. She doesn't allow us to misbehave. (508611)

Not surprisingly, how well students learned was obviously and inextricably intermingled with how students behaved in the classroom. While students were not specifically asked to connect these two issues, they did so on their own, as the above comments document. Students were equally concise in describing teacher differences that affected their classroom behavior.

With respect to how well students behaved in their classes, 132 (65 females) out of 152 (74 females) said that they had classes in which students behaved better than others. As with learning, students had a clear picture of what distinguished one teacher from another.

I: Why do students act up in some classes?

S: Cause the teacher don't take control of the classroom, don't ever say nothing.

I: Why is that?

S: I don't know; maybe they just don't care about you. (164612)

S: The teacher we have don't ever give no homework, kids run over him, and they disrespect him.

I: What does the teacher do?

S: He don't say nothing.

I: What does your other teacher do?

S: She know how to keep the class under control, what to do if students get out of hand.

I: How?

S: If they don't do work, she keep em in at three o'clock, or give a suspension. She be strict if they act up and nice at the same time.

I: How?

S: Because if one person does something and mess up the class, like one teacher takes it out on the whole class, but my teacher she doesn't do that. (260612)

Cause students know one teacher is scrick (sic) and another is not going to do nothing. (566612)

I: Why do students act up in your class?

S: Because they can't do it in the other classes; they know the other teacher is real strict. They don't do it as much when the teachers are stricter.

I: What do you mean by being strict?

S: For instance, my teacher in sixth grade, she strict. Anything she gave us to do, she want us to do it. (565611)

I: Do students behave differently for different teachers?

S: They are different for different teachers.

I: Why?

S: I don't know — one of the teachers got more power.

I: What do you mean?

S: They tell you what to do and people listen. In the other class, they won't listen.

I: Why is that?

S: I don't know — the one got the power to suspend us whenever he want. (363611)

As can be seen in the above examples, much of the distinction students made was in terms of whether their teachers were strict or not. "Strict" had several meanings. In the first two examples, it was the opposite of "doing nothing" to students who misbehaved; in the next one, strict seemed to mean making sure that students did their class work; and in the last example, strict was associated with having "power," or following through on promised consequences.

Last year we reported that students actually preferred their teachers to be strict and nice, but that this posed a danger because being nice was often a sign of weakness and students would take advantage of teachers who were too nice. Three students from the same class reinforced the disciplinary tightrope that teachers had to walk by independently confirming a fatal mistake one of their teachers made at the beginning of the school year.

One student simply described a change that occurred in the students:

S: Students really only act up in one of my classes.

I: Why is that?

S: I don't know — at the beginning of the year they did work, but then they acted up. (369612)

Another offered an explanation for the change:

S: My teacher don't really teach us stuff. Most people take advantage of him.

I: What do you mean?

S: When we first came into the class, he let us have free time. Then when we did work, kids didn't want to do nothing and they just run around the class.

I: So you are not learning anything?

S: Yeah. (353612)

Two of the students then offered this sage advice for teachers tempted to follow the same path:

He should haven't let it be easy. He should be more stricter. Students took it as a joke. (353612)

You get off to the wrong start when you let em do this, and it get out of hand. They should, when they start off, have an attitude, tell the children they will get down to work. They should not be nice ever. (356612)

Students may have preferred teachers to be both strict and nice, but if this was not possible, then being strict was the most effective choice.

Thus, it should not be surprising that, despite the "on the edge" behavior of these students throughout the school day, they overwhelmingly preferred their teachers to be strict. In a subsample of 22 students who were specifically asked about this preference, 16 said they wanted strict teachers, five said they preferred teachers who were strict but that also gave them some free time every now and then, and only one wanted a teacher who was not strict. While much of this report details the variety of students' explanations for phenomena, their reasons for preferring a strict teacher all connected the teacher's ability to handle students in the classroom with how much students learned.

I: Do you prefer a strict teacher or one that isn't?

S: Strict. The reason being that how can you learn anything playing around? You not learning nothing. (167612)

Cause it help you learning. If the teacher let you play, what are you learning in school? Nothing. (555611)

S: She don't let you do what you wanna do; others let you walk around.

I: Which do you prefer?

S: Like her. That's how I get good grades. (467612)

I: Do you prefer your teachers to be strict?

S: Mean and nasty.

I: Why?

S: So you know you will get your work finished. (574612)

Cause you learn more. (375611)

Because I don't come to school to play; I come to school to learn. (257612)

They need to control the class so we can get to it. (356612)

But students did not always get the opportunity to "get to it." There were three different types of situations the students discussed where doing work and learning were far down on the list of what they "got to." And through these "cracks in the floor" slipped numerous opportunities to learn.

Cracks in the Classroom Floor

We are now in a position to revisit two questions that were posed at the beginning of the first section of this report. There we noted the tremendous range in individual students' grades and wondered whether they performed so inconsistently from class to class or whether teachers' criteria changed dramatically. This year's interview data hinted that both possibilities were true. Students reported that they behaved differently for different teachers and it was not difficult to extrapolate that these differences could have had significant effects on the grades they received. At the same time, students described considerable variety in how teachers approached instruction and, thus, it was highly probable that their criteria for grading varied as well.

These inconsistencies greatly influenced the quality of students' educational paths through middle school. The portions of our student interviews that dealt with the above topics illustrated three very important scenarios in which significant portions of students were not likely to learn as much as they felt they could and/or should. We now look at those in much greater detail. The fourth scenario will be discussed in the last part of this section.

Multiple or long-term replacement teachers. In several instances, students became very adamant in asserting that portions of their schooling experiences were essentially a "waste." They explained that for some reason — a sabbatical (described by a student as "when you been working for a long time and then take a vacation"); an illness; or simply an abrupt departure ("we got her fired") — their "regular" teacher had left and in their place followed a succession of replacement teachers. The consequence was a daily battle between the students and the teachers and little, if any, time spent on learning.

Seven students in one school discussed the situation that they all faced in the same English class.

In my class, we haven't had a permanent teacher in over three months and we really hadn't had anything but worksheets. I can't blame the teachers. The teachers didn't want to take a chance. They see us being bad and don't wanna take a chance to teach us. (165611)

S: We had a whole lot of teachers this year.

I: Has that been a good thing or a bad thing?

S: A bad thing.

I: Why?

S: We don't do nothing.

I: What do you mean?

S: We don't do work or nuthing and they all be acting up.

I: So how has this year been for you?

S: A waste...my whole class going to be retained.

I: How do you feel about being retained?

S: I could do eighth grade work. They explain the work there. We get split up sometimes (on days when no English teacher shows up) and I went to the eighth grade class and I could understand it.

I: So how has this year been?

S: We had fun in the beginning (with the regular teacher), but everybody now is failing, except one person. (162612)

I: Has seventh grade been better than sixth?

S: A worse year.

I: Why?

S: We don't have no teacher.

I: How has that affected you?

S: Like with my grade my old teacher had given me.

I: Explain what you mean.

S: Say if I had a C in English, I can't see if I'm improving or not.
I: Why?
S: My old teacher gave me a C, so they just kept her grade for me for the whole year.
I: Do you do work in the class?
S: Almost every different week we have a different teacher or we get split up.
I: Are you learning anything this year?
S: Not really.
I: Do you ever use the library for anything in English?
S: In the beginning, when our teacher was here, we did book reports.
I: Now?
S: We don't do nothing. Then they started saying they were going to leave us all behind; they can't do that...I could have stayed home when we in that class...We say if we got to teach ourselves we will. If someone don't know science, one of us will go over there and make them understand. And we got in trouble for doing that. It is like the teachers only come to get paid, not to teach. One teacher turned it into a jail cell and we had to sit there and just be quiet. (157612)

I: How do you get a grade in English?
S: They just took the grade from the second report card.
I: From when your regular teacher was here?
S: The teacher left in the middle of the year.
I: How did students behave then?
S: They act up with the rest of the teachers. (170611)

A student wistfully concluded:
S: I want my old teacher back.
I: Why?
S: She knew it better than any teacher; don't nobody talk in her class.
I: Why?
S: Like they listening to her cause she talk to us, stuff like that.
I: What do you mean?
S: Like real life stuff. (153611)

Two of the seven were transferred out of the class into a section that housed the top students in the grade. The students were vague about why they had been selected to leave other than to note their grades in the past had been good. One compared the differences in her situations and determined that the move had been for the better.

S: Recently I was in (the old section) and I was having problems in that class but I was getting As and Bs so I was transferred to (the top section)...they are doing much harder work.
I: What do you mean by harder?
S: It was harder, more reading; in my old section we were getting some work, but in my new section we get more.
I: Could you give an example?
S: The way they do...they do definitions different. In my new section you have to write it, give the abbreviation, break it into syllables, write what part of speech it is.
I: What do students do in your old section?
S: It more like a commercial class; they just there to pass. A lot could do what we do in my new section, it just they are used to the easy way instead of working for it...they like just sit there, do work, the testes (sic) is easy, a little kid could pass.
I: So you got different work to do in the new section.
S: (In the old section), we were getting new teachers every day and we're not learning, but in my new section my teacher gives a test every week. (167612)

However, others still seemed to prefer the "easy" way, as the above student called it.

I: What was the work like in your old section?
S: That work was easy. I like being in slow classes; it's easy plus I didn't change from last year and it was the same level class. (150612)

Students did not deny that they misbehaved badly in this situation, but as was indicated in the above descriptions of differences in how students acted in their classes, students tended to view this as the teacher's inability to control the class. That is, students felt that they were controllable, if the teacher knew how. Of course, the folklore of schools is replete with stories of how to "sink a sub." So the teachers who followed regular teachers into the classroom were definitely in unenviable circumstances. Thus, the blame for the cumulative "noneducational" atmosphere undoubtedly should have been shared. The point, however, is that an entire school year in some core subject areas was in fact wasted. For a student population that collectively achieved well below grade level, this loss of a year was serious.

It may seem to some that there would be only a small proportion of students who in any one school year would face a situation in which a regular classroom teacher left and was replaced by a series of teachers who, for a variety of reasons, stayed for only a short period of time or by a long-term replacement who was ineffective. However, our sample indi-

cated that the number of students who faced this situation may have been sizable. For example, students in three of the other four schools commented on the detrimental effects in their classes when the regular teacher was replaced for a significant portion of the year by a substitute.

I: Why are you getting a C?
S: For me, it's just I'm not getting something.
I: Can you give an example?
S: In math, and it's only because my regular teacher was not here half the year. We had a sub, and I couldn't understand him and everybody did what they wanted to. He wasn't teaching. (386612)

I: Do you learn more in some classes than others?
S: Yes, in certain classes children misbehave and I can't hear the lesson.
I: Why do they behave differently?
S: I think I know in math. A teacher came in the middle of the year, so the students think they can take advantage cause she doesn't know what's going on.
I: What do you mean?
S: The routine, how to handle us, the punishment.
I: What should the teacher do?
S: Hold detention. And when children act up, send the name to the house director. Let him see what is going on in the classroom and see that the same kids acting up and he will punish them and we will be able to learn in class...Most of the work we get is kind of easy and we can't move on cause the teacher can't tell if we are learning or not. The teacher we had in the first of the year would let us move on. (268611)

I: What's hard for you?
S: Math and all that stuff.
I: Why?
S: The teacher hardly teaches though, cause so much people changed us a lot.
I: What do you mean?
S: I don't know what happened to our teacher; we had three already.
I: Do students act up?
S: All the time. The teacher don't care what happen. (470621)

The effect was somewhat magnified in some of the schools because students tended to have one teacher for two core subjects. That is, one teacher taught both science and social studies or science and math or math and language arts, depending on the school.

Thus, when a student had multiple teachers or a long-term substitute, it affected 50 percent of their non-exploratory classes.

Disruptive classrooms. While the above situations were decidedly disruptive, there also were instances in which students described difficult learning environments with their "regular" teachers as well. The following students all shared the same class.

I: What grades are you getting?
S: As, Bs, and Cs.
I: What are you getting the C in?
S: Math
I: Is that good or bad for you?
S: Not a good grade.
I: Why?
S: The teacher mostly.
I: What do you mean?
S: Like the kids talk, and if one talks, he blame the whole class. He screams at us. He threw a desk.
I: Why did you get a C?
S: He did not explain it, and I do poorly on the test.
I: Describe a day in the class.
S: You don't learn nothing. It's boring. He always suspending kids; that's how he wastes his time.
I: Why do kids act up?
S: They don't like the way the teacher acts; other math teachers teach a different subject every week; he teaches the same subject for a month. (468621)

S: This year one of my teachers make class real boring, and kids don't pay attention and act up. Some teachers make it interesting by not being so strict and not so loose. But he so strict that no one pays attention. Kids say he don't respect them so why should they.
I: Why?
S: This is what most kids say: "He not my parent. Why he is yelling? I'm not going to pay attention."
I: What's wrong with yelling?
S: They find it as disrespectful. There's a difference when you yell. Two different ways. With a big attitude, you notice it through his face, and nobody likes it. And there's a different way, in a kind way: "Please do this." It's not always the teacher's fault; sometimes it the student's fault.

I: How?
S: If kids don't pay attention, and cooperate, nothing will be accomplished.
I: How is your grade in math?
S: Don't know. Last semester a B, cause of the same reason.
I: That is lower than usual?
S: It's different with every kind of teacher. They explain things differently. This teacher thinks we can learn it that quick (snaps finger). Some of the kids try to help the teacher and give an opinion of what to do but he doesn't listen. Sometimes he takes our opinion and they do work. (453622)

I: Why do students misbehave in the class?
S: The teacher hollers at them. He tries to be nice but he hollers . . . He cursed once. I even heard him myself. So now kids are fussing at the teacher cause he cursed. We're trying to get a new teacher. He doesn't listen to us. If a bad kid asks to go to the bathroom, he will say no. But, then he will forget he said no and get frustrated and if a good kid asks, he won't let him go. We got a lot of problems with that teacher. (456611)

Three students talked about the effects of this situation on their performance in the class; the first covering behavior and the second two regarding learning.

I: Are you behaving in class?
S: I still listen to the teacher. But lately I'm not doing all I'm supposed to be doing.
I: Why not?
S: Sometimes I may listen to my friends. I realize I'm doing the wrong thing. (456611)

I: Are you learning anything in math?
S: No, cause he don't teach us right.
I: What do you mean?
S: He don't teach in his own words. I don't understand. He teach us out of the math book. Whatever he says, he says from the math book and if it is easy, he make it complicated.
I: You want examples?
S: Yes.
I: Do other teachers explain?
S: Yes, they explain it like with little details. (459622)

S: He only like to say it once and don't want to go over it.
I: When this happens what do you do?
S: I get lost or ask classmates.
I: Math was easy for you last year (based on the previous year's interview).
S: This year it is harder cause of the teacher. He won't explain, that's what I was referring to (463621)

Thus, an inescapable cycle emerged in the class wherein the teacher would discipline the students in a way they did not like. The students would continue misbehaving. The teacher would try to move on through the lesson, apparently by limiting interaction with the students. The students would then complain that he was not teaching the material correctly. This accentuated their misbehavior which in turn caused the teacher to try to exert greater control.

For some of the students, the lack of instruction was more notable than the disruptive atmosphere.

I: When are things boring for you?
S: When we don't do nothing.
I: Would you give me an example?
S: When we go to math, we don't do nothing. We're not even learning nothing; he don't teach us.
I: What does the teacher do?
S: All we do is copy the whole board, that's it. (464611)

Only one of the students that we interviewed from this section felt like he was still moving ahead in math.

I: You still like math?
S: Yeah.
I: What grade are you getting?
S: B.
I: Is that what you expected?
S: I think I can get a A; I got confidence in myself.
I: Are you learning as much as last year?
S: Yes.
I: Is it easy to get good grades in there?
S: It's easy, all you gotta do is pay attention.
I: Why don't some of your classmates?
S: They want to act like little kids, be like someone else, but they not

that person.

I: Why do you behave?

S: Because I wanna better start for myself. (450611)

But for the most part, students closely connected the disruptive situation in the room, the terse and unelaborated instructional approach, and their lack of achievement in math.

I: What grades are you getting?

S: The last report: 4 As, 3 Bs, and 1 C.

I: Are you happy with that?

S: Yeah.

I: How do you get an A?

S: Nothing, do all your work, that's it — do homework and everything.

I: So where did you get a C?

S: In math, nobody in class like it. All he do is sit there and holler and write pink slips for no reason. (464611)

I: Do you learn more in some classes than others?

S: Yeah, in science and social studies.

I: Why?

S: I knew nothing about the heart, and in social studies, the teacher teaches us a lot about the world, a lot of things I didn't know.

I: Where do you not learn as much?

S: In math, kids won't stop talking, so my teacher is not my teacher.

They maybe stay quiet for 15 minutes, but then will start talking. He tries to make them calm down; sometimes it work and sometimes it don't. (457622)

One final, ironic note should be added to the above vignette. According to the students, the section they were in was considered to be the top section in the seventh grade. When asked how it was determined they should be in that section, one student responded, "Because we're good in math." Of course, this designation may not be true; but at the very least the above students did not look upon themselves as representing "bad" students behaviorwise or "poor" students mathwise.

Once again, it was difficult to determine how many students were affected by such situations. But the extremely high percentage of students who said that they both learned more in some classes than others and that students behaved differently from classroom to classroom made it highly probable that the above situation was not all that unusual.

"Support scarce" classrooms. The students in the above section tightly connected disruptions with how much they were learning. They also associated whether they were learning with the extent to which the teacher was willing to give help to them. Thus, it was somewhat difficult and artificial to untangle "disruptive" classes from "support scarce" ones. Still, the prominence of the students' desire and gratefulness for help in last year's report made it important to look more closely at situations in which such support did not seem available. This year students talked more deeply about how important such support from the teacher was, often doing so by contrasting "support rich" and "support scarce" classrooms.

Some teachers take more time to explain stuff. They break it down and others go right through it. (369612)

I: Do you learn more in some classes?

S: Math.

I: Why do you say that?

S: Cause he explains stuff when he give it to us; the other teacher just give it to us and expect us to know how to do it.

I: What does the first teacher do to help you get it?

S: Like when he give us new math, like yesterday, he gives a example on the board, and if I don't understand when I do it on my own, you tell him and then he say "all right" and come help you.

I: When do you have the most trouble learning?

S: LA and science.

I: Why?

S: What I said earlier. The teacher just put it on the board and if you don't know how, the teacher get angry. I try to get help but when I come after school, they gotta go somewhere and can't help you...like when I ask somebody to help me, just because some other kid won't need help, then they think others won't either; some kids are smarter.

I: If you got more help, could you get a better grade?

S: Mmhmm. (251611)

S: In one class there ain't nothing to do. The teacher just sits behind the desk. (116611)

S: In one class, my teacher has a bad attitude. He takes out his anger on you. He barely teaches. All we do is read books. If we don't know something, all he says is just "figure it out yourself." In my other class, we learn how to do letters. She wants to teach us what we don't know. If you raise your hand, she will explain it to us and show us how to do it.

Some teachers just teach more.

I: But in your other class?

S: He just has us read books. He tells us he has his education. If we don't like it, don't come to class. My mom didn't send me here just to read books. (327612)

I: Do you learn more in some classes?

S: Yeah.

I: Which ones?

S: In social studies we do the work pay attention, and don't get out of our seat.

I: Why?

S: The teacher helps you out a lot. Other teachers just write things on the board and don't explain it. (407621)

Students argued that creating a more supportive atmosphere would also have positive effects on discipline as well.

I: Do students act up in your class?

S: Most of them, they don't have enough stuff to stay in.

I: What do you mean?

S: They don't try. They don't think they can do it.

I: Do you have some advice?

S: Have like a family group, small groups, to talk about problems, and teachers could give some advice.

I: Do you do that now?

S: No.

I: Why do you think that would work?

S: They would build like....make some feel like they are cared about. (260612)

I: Do you learn more or the same in your classes?

S: More.

I: Why?

S: Cause some teachers have more discipline over the class. I have a teacher. She doesn't have control over our class so she doesn't teach, just write on the board.

I: Why do you think the teacher gives up?

S: Just don't care.

I: What do you mean?

S: Because if they really wanted to teach us, they could catch the class'

attention.

I: How?

S: Like she could teach something interesting or could teach and we could have fun at the same time.

I: What makes it interesting?

S: A fun class, a nice class, friendly but strict. A teacher who teach so we can learn.

I: Explain "so we can learn."

S: Like if you're the teacher and they know you don't understand, they can think of other ways to help you understand it.

I: Can you give an example?

S: Like think of educational games. (556612)

Classrooms Where Students Learn

An issue then became how best to motivate students to engage in the activities, however hard, that would promote the learning they all thought they were capable of doing. Students were mixed on where the responsibility resided. Some said there was nothing teachers could do, it was up to the students.

I: Should teachers make the students who don't work do it?

S: I don't think teachers should make them do work; if students fail, it is on them. (158612)

I: Why do others in your class give up?

S: Cause most of em, their mom never there and they parents don't care.

I: Could teachers do anything to encourage them?

S: No. (369612)

I: Anything teachers can do to get other students interested in class?

S: Not really.

I: It's hopeless?

S: Hopeless. (451612)

Others argued that teachers were the ones that had to put the "pressure" on for students to learn, that it was teachers' jobs to do this.

I: Why do you say you learn more in science?

S: Cause he don't let us not. He push em to their limits and he not scared of them or nothing.

I: What do you mean by “push em to their limits”?

S: Like if you don't do homework, he'll make you do it the next night plus the other homework. (270612)

S: Teachers should find a way to make them do it, make them learn.

I: Why?

S: Because people not learning right. Teachers say they want higher pay. They are not here to baby-sit. Some are here just to get paid. They should like the kids, try to make it fun, so that students will learn easier. (166611)

I: What do your classmates do when they don't know how to do the work?

S: They just give up and say “I ain't doing this.”

I: Why do they give up?

S: I don't know. They don't want to push.

I: Could they do the work?

S: I know they can. One of my friends don't do nothing but when he does do it, he gets good grades.

I: So why doesn't he do it?

S: They teachers just forget about em, don't push em. That ain't right.

I: You think teachers should push all the students?

S: Yep. (576611)

In a subsample of 50 students, 27 placed the blame on low levels of learning in the classroom on students, 16 on teachers, and seven blamed both. For those who put the locus of blame on themselves, most talked about the poor behavior of their peers, using such phrases as “they are disrespectful – they don't pay attention”, “having an attitude about school”, “don't listen”, “fuss with the teacher”, “act like they don't know how to behave”, or “kids think school is a place to play and talk to their buddies”. A handful of these students, while claiming it was the students' who were to blame, indirectly implicated the teachers by commenting on “kids who take advantage of new teachers” or “kids who know they can get away with it”.

Half of those who blamed the teacher noted that some of their teachers were “not strict enough” or “did not have enough control”, both themes that we visited earlier in the report. Five of the students talked about the way teachers related to students: “not nice”, “not fun”, or “believe other teachers and not kids” when a conflict arose. Only a couple of students placed the blame directly on inadequate pedagogy: “they need to break things down on the board and to explain it well” or “she can't teach”. For the students who blamed both, they offered a mix of explanations similar to those noted above.

While more students placed the onus for learning on their peers, some teachers — according to the students — did not accept this as an excuse for letting students slip through the cracks. In their classrooms, they cajoled, teased, and badgered the students into working and — if the student reports were accurate — into learning. The remainder of this section then examines more closely students' experiences in classrooms where they did learn.

It is important to look at such classrooms in greater depth for another reason: We would be remiss if we painted only the negative picture of classroom life in these schools. The negative side is important, not for its drama, but because it emphasizes the preparation that any public school system must engage in to create a set of schools that are capable of enabling all students that enter the buildings each day to learn at high levels, not just those who are “lucky” enough to find their way into the pockets where such learning is possible. However, we also want to describe education within these pockets. And while the teachers were stylistically different — with some being described as stern and others as funny or interesting, they all had one characteristic in common: they reduced students' excuses for not being able to learn.

Teachers accomplished this, according to their young charges, in a variety of ways. Some did it by carefully explaining what students were to learn and monitoring how well students did.

I: How does a teacher explain well?

S: They take their time. Like one teacher. If one student does not understand, she will continue to explain it until the whole class will know.

I: How much time should the teacher take?

S: At least a time, but if it is too long, everyone will fall back; so the teacher will tell the student to stay after school, or the teacher will get somebody who does know it to explain.

I: Does that embarrass kids?

S: (Frowns and shakes her head from side to side)

I: Why?

S: When I do it, I feel happy that I know what I'm talking about. (453622)

I: Can you give an example of how your teacher helps you learn?

S: Like what we do in class. If he explains everything, and then gives you two or three questions to see if you are paying attention, to see if you understand in class. Sometimes he asks you to raise your hand if you understand, and if you don't, he will tell you. (470621)

Some of the teachers worked hard to make their lessons more interesting and “fun.”

I: What could teachers do to be interesting?

S: They could, you know, teach more with feeling and not always be serious with a serious face.

I: Explain more.

S: If a teacher is trying to communicate....my science teacher teaches, but also jokes around, but they take him seriously.

I: How?

S: He like when he teaches us something about evolution, he be saying there was a person named “Herbie.”

I: Does everyone listen when he does that?

S: Yes. (461622)

Explaining well, offering help, and enlivening the lesson were only part of the picture of the classroom in which students succeeded. Grades were one of the pieces of information that students relied on to form their own judgments of how successful they were. Thus, teachers who provided the kind of preparation that increased the chances of doing well on tests were highly valued. The same student from above continued her depiction of such a teacher.

I: Do you learn more in some classes?

S: Science.

I: Why?

S: Because he, my teacher, teaches over and over again. I don't know, he explains in a way I would understand.

I: Could you give an example?

S: Um, now we talking about evolution, we talk about how people changing one way and kept on changing and he shows it by pictures and stuff.

I: And that helps you?

S: Yeah.

I: What is your grade?

S: B.

I: Is it hard to get that?

S: Pretty easy cause when he be giving a test, he would be telling us the stuff. Sometimes we copy notes, but we don't always; But he explains it and the day of the test we know what to do.

I: So you're confident?

S: Yes.

I: What are your overall grades?

S: C's. (461622)

Another aspect to students getting support — apart from explaining how to do a task — was the teachers' providing constructive feedback once the task was completed. When we were talking with students about the projects they did in the classroom, we also probed with a subset the degree to which they were getting useful feedback on their work. We coded any feedback beyond receiving a simple letter grade as being constructive. These constructive comments ranged from a detailed one-on-one discussion after school to a comment in front of the class at the end of a student presentation.

Only one-third of the 89 students who commented on teacher feedback reported that teachers offered constructive critique of their work (i.e., teachers provided more than a letter grade or a cursory “nice job”). Students were not very reflective about the lack of constructive feedback, other than acknowledging that with heavy supervision loads, it was difficult for teachers to give more than letter grades. However, students were eager to talk about helpful feedback. They appeared hungry to learn more about what their mistakes were and how they could correct them, and they were especially proud when they received some recognition for quality work.

There is a whole packet of rules. We do both a self-evaluation and the teacher fills out one. If you get an F, you have to tell the class why you thought you got the F. (207612)

She said I messed up my hypothesis, and she showed me how to do it better. (508611)

She gives us lots of comments and corrects any mistakes. (419621)

She sent a letter home to our parents about our effort (on the project). (315612)

At lunch time my teacher gave me advice on how to get an A. (306611)

Implicit in the examples in this section was that some teachers exhibited a concern with enabling “all” of the students in the class to succeed, not just the ones who tried or who were smart or who cooperated or who participated. Despite some of the students' arguments that there was little teachers could do to engender greater resilience in performing tasks and more attentive behavior, some teachers — according to their students' descriptions — apparently did not accept this as inevitable. In an extended discussion, the following student described how her teacher incorporated the above characteristics in his approach and ultimately exercised his “will” over the students, to push them to perform well.

I: How are your grades?

S: With my teacher, my fourth teacher this year. My class is a pain in the behind. With my first teachers, I got 5 Ds and 2 As because of the class. I couldn't pay attention; somebody was doing something every day. We got another teacher, and he is still the teacher, thank God.

I: You like him?

S: Yeah.

I: Why?

S: Because he makes learning science in a fun way and because of him I got an A, and I had never passed science before.

I: How did you get the A?

S: He doesn't talk like a regular teacher. He knows how to have fun. With him, he doesn't bore us with work. He make us....he give examples in a fun way. Like he talks to us, the way he talk, just creating things is fun, and we play games and at the same time we are learning.

I: So, how did you get an A in science?

S: He was like messing around with us and teaching, and I kept on paying attention and reviewing the work, and I passed all the tests with 100 and got a A.

I: How does he grade class work, like experiments?

S: We work as groups, and he goes around and watches to see how you doing the experiment. He won't let you fail a test, and he will help you until you get the grade you deserve.

I: What do you mean?

S: He doesn't let us flunk.

I: What if a student is happy with an F?

S: No, he don't let them. (458622)

Student Dreams for the Future

In this final section, we supply additional, and perhaps the ultimate, ammunition for the need for raising standards: students' dreams for the future. Students in these five schools expressed aspirations that would probably match those of most American middle-class students, in terms of post-secondary plans and careers. With only a few exceptions, they saw college as part of their future educational goals. In fact, 91 percent of the students in a population where the dropout rate was among the highest in the country said they wanted to and/or expected to attend college!

In order to be a doctor I need diplomas and degrees. I can't

reach my goals without it. I haven't seen a doctor that didn't go to college. (104612)

Yes, I want to go to college. If I don't go, what will I do with my life? You got to get a degree, get more experienced, have a better chance to get a job than just going to high school. (211611)

I plan to go to college. You get more education. I want to get as much as I can even though the work is harder. (24612)

I want to go to college for two years. I will learn enough, then I plan to audition for singing or in the movies. (418622)

In this world today, college gets you more business and gets you a better life. (503612)

If you apply for a job, you will have a better chance of getting it if you go to college. (533612)

They also had aggressive plans for the careers they wanted to pursue. Their choices were wide-ranging: doctors, lawyers, teachers, athletes, engineers, performers (models, singers, dancers), nurses, cosmetologists, scientists (chemists, archeologists, astronauts), artists, architects, law enforcement officers, and writers. The two most popular occupational aspirations, with one out of every five students saying that they wanted to be one or the other, were doctor or athlete. Becoming a doctor was equally balanced between males and females. The choice of athlete was dominated by males, with basketball and football being the most popular choices. Becoming an attorney was the third most popular choice (14 percent) followed by the teaching profession (9 percent) and nursing (7 percent).

Given that students expressed aspirations for college and careers that were far out of proportion with what their scholastic predecessors had achieved, we thought we needed to press the students to see how clear an idea they had about whether they could achieve their goals – keeping in mind they were still only in middle school. Thus, we asked them to talk to us about why college was important, the type of encouragement they received to pursue college as an option, and how to get into college. At this stage in their educational career, their enthusiasm for college appeared to exceed their knowledge about it.

Why Was College Important?

Of those who talked about college, 70 percent of them made a concrete connection between going to college and getting a good job. This explanation was three times as frequent a response as any other category.

You have to go to college to get a good-paying job and a better education.

If you go you can become a doctor, lawyer, or nurse. But if you don't all you can do is work at McDonalds. (206612)

I want to become a chef. I need training. Maybe I will go to college for a couple of years. They will teach you how to cook gourmet, how to season the food, how to fix the plate nice and neat, how not to have anything dripping off the plate. (303611)

My goal (as a result of college) is to be involved in science tests, build machinery, and stuff like that. (417621)

However, students saw more to their education than just training for a particular skill they might need in a particular occupation. Students also spoke eloquently of the value of learning just for learning sake, something that may have surprised some teachers who struggled to get these students' attention on a daily basis. One student even named a set of highly prestigious institutions as being on her list, arguing that she would learn more in a new environment:

I: Do you still plan to go to college?

S: Yes, I want to go to Stanford, Harvard, UCLA or Penn State.

I: Why those places?

S: My mom told me they were good places. ... I can get away from people, the city, and concentrate on my books. (315612)

It will help you expand your education more and learn more. You should never pass up an opportunity to learn something new. (214611)

But students also recognized there was more to being educated than just knowing lots of "stuff." They also talked about quality of life issues, suggesting that a good education would do more than get them a good job or give them knowledge.

You need it to get what you want in life. You need more education than high school to have a decent life. (111611)

I want to do something good with my life. It motivates me to do better. (225611)

I don't want to stay around the house. I want to go places and do things. (325611)

I want to be successful in life. A lot of my family started school and then got pregnant. (327612)

Money isn't the most important thing to me. It is more important to educate black kids in the community. It is important to help the community. (424612)

Encouragement for College

We were curious about where students had received their ideas about the value of college. Thus, we asked the students whether they had family members who had been to college and what they heard from them about college. While only a minority of students reported having family members with first-hand college experience, the majority had someone in their household who constructively nudged them to continue thinking about this dream. Indeed, students claimed that their attending college was a prominent wish of family members.

My cousin tells me you got to get what you need now. You need a high school diploma just to flip burgers. Your friends that you laugh with now might be doing things and you'll just be sitting here [unless you are prepared for college]. (120611)

I have a cousin at West Chester. He took me up to campus on Christmas break. He showed me what he studied, where he studied, and how he managed his money. I stayed with him for a week. (114611)

My mom and dad - they say it (college) is pretty good. They say you need to go there and try hard. They keep saying to me that I can do anything if I graduate from college. (231611)

My mom and dad want us (brothers and sisters) to go to college. My dad sat us down and said: "I want you to fulfill your goals. I will die a happy man if you do." (225611)

S: I will be the third one in the family to go to college.

I: What does your family tell you about college?

S: They say college is the right place to be. You learn more. You can succeed in life with college. You can get a good job. (312611)

I: What would you like to become as an adult?

S: I want to become a doctor.

I: Why?

S: It's my dream since I was in the third grade and I did a drawing of a doctor and won a contest.

I: What does your mom say about your dream?

S: She says, "Keep your dream alive. That's a good choice!" (429621)

My mom says it will open new doors. You can have a good career and you will get paid good money. My mom wants me to fly airplanes for the U. S. government. (417621)

My grandmom - once in a while she will tell me that I need to do good and keep up the good work in school so I can go to college. (518611)

We also asked students whether their teachers shared information with them about college. Only about two out of every five students reported that there was discussion of college in their classrooms. A common refrain from those classrooms where college was not a topic of discussion was that either:

"They mostly just stick to our class work" (417621) or that "They talk mostly about high school and how you need to get into a good high school." (511611)

The central theme for students whose teachers did refer to college was that it represented an important ticket to the future and that with that ticket they would have a wider range of options open to them. Most of the comments about teacher talk revolved around how important college was to a future career:

My teacher says you have to have a degree to get a good career. (105612)

They say you gotta go. They say you should go. That is how they got where they are now. (106612)

My teacher says the same thing to me as my father: What will you do if you get hurt? (referring to the need to be more than just an athlete) (306611)

Every time we be bad they remind us about the importance of college for getting a good job. (311621)

But not every conversation was focused on jobs. There was also the mention of learning other important life skills.

I: Why is college important?

S: College is the best place to go to do more than other schools. You get to be around a lot of different people.

I: Why is that important?

S: You learn a lot of things if you see people doing the right things. You will want to do it, too. (312611)

S: [The teacher] talks to me one-on-one about college.

I: What kinds of things does she say?

S: She talks about goals, about what she did, where she lived, what it was like. (424612)

I: Do your teachers talk about college?

S: Mr. [teacher's name] does.

I: What does he say?

S: He tells us about how it is. He told us about his fraternity and what they did to help the neighborhood. (430621)

It was clear that students had received information about college from both family members and teachers (or counselors), with students identifying the family as providing at least the same, if not more, encouragement as the school. Not much of the school information appeared to be programmatic, cropping up in classroom discussions as the opportunity presented itself. An occasional student would refer to a program that concerned college, such as "College Access," but these references were often in the past tense, with the exception of a couple of females who had spent their summers on a college campus.

The Paths to College?

We knew from our conversations with these students last year that college was an important part of their plans so we explored just how much students articulated what it would take to get into college. Their responses clustered around three main categories: grades, working hard, and behaving, with about half of the students mentioning more than one criterion. These three categories matched students' characteristics of successful students in last year's interviews. Thus, their conception of the path to college was not very specific. Considering that the students were still young, perhaps this depiction was entirely reasonable. The low frequency of answers such as "money" or "scholarships" (only 20 of 152) perhaps reflected their age or, of more concern, unrealistic ideas of the path to college.

Not unexpectedly, the most important criterion from the students' perspective was the need to have good grades. Just over half of those who talked about the path to college (77 of 152) mentioned high grades:

I need to pass my classes, you know, get As. (311621)

You need to finish with good grades and honors. (429621)

You need to get good grades and get into a good high school. (511611)

But this acknowledgment of the importance of grades must be tempered with the discussion earlier in this report about how little students could clearly articulate what it took to get good grades. It was one thing to acknowledge that grades were important, but an entirely different matter to know what you had to do to improve grades. Even the possibly inflated self-reports of grades revealed that many of these students were struggling just to pass their classes, let alone performing at a level necessary for college.

While not always explicitly making the connection between level of work and grades, just under half of the students (68 of 152) mentioned the importance of working hard as a value that would be rewarded with college acceptance. But, as noted earlier, there was not a very clear understanding of hard work beyond doing all the work the teacher assigned.

I need to study every night, be prepared, and try harder. (121612)

You need to do your work and your homework. (532611)

I: What do you need to go to college?

S: You need to be on a higher level.

I: What do you mean?

S: You need to do 8th grade work in 7th grade. (533612)

Finally, just over a quarter of the students (44 of 152) also pointed to the significance of good classroom behavior as an important part of the ticket to college:

You need to pay attention and have respect for the teacher and other adults. (135611)

You need to learn that things aren't always your way. You have to do what other people say. You need to learn to hear their side of what they want you to do. (114611)

This is not surprising in a setting where students regularly talked about poor behavior as being a key distracter to student learning (see section on "Disruptive Classrooms"). There was a strong belief that either through report cards or references from teachers, that colleges would have a way of checking up on their behavior:

"If you are good in school then you will get a good recommendation from the teacher." (101631)

As in the earlier discussion about grades, the students collectively offered a multi-dimensional picture of the paths to college. But, of course, collective ideas about getting into college were generally more comprehensive than those of the majority of individual students. There was a wide variety of answers:

You need to act like you know something, get good grades, know what your goals are, and where you want to go to school. (528612)

Get good grades, pay attention, and do your homework. (102612)

You need good grades – that is the most important. And you need good behavior reports. (417621)

You need to study, work hard, and don't get into trouble. (401621)

Essentially, then, many more students wanted to go to college than knew what they needed to do to get there.

Conclusions

There is no reason to think that subjecting these students to higher performance standards without simultaneous changes in classroom teaching environments will engender any different pattern of behavior than they exhibited this past year. A sizable group of students, to be sure, will eagerly welcome more challenging work, and perhaps the greater attention devoted to performance standards may even help clarify for them what it takes to do quality work. But a considerable number will be less resilient, especially given the likelihood that many of the students will discover cracks in the classroom floors on which they stand. Absent some significant intervention, the pool of students in the Philadelphia middle schools will not be well-prepared for having to achieve more to receive the same academic recognition they currently receive.

Of course, "absent some significant intervention" is a key phrase. Urban school districts are highly complex — in size, diversity, and politics. Agreeing on and implementing interventions are more easily said than done. We would not presume to specify what the necessary interventions are, but clearly they must include greater professional development for teachers, geared to creating the kinds of classrooms that students so clearly articulated as enabling them to learn the most: vibrant, interesting, and supportive settings where teachers granted students no excuses for not succeeding.

And, such interventions must attend to greater student preparation as well, preparation that sends (1) the message that the adults believe as strongly as the students' peers that they all are capable, and (2) knowledge about how good "good enough" is to have realistic changes of attaining their lofty goals. In fact, it may be that the real value of standards-based reform will be in clearly defining the expectations of which the students seemed to be so vaguely aware (see also, Wheelock, 1995).

Thus, standards reform must nurture, maintain, and reinforce the classrooms like those in the last part of the second results section, and they must promote the spread of such classrooms throughout the school building. Otherwise, existing cracks in the classroom floors will remain, and many students — all with aspirations to have viable careers and to contribute to the well-being of themselves and their families — will slip through.

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Appendix: 1997 Student Interview Protocol

I. Why do students report they are successful when indicators suggest they aren't? How do teachers' standards influence students' views of their performance?

- (a) What does it take to get an A in a particular class (mix across Engl, Math, Sci & SS)?
- (b) What is the difference between an A and a C in that class?
- (c) A C and a F?
- (d) Is that true for all of your classes?
- (e) If not, what are some of the differences across classes?
- (f) What grades do you usually get?
- (g) Is it easy or difficult to get those grades?
- (h) How hard is it to get an A?
- (i) What subjects do you do research in when putting together projects or reports?
- (j) What are the steps you go through to put together your research project/report? (probe for putting information in their own words)
- (k) What kind of feedback do teachers give you on your research? (letter grades or comments)
- (l) Do teachers make you redo work that they say is not acceptable? How do you respond?

II. Why do students say they value education but don't behave accordingly?

- (a) Students say they value education, but few of you act like you want to be in school. Why?
- (b) What would it take for students to show more enthusiasm for school?
- (c) What sort of activities would really get your attention?
- (d) How do these activities help you learn better?
- (e) What do teachers need to do to make classes more interesting?
- (f) Can you tell me about some activities in your classes that really helped you learn?

III. Are the differences in instruction that students experience from class to class important?

- (a) Do students behave differently for different teachers? How and why?
- (b) Do you learn more in some classes than others?
- (c) How do you know you are learning more? Why?
- (d) How much of this difference depends on you and how much depends on the teacher?
- (e) What does the teacher do who helps you learn more?

IV. Why do so many students say they will attend college but few will likely do so?

- (a) Do you plan to go to college?
- (b) Why do you say this?
- (c) Do your teachers talk about students going to college?
- (d) How will college help you?
- (e) What will you need to do in school to be able to go to college?
- (f) How many people do you know who have gone to college?
- (g) What have they told you about college?

V. Do students value challenging work?

- (a) How do students react when the work in school is hard for them?
- (b) What kind of work is hard for you? (What does hard mean?) Why?
- (c) What do you do when the work gets hard? Why?
- (d) What should the teacher do to help you when the work is hard?
- (e) Do you prefer easy work or hard work? Why?
- (f) Do you like learning outside of school?
- (g) Is reading part of that learning?
- (h) How often do you read outside of school?
- (i) Where do you get your reading materials?
- (j) Is the school library an challenging/fun place to learn?
- (k) How often do you visit there?
- (l) What do you do when you are there?
- (m) Who do you go with?
- (n) Does the library have the materials you need?



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