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**URBAN STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES  
ON MIDDLE SCHOOL:**

**The Sixth Grade Year in Five Philadelphia Middle Schools**

**H. DICKSON CORBETT AND BRUCE L. WILSON**

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for the  
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Long an afterthought in the organization of American education, the middle school has recently become a more highly visible target of reform fervor. Much of the impetus for this attention was Lipsitz's *Successful Schools for Young Adolescents* (1984) and the Carnegie Foundation's *Turning Points* (1989). Following these documents' publication, a host of empirical, philosophical, ideological, political, and practical arguments were advanced and/or recycled that supported a surprisingly consistent collection of ideas about a "good middle school," including interdisciplinary teaming, heterogeneous grouping, small learning communities, involved families, community service opportunities, flexible scheduling, and advisory periods, among others. However, an important population of people with a significant stake in how middle schools should operate has only been, at best, tangential participants in the debate — students. This study, commissioned by The Philadelphia Education Fund (PEF) with funding from the Pew Charitable Trusts, seeks to surface urban adolescents' ideas about their experiences in school with the hope that this information will play a substantial part in tempering, extending, and revising how reform at the middle level occurs.

And students had plenty to say. Open-ended interviews with 361 sixth and eighth grade, predominantly African-American, Philadelphia middle school students produced five major themes. First, against a backdrop of negative rumors about their prospective schools, students said that easy work and familiar faces smoothed the transition from elementary to middle school. Second, good teachers were incredibly adept at maintaining a delicate balance in their instructional relationships with students: willing to help individuals without showing favorites, being strict but nice, and being able to clearly explain students' work while avoiding becoming tediously repetitive. Third, students preferred learning experiences in which they were active, rather than passive, participants. Fourth, students identified compliant behavior and completing assigned work as the paths to school success. Fifth, individually students said that they highly valued education; collectively they acted the opposite.

The discussions of the above themes uncovered two "big picture" conditions of students' educational experiences that have significant implications for reforming schools. One, students described important instructional inconsistencies within individual schools, resulting in students' having widely different educational experiences from classroom to classroom. Two, there was a decided non-instructional tone to students' interactions with each other, which meant that the student cultures in the middle schools usually worked against, rather than for, achieving educational goals. We conclude that to obviate these conditions, a "school development" approach is needed wherein adults and students collaboratively learn, plan, and act — all in the interest of greater student success.

These issues serve as the foci of this paper. Additional background on the study is provided below, after which we turn to an in-depth discussion of what students had to say about school and the implications thereof.

## About the Study

This paper describes the results from the first year of a three-year effort that will follow a cohort of current sixth graders through middle school. The study's purposes and research questions, school sites and student sample, research methods, and data analysis strategies are described in more detail in this section. The section concludes with several tips for reading the paper.

### Study Purposes and Research Questions

The overall purposes of the study are to document the middle school students' perceptions of their educational experiences and to track how these perceptions evolve over a three-year period, which corresponds with the Philadelphia School District's implementation of its "Children Achieving" reform agenda. "Children Achieving," according to district pamphlets, seeks dramatic improvement in the education of urban children and youth, specifically attempting to set high expectations for all students, to establish standards by which to measure results, to let the schools make more decisions, to provide intensive and sustained training to staff, to ensure that all students come to school healthy and ready to learn, to provide students with community support and services, to provide up-to-date technology, books, and clean and safe schools, to engage the public in shaping the reform, to ensure adequate resources and their effective use, and to be prepared to address these priorities immediately and for the long term in a collaborative manner.

The proof of this reform effort will ultimately reside in increased student success in school — greater participation, higher achievement, and heightened ability to direct their own learning in the future. To attain these results, the quality of students' educational experiences and opportunities to learn will have to change as well. The assumption of this study is that these changes, if they are substantial, will be reflected in how students talk about school. We do not expect them to comment directly on the specifics of reform; but we do expect that the ways in which they discuss what they learn and how they work in school to have considerable relevance for debates about how the process of reform is going. For that reason, an additional purpose of the study is to provide feedback to the participating Philadelphia middle schools as they work to improve the conditions of schooling in their respective settings.

The long-term research questions for the study concern changes in students' perceptions and performance over the three-year period. For example, does the introduction of changes such as new standards and assessment practices shape school actions in ways that reach down to students? That is, do students talk about learning in new ways? In what ways do

students perceive and react to changes that alter their own roles in the classroom? And, to what degree have the reform efforts in the schools contributed to the growth among school staff of a collegial professional culture focused on student learning and greater outreach to parents/community partners, and how do students make sense of and respond to this culture in light of their own view of what "school" means?

For this paper, the primary research objective was to document students' views about themselves as learners, about school experiences and teachers' actions that helped and did not help them learn, and about how students related to one another. In other words, what did students think about school and their place in it? Using their answers as baselines for future comparisons once reforms have been in place for awhile and exploring why students' espouse particular perspectives will be future study tasks; for now, our emphasis is on what students had to say and how their views would likely affect and be affected by reform initiatives. While this current study task is mostly descriptive in nature, we feel it does have educational significance in its own right.

### School Site and Student Sample Selection

Five middle schools were identified to participate in the study by PEF. The schools served some of the poorest neighborhoods in the city with 83 to 94 percent of the students qualifying for free lunch and had almost entirely minority student populations (98 to 100 percent) — predominantly African American with some Hispanic/Latino youth. All drew students from surrounding neighborhoods, with average daily attendance figures ranging from 80 to 85 percent. Staff members in each were predominantly female (65 to 82 percent); ethnically, staff members were more diverse but not in proportion to the student populations. The schools were all organized into smaller "houses" or "learning communities" and made use of deans and/or house directors to coordinate discipline and instruction in these subunits. Student/teacher ratios ranged from a low of 15.5 students per teacher to a high of 20.8. Performance-wise, only about 15 percent of the students in the five schools scored above the nationally-normed median in math on the CTBS, although the figures ranged from six percent to 22 percent across the schools. Likewise the schools collectively had a suspension-to-total student population ratio of around 29 percent, but the schools varied from 13 to 44 percent.

Thus, despite some similarities, the schools were not identical. This ensured that the total population of students from which we drew our sample would speak from some variety of experience, without violating the study's overall focus on highly urbanized settings. In this paper, we have elected not to display data by schools in order to (1) live up to a promise of anonymity to the sites and (2) to discourage school by school comparisons which would detract from the power of students' collective observations on schooling.

The PEF project director introduced us to each principal and in an initial meeting we provided an overview of the project and described how the study might affect the school's daily routines. The principals agreed to proceed with the study, provided that we meet with representative group(s) of staff and secure their consent as well. One school even had a research committee consisting of volunteer teachers who had had experience in previous collaborative research efforts.

As noted above, the study will track a cohort of students over three years, and thus, most of the interviews (247) were with sixth graders. However, to check for maturation effects, we also talked with 114 eighth grade students. We asked each school to select the students for us. Our selection guidelines to the schools included the following criteria:

- balance by gender
- proportional balance by race, if appropriate, which meant that the resulting sample was predominantly African-American
- diversity in instructional experience, with several students coming from each teacher team
- diversity in academic ability/performance
- diversity in behavior and intellectual motivation

The latter two criteria were particularly important to us since we wanted to hear from the full range of students, and generally speaking we felt that we did. In those cases where individual teachers thought that their particular classroom sample was biased, we replaced absent students with ones that provided greater diversity.

The schools varied somewhat in how they selected the students. In one school, the principal used the computer to randomly select students; in two others, the roster person hand-selected students; and, in the other two, the house directors selected a subsample. Schools handled notification of selected students according to their customs. The total sample of students interviewed was 361 — 182 males and 179 females.

## Research Methods

The bulk of the data collection for the first year was a round of interviews with the students. An open-ended written survey was distributed to sixth graders at the end of the school year to supplement the interviews and to obtain information from students who may have to serve as replacements for those originally interviewed. Those surveys are not a part of this paper.

Based on our previous experience in interviewing middle school students, we drafted an

initial set of broad questions that had proven useful in stimulating students to talk about their perspectives on school. Examples included: Are you getting a good education here and why? What do you consider a good teacher to be? What activities help you learn best? What is your favorite subject and why? How do students treat one another here? Do you feel the adults here treat you fairly and why? How often do you do your homework and why? What do you want to do in the future and how do you expect to get to do that?

These questions were revised through a round of visits with teachers in each of the schools. Generally, we received input with respect to additional questions pertaining to issues the schools were concerned about (e.g., why students hung out in the halls instead of going to class, why students did not eat the free lunches, etc.) and the phrasing of the original questions; no one wanted to delete any. The final interview protocol is duplicated in Appendix A. The interviews took from 25 to 45 minutes, depending on the student, and included opportunities to probe more deeply into many of the questions. Students occasionally chose to not answer a particular question so that the N's in our data displays vary from question to question.

In the first school we visited, we had arranged appointments for the students, but we quickly found that such scheduling did not work well. They forgot, they had a test, they did not want to miss a particular class or lesson, they were absent, etc. Instead, we simply went directly to the classes of the selected students and asked them and the teachers if the present time was acceptable for the interview. This strategy was actually very useful, for a number of reasons: (1) when walking the corridors and entering the classrooms for short periods of time, we were able to observe firsthand some of the activities and patterns of behavior that students described to us; (2) we became familiar to the teachers which should help in future study work; and (3) we were able to accommodate the study to the teachers' instructional considerations and therefore minimize the disruptions to class.

All of the interviews were conducted by the two authors. With a few exceptions in which a laptop was used, the interviews were recorded verbatim by hand and then entered into the computer. Rather than being a burdensome clerical task, entering the interviews served as a valuable opportunity to review field notes and to develop initial ideas on themes. Since both of us spent equal amounts of time in the schools and typically were there at the same time, we took advantage of free moments to compare notes about what we were hearing from students, a spontaneous analytical step that presaged the more formal analysis.

## Data Analysis

After all the interviews were conducted and the field notes were entered, we each read our respective halves of the data another time. We then had several brainstorming sessions

during which we discussed key themes we saw and the questions which we thought had elicited most of the responses relevant to each theme. Once we agreed on a preliminary set of themes, we systematically went through all of the interviews again, categorizing each students' responses according to the phrases that they used. Thus, we lumped students together descriptively rather than conceptually because we were trying to capture students' ways of talking about school, not adults'.

To facilitate analyses, we recorded individual identification codes assigned to each student within each category of response so that we could identify students by school, grade, race, and gender and keep track of particular students' responses across the three years. School differences, if any, will be important for feedback to the sites but the schools were extremely worried about such issues becoming public. These differences were not expected to be great because the schools were selected more for their similarities in serving a minority and economically disadvantaged population than for their differences. But future analyses for the feedback sessions will test this assumption. The small number of Hispanic students that appeared in the sample rendered racial comparisons meaningless. However, we do report gender comparisons in most of the analyses related to the five themes and we provide grade comparisons in tables where the numbers are large enough to make these at least somewhat meaningful. In the data displays, observable gender differences outnumbered grade differences.

The next analytical step was to draft text that summarized each of the preliminary themes. These summaries included a brief description of why the theme was important, how the students defined the issue, and what they had to say about it. Frequency counts as well as illustrative quotes were used to convey the students' meanings. Once we reviewed all of these results, we then began to collapse some of our initial organizing themes — with the final five themes described below being the result. These were shared with several staff in a couple of the schools before the end of the 1995-96 year. They expressed a belief that the findings were valid and were pleasantly surprised by how thoughtful students had been. This paper will serve as the basis for a round of meetings in all of the schools during the 1996-97 school year.

### Other Considerations in Reading This Paper

The main text will provide both quantitative data, primarily counts of students and the frequencies of their responses within categories, and qualitative data — mostly illustrative comments from the students. In the interest of readability, the counts and response distributions have been placed in Appendix B, with a display of pertinent data for each of the five themes. Not every question was asked of every student, generally because students took longer in answering some questions and because some questions were designated for a

random subset of the student sample so that more issues could be addressed; and students sometimes chose not to respond. Thus, the N's for particular analyses vary. Also, the reader should keep in mind that students could have given more than one response within a particular topic category. This means that some lists of response categories will add up to greater than 100 percent. The displays occasionally list a wider range of responses than are discussed in the text so that the reader can get a sense of the variety of student perceptions of school.

In all of the following excerpts from 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 student's unique "ID," the fourth being grade level (either six or eight), the fifth being the student's race (1=African-American; 2=Hispanic; and 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.

## MAJOR THEMES

The analyses of the interviews suggested five themes. We begin with students' views of entering middle school, and then turn to what they think about teachers, learning, success, and their interactions with each other.

### Easy Work and Familiar Faces Smoothed the Transition from Elementary to Middle School

The folklore in American education is that young adolescents in middle schools are the most difficult age group to teach. This is often reinforced by the personal experiences of many families who have trouble guessing which of the physical, emotional, and social changes common to this critical stage of development will take precedence on any given day. Couple these changes with moving to a new school setting — especially one that is larger and more complex — and you have a potential recipe for turmoil and conflict.

With that volatile mix in mind, we asked students how difficult it was for them to go from elementary to middle school. It was surprising to us that they said it was easy, in a two to one ratio (see Display 1 in Appendix B). Approximately one in four students noted difficulties in making the move to middle school, and one out of ten talked about its being both. The two primary reasons students offered as determining the difficulty of the transition were (1) how familiar they already were, or quickly came to be, with the other students

and (2) how hard students found the work to be.

Two hundred and eight students (out of the 323 who responded to the question) described the transition as “easy” and were equally divided between males and females. Approximately 30 percent of these students explained that going to middle school was easy because they had **friends or family** in the school, which made entering a new setting a less scary proposition; familiar people provided good information about what the school was like and ready affiliation (N=65).

*I knew a lot of people and they introduced me [to others]. Everyone in the class get along with each other from the first day. While we disagree, that doesn't make us not be friends. (205612)*

- I: Was the switch to middle school easy?  
S: Yeah, pretty much.  
I: Why?  
S: Cause I knew some of my friends was there and I knew I would make new ones. (369612)

More disconcerting was having lots of strangers or new faces in the crowd, especially for 30 percent of the students (N=25) who reported difficulty in switching from elementary school to middle school:

*I was young and didn't know anybody. (200812)*

*I didn't know my way around. I didn't know anyone from my elementary school. (202611)*

*I didn't know nobody. I should have gone to [another school] but I moved. (519811)*

Facilitating the transition, 43 of the “easy” respondents indicated, was that they found that the work was not too difficult:

*It was pretty easy. I get problems that I already know. (204611)*

*It was easy. I already knew the work. (179812)*

- S: It was easy because it wasn't a big change; it was the same thing as elementary.  
I: What do you mean?  
S: Sixth grade was a review of fifth grade.  
I: It wasn't different?  
S: We were going over the same material as in fifth grade.  
I: Could you give me some examples?  
S: Multiplication and division in math, Indians in social studies, and how the earth orbit. (455621)

The other side of the coin was described by 24 of the students for whom the move was more difficult:

*At elementary school it was an easy A. It is harder here because they expect you to do more work, projects, and tests. (104612)*

*It is difficult. We be doing lots of stuff we don't know about, like fractions. (226612)*

*It was kinda hard because I didn't get good grades. I started working harder because my parents said it would get harder. (422822)*

*It was kind of hard, cause we working on a different level. Like if you're in fifth grade, you had the same kind of work as fourth but harder. (568811)*

Only a small number of students said that the switch from elementary to middle school was both easy and hard. Still, for almost two-thirds of this group of 33 (N=20), their reasons were related to the nature of the work they were asked to do, thereby underscoring its importance in the adolescents' minds.

An additional note on this idea of “easy” work is worth putting in here because it subtly seeped into students' answers throughout the interviews. For example, we asked most students to identify their favorite subjects (the results of which are in Display 1) and with a subset of these we explored why they picked a subject as a favorite. Tied for third as the most frequent explanation was “because it's easy.” As an important aside, the male students disproportionately identified math and science as their favorites while the female students disproportionately indicated their favorites as reading and English/spelling.



A subset of the students injected an interesting backdrop against which the transition to middle school played out: overwhelmingly negative rumors students heard concerning the school they were to attend. In fact, of the 46 students who specifically were asked about what they had heard about their school ahead of time, 31 said that people had told them that the school was bad, replete with fights and vandalism. While these rumors often did not prove to be true, according to students, they still set an initially unsettling tone.

*The kids talked about all the bad stuff that happens here, but none of that happened. (122812)*

- I: Did you hear any rumors about this school before you came?  
S: Kids used to say everyone was bad, they set fires in the library, kids used to fight everyday.  
I: Has it turned out that way?  
S: The way they told me was that it was a real bad school, but it's all right; kids are not bad like people say they were. (485821)

*When I was at elementary school, people said this school was bad—people hitting people—but when I came here I found out they weren't doing it. (360612)*

- I: Did you hear any rumors about this school?  
S: Yeah, that people was going to jump you and stuff. (556612)  
I: Did you have a choice about whether you came here?  
S: I wanted to come; but my mom signed me up for (another school).  
I: Why didn't your mom want you to come here?  
S: She said when she went through school here she was a drop out and my brother dropped out. She said it's too crowded and has too many bad students. I like being here, but it is like that: trash everywhere, people spray paint on the walls, people be smoking in the hall, and pull fire alarms. You get scared. (256611)

Of course, this group of students would become the source of information for future cohorts of attendees, perhaps creating new reputations for their schools or perpetuating the old ones.

- S: A lot of people didn't want me to come here; they said 'you're too good.' I don't see all these fights. How are you going to judge if you don't come here?  
I: So what do you recommend to people?  
S: I tell a lot of people they should come. But, I tell some people with attitudes to not come here cause there are some people here with an attitude so you be fighting all the time. They think they invincible. (282812)

None of the remaining explanations cut across the three response categories of "easy," "difficult," or "both." However, for the students who found the transition to be easy, 14 percent claimed it was because they were well-prepared for middle school — in terms of summer tours, orientation programs, or special attention given to this issue by teachers or parents — and 10 percent explained that their own attitudes and work habits made the difference.

### Good Teachers Were Willing to Help, Strict but Nice, and Able to Clearly Explain Students' Work

This paper will put a glaring spotlight on teachers. They were the people, other than students themselves, who had the largest impact on the kinds of school experiences students had. When we pressed interviewees to explain why they looked at a certain experience in a positive or negative light, they tended to lay the praise or blame at teachers' feet. Thus, being a hero or a scapegoat was an unavoidable part of a teacher's professional worklife. For example, students were asked "Are you getting a good education here?" Overwhelmingly, most said yes (almost 75 percent: 242 out of 330). But whether students answered "yes," "no," or "somewhat," nearly half of the proffered explanations explicitly mentioned teachers (see Display 2 in Appendix B). One out of four explanations was related to whether the students believed that they were doing their work and/or learning anything.

Both answers implicated teachers, in so far as instruction was a huge part of both explanations; and students were very clear about what they wanted to see in their teachers. They wanted to spend their school time in the company of adults who could maintain a delicate, at times almost contradictory, balance among a handful of highly prized traits: being eager to help students individually but without playing favorites, being strict but nice and respectful, and taking the time to explain work clearly without becoming tediously repetitive. Slightly more than 75 percent of the students mentioned one of these aspects of teaching as



being important to them (292 out of 361 interviews). Because students could give multiple answers, there were actually 470 specific mentions of being willing to help (145), strict (121), nice and respectful (96), and able to explain clearly (108) (Display 2). Responses for the first two of the categories showed no obvious gender differences. However, males in both grades placed importance on strictness while their female counterparts discussed being able to explain clearly as a valued trait.

**Willing to Help.** Students valued the feeling that their teachers would listen to their questions, respond to these queries, and work with them individually, if necessary. Partially teachers demonstrated their willingness during class and partially they communicated this by tutoring before or after school. Underlying the issue of help was that teachers always had the time to be there when the student needed instructional, and sometimes, personal attention. The following students clarified the idea of being “willing to help.”

*She let me come in the morning to help me with (the subject). (152612)*

I: Are you getting a good education here?

S: I do; that's why I want to stay here. Some of my teachers, she knows how to teach and how to talk to people.

I: How do you mean?

S: She know how to talk to you, like when you having a problem, instead of having a temper or nuttin'. They just nice; you can go to them and ask a question. They just don't want to hurry you up and get you out of they class. (284812)

S: One is a nice teacher. She don't keep repeating 'I told the whole class.' My other teacher is always saying 'didn't you hear me, didn't you hear me, I'm not repeating it.'

I: What does the first teacher do?

S: Like when I don't know something, she come back to explain it to me; she'll let me know how to fix it. (465611)

The discussion of students' preference for help should have ended here, as a straightforward request that teachers bend over backwards to assist them. But showing a willingness to help had its subtleties. This was because, from the student perspective, the teacher traits interacted with fairness in shaping learning experiences. In fact, much of what was at stake when teachers were unable to juggle their actions and attitudes in the demanding ways students preferred was whether teachers were being fair. The majority of the students we

interviewed about fairness, 60 percent (189 out of 321), felt that teachers were fair; 16 percent felt teachers were not fair and 25 percent identified some who were and some who were not (Display 2). Males tended to view teachers as fair more than females did.

The notion of fairness, not surprisingly, revolved around how teachers treated students, and the term seemed to have at least two distinct meanings: whether teachers treated students “equally” and whether teachers treated students with “respect.” The former is pertinent for understanding the nuances of teachers' willingness to help while the latter will be discussed in the next section on being strict and nice.

Teachers demonstrated equal treatment in at least three ways: giving the same attention to everyone, treating students in a manner commensurate with the way students acted toward teachers, and not playing favorites. The first two of these three ways were used by students to explain why they said teachers were fair; the third way was the rationale for why teachers were not fair. The percentages for these explanations are in Display 2.

Students liked it when their teachers devoted the same attention to everyone. Some 31 of them used phrases like the following:

*Everyone gets the same attention. (100612)*

*Everyone is treated equal. (130812)*

*In my room, she treats everyone the same. (300611)*

*We all do the same thing at the same time. (412621)*

*They blame both if a fight happens. (417621)*

*Everybody gets treated the same whether you are good or not. (428621)*

Nineteen students amplified specifically on this last quote, noting that they were not saying that good or bad behavior should be ignored but that they meant that students should be treated in the manner in which they had acted. If students were good, teachers should treat them well; if students acted badly, then the teacher should show another side as well. Thus, students did not want to see a “halo” effect wherein “good” students were excused when they broke the rules nor a “horn” effect wherein “bad” students were ignored when they tried to be good.

Giving individual attention, then, was at times interpreted as being unfair, especially if the

students perceived that only some of the students received the kind of help they all valued. Twenty-seven students complained about teachers playing favorites.

*The teacher has a couple of favorites who don't get hollered at. (119812)*

*Some of the teachers go by who they like the best. (221612)*

- S: I think they should treat all equal but they treat some like better.  
I: What do you mean?  
S: If a kid do something wrong, the teacher treat him like bad and don't care about him and then treat another kid like he the world.  
I: Why?  
S: Cause the teacher like one student better than the other. (580611)

*It's like different students she teach good; others she don't deal with. (569611)*

The percentages in the table for "Reasons for Fairness" in Display 2 suggest that female students were more concerned with equal treatment while the males concentrated more on being treated with respect — which is the aspect of fairness paired with the next valued trait: being strict but nice.

**Strict but Nice.** Students occasionally distinguished between teachers who "taught" and teachers who did not. Usually what they meant by this was that some teachers actually covered material associated with the class while others always seemed to be continually interrupted and distracted by misbehaving students. Being in control or strict, thus, loomed large in the extent to which students believed that they were receiving instruction.

- I: Are you getting a good education here?  
S: Yes.  
I: Why?  
S: Because my teachers want to teach us. They want us to get our education.  
I: How do you know this?

- S: They like strict; they don't want you to play around; they make you do work and learn. (466621)

Another student exemplified the role that being strict played in a class and what the difference was between a teacher who could be strict successfully and one who could not.

(The student had just identified a class that had been his favorite but was no longer).

- I: Why isn't it your favorite anymore?  
S: Cause of the teacher we had — a weak teacher who couldn't control the class. Now we have a strong teacher who won't hesitate to put you out the class.  
I: What makes a teacher a weak one?  
S: When the kids talk loud to the teacher and she says be quiet and they don't be quiet and they threaten the student and end up not doing anything because they don't want to be bothered because then they would have to do the next kid. If they threaten, then go behind the threat; then do it. If you say 'I'm gonna call your house,' do it. (184811)

But students warned that teachers could slip over a vague and undefined line, resulting in a type of strictness that had less beneficial consequences in the classroom.

*My teacher likes to do stuff her way but not (the way) in the book...and her way is not helping us. She like to get smart about it: 'Ya'll do it my way.' But, it's harder. She be telling us: 'I pass the 6th grade and I say do it my way or get a zero.' But that makes students mad and they like to show her they're mad. (351612)*

*Some are real nasty. They say "shut up" rather than "be quiet". (222811)*

*Kids get smart and adults get smart back. (307812)*

Keep in mind that strictness involved maintaining control of a class and pushing students to complete their work. Both were important to students.

- I: Are you getting a good education here?  
 S: Yes.  
 I: Why?  
 S: Cause I learn new stuff and my teacher is hard on people so they can learn.  
 I: What do you mean by hard?  
 S: Like if she writes something on the board, and if you don't know how to do it, she'll help you; and if you don't want to, she'll still make you. (362611)

*I don't know my teacher's problem. She says "do it" or "don't do it." That's encouraging them not to work. She should say you have to do it. (284812)*

The trick was to be strict but nice. In fact, 39 of the 292 students who contributed data for the analysis in this section specifically juxtaposed some version of being strict and being nice as the defining characteristics of a good teacher.

- S: My teacher, she's strict in her own way — stern and then eased up. She does her job.  
 I: What do you mean by 'strict'?  
 S: Certain things she does not tolerate: being disrespectful to her and classmates, no fighting, she allows us to do certain things when we deserve them. She doesn't allow us to be mean and talk about mothers.  
 I: How does she do this?  
 S: When the year started off, she was stern. We had to learn where she stood as a teacher and we know what she will not have and how she pulls it off is she keeps her word.  
 I: Do you prefer a teacher to be strict or let you play?  
 S: Much rather have where a teacher is stern.  
 I: Why?  
 S: Because when she sets goals, and makes sure you follow them, you get a better education. (377612)

Three other students put it this way.

*Our teachers is pretty fun. They don't say things (bad about students); they're strict but fun. They let you do what you want but they also has control. (453622)*

- S: (A good teacher) don't holler a lot but that gives you a home work.  
 I: Why is this good?  
 S: To learn more about a subject; you don't learn nothing by playing. (468621)  
 I: What does your teacher expect of you in class?  
 S: Be quiet, listen, don't talk — sometimes she strict but she not mean.  
 I: What do you mean by strict?  
 S: Like if you talk, she send you to the discipline office.  
 I: [in later probe] But the teacher respects you?  
 S: Mmhmm.  
 I: How do you know?  
 S: If like we say something nice, she say "thank you." She don't do like other teachers. (573612)

Students recognized that achieving this balance was not easy.

- S: It's hard for a teacher to be nice; students figure if the teacher is nice, they can do anything. But a teacher can still be nice and still discipline them.  
 I: How?  
 S: My teacher can do it; we'll follow her rules and if we act up, we get a detention but she still nice. (373812)

Indeed, just as a teacher who was not strict in the "correct" way could engender undesirable responses from students, so too could a teacher who was too nice.

- S: My teacher don't do nothing (to disruptive students) and she is too nice.  
 I: What advice would you have?  
 S: She should quit this job; it is too difficult for her. (380622)

*They just treat him like he ain't there, run over him like a piece of paper on the floor. He try to stop it but he can't. He would give his life for the students and they acting like knotty heads. He nice. (263612)*

*She soft-hearted. When she nice, everyone run over her. (552811)*

However improbable it sounds, the issues of how strict to be and how to be strict were further complicated because of the other aspect of fairness, treating students with respect. Positive phrases students used in this regard included "they give respect" and are "nice to students," "they give second chances," and "they listen to us." On the more negative side, students said "teachers show a lack of respect" and "they handle kids badly" (see Display 2 for the percentages). Below we amplify two of these phrases related to treating students with respect: "giving second chances" and "handling students badly."

Students, particularly males (15 to 4), were appreciative of teachers who alerted students before punishments were doled out and who were willing to give students a second chance to make amends for any misbehavior.

*Bad kids get three chances, just like in baseball. You get three chances and then you are out. (116611)*

*The teachers give us warnings and chances. Only then do they give us detentions. (219611)*

*They [teachers] give us a second chance on everything. (525812)*

On the other hand, 25 students were extremely vocal about what they considered to be improper handling of students. Especially bothersome to them were teachers who were quick to rush to judgment and in the process often blamed either the wrong students or forced everyone to accept punishment for the miscreant few:

*I am not treated fairly because the teacher blames me for stuff I don't do. (115611)*

*Some kids get hollered at when they didn't do anything.*

*The teacher punishes the whole class for a few. (228612)*

*The ones who aren't treated fairly get blamed for stuff they don't do, like shooting rubber bands. (310611)*

Just as in the general discussion of being strict but nice, students in their comments on fairness expressed a willingness to work in a controlled environment as long as that control was exercised with respect.

*She is respectful to kids and even when I am mad, she's not mad at me. (210611)*

*They give respect and we give it back. (318612)*

I: Do teachers treat you fairly?

S: Mmhmm.

I: Why?

S: Other teachers I had were mean and grouchy but my teacher is nice. (562612)

**Able to Explain Clearly.** A point that will come up in several places in this paper is that students attached a considerable portion of their willingness to work to whether they understood what they were supposed to be doing. For example, in their explanations of why they had picked a subject as a favorite (contained in Display 1), being "good at it" was the second most frequent and in constructing reasons why students did not behave in class (presented in Display 5), "because they don't understand" was in the top five. Thus, they preferred for teachers to go over their assignments and content until they had grasped them. Phrases like "explain it," "go over it," "step by step," "makes sure we understand" were repeated frequently in their comments on what a good teacher was or on what teachers did that helped them learn the best. The following are illustrative.

I: Are you getting a good education here?

S: Yeah.

I: Why?

S: Cause I have a teacher and she makes sure everyone knows it.

I: What does she do?

S: She won't go on unless you understand it. All my teachers are like that.

I: Explain more about this.

S: Like if you make a mistake, they keep going over it. She ask if you have a question and to raise your hand and she give you another way to do it. (371811)

I: How does your teacher help you to learn best?

S: She explains it, puts it in different categories.

I: What do you mean?

S: Like, how many steps does it take to understand it. (478822)

*My teachers' thing ain't just write it on the board. They explain it and tell us how to do it. I learned a lot of stuff I didn't know. (281812)*

The inevitable flipside of taking the time to explain an assignment or a word or a problem so that everyone understood was that, for some students, classes became tediously repetitive.

S: I do my work but I talk a lot.

I: What does the teacher do?

S: Tell me to be quiet.

I: Does that work?

S: Not really.

I: Why?

S: Cause I do my work quick, faster than most other students. We get done and have nothing else to do. (569611)

**Reprise: Teachers and a Good Education.** For the students, education boiled down to them and the teachers, either as cooperative compatriots or frustrated foes. Whether their time together was perceived by students as beneficial rested on teachers' ability to tiptoe through a minefield, avoiding being not helpful enough or helping someone too much, overly strict or overly nice, and thoroughly clear or excruciatingly slow. It would be amazing to find humans who were capable of meeting these stringent demands. And, indeed, in the interviews, students drew on both positive and negative examples of teachers' possessing the qualities described above.

## Students Expressed a Preference for Active Learning

The students could not be expected to be familiar with the literature on constructivism; and the names of Dewey, Piaget, and Vygotsky did not come up in any of the interviews. Nevertheless, the students constructed a compelling case for being active as a valuable means to making school-related learning more attractive to them. As students talked about the kinds of work they preferred and what teachers could do to make class more interesting, they repeatedly stated "give us projects," "make it fun," and "let us work with other students." Two-thirds of the overall sample of students (248 out of 361) mentioned either these phrases or related preferences such as "use my imagination," "find information/do research," "make things," and "play games that help us learn" (Display 3 in Appendix B). These seven active learning-related ideas cropped up 464 times (just under two per student). "Doing projects" was mentioned 133 times, "fun" received 122 mentions, and "working in groups" was talked about 60 times. These three will be discussed more fully below. With respect to gender, females tended to mention "working in groups" disproportionately whereas the males showed a preference for "finding information" and "making things," relative to females. This finding held for students in both grades.

**Doing projects and experiments** were the activities most frequently mentioned in response to questions about what kind of work students liked doing best or that helped them learn. Such projects and experiments included:

- Making a "terrarium," "aquarium," or "planetarium" (with all three terms used by students in one school to refer to the same project — a terrarium)
- Showing how shells got their shapes
- Finding out what kind of bleach best cleans clothes
- Constructing a volcano
- Planning a vacation by actually contacting airlines, hotels, and restaurants
- Demonstrating electrical circuits with batteries
- Doing reports and posters for Black History Month

The sheer number of students who discussed these classroom activities was impressive; the "whys" were even more so because they revealed an enthusiasm for doing work of this type, an enthusiasm that belied widely-accepted beliefs about urban students' approaches to school.

*It's fun and I can learn. (166611)*

*You get to think about what you do. (269611)*

- S: Because you can have fun and learn at the same time; it teaches you more about the subject.
- I: What do you mean by more?
- S: You know how they say if you learn, you explore; then you be successful. (450611)

*Cause some of them is like you can imagine what you want to do and I do all kinds of stuff— like making a one-leg dog, putting materials together. (358612)*

*You get to experiment with things, hands-on type things, stuff you might be wondering about. (282812)*

*It's fun experimenting with things; when you do it, you get something out of it. (550612)*

But, **fun** did not mean play. While students occasionally pleaded for more free time during the school day, particularly on Friday afternoons, not a single student said that they preferred to be in a class where students “played around” most of the time. Instead, having fun referred to the ways in which students encountered, discussed, and/or reviewed the content of the particular subject they were studying.

- I: What makes class interesting for you?
- S: Activities...the way they run the class.
- I: What do you mean by that?
- S: If you can make it fun and still teach, that's a great class.
- I: Can you give me an example of how a teacher has done this?
- S: Like when we played a game to show us how to get ready for a test; it was “Family Feud.”
- I: Do students pay attention during this kind of activity, or do they play around?
- S: Yeah, they pay attention. (278811)

While students made sure we knew that their desire for fun was related to instruction, they also occasionally distinguished fun activities from the “regular” work they did, implying that the above student's criteria for a great class as involving fun and teaching was sometimes elusive.

- I: What's the best thing about this school?
- S: When we have activities and when we learn stuff that's fun and not boring.
- I: What activities are fun for you?
- S: When they let us play games what's got something to do with the subject.
- I: Why is this fun?
- S: Cause it gives you a break from work. (150612)

Reinforcing the importance of “fun” in how students felt about classwork were their explanations of what made a subject a favorite for them (see Display 1). The most popular response was simply “I like/enjoy it” and tied for third was that the subject was “fun” to learn.

Students, particularly females, valued lessons during which they got to “**work with their classmates**,” primarily because they viewed their peers as information and idea resources. Their arguments were convincing.

*Everybody puts ideas together to make one. (565611)*

*We talk a lot. If we don't know something, we can ask someone. (358612)*

*It makes it easier for you, more thinking on it. Three is better than one. (481821)*

*I can hear other people's opinions too. (260612)*

*We all share. (156611)*

Still, we aired our suspicions that working in pairs or groups really let them chat with friends rather than do work. They were honest and staunch in their rebuttal.

- I: How do you like to work in class?
- S: Working in groups, doing a big project, and writing about it.
- I: Why?

- S: It's more exciting and more educational.  
 I: Why is it exciting?  
 S: Cause we get to work together, get through, uh, done faster, and talk about what we're doing.  
 I: Do you really work or do you play?  
 S: [smiles] We work and we talk.  
 I: How is it educational?  
 S: We learn more from each other; if one person don't understand, maybe one other person can help.  
 I: So, do students behave when they work in groups?  
 S: There is still misbehavior if there is a group of boys; they play around.  
 I: What advice do you have for teachers?  
 S: To make sure that they are doing their work and then to have them present it to the class. And if they are not working, separate them.  
 I: Why present it to the class?  
 S: To make sure that you know what you did and for other kids who are doing something different (to know). (480822)

While some students indicated that a minority of groups in their classes did not work the way they were supposed to, no one said that groups could not be good learning strategies. We tried to get a handle on how often students were likely to encounter active learning opportunities in their classrooms. Responses to two questions provided a rough estimate of this, both of which related to students' opportunities to take some responsibility for what and how they learned. One question concerned whether students made choices about what they did in class and how they went about doing the work. The other question addressed whether students had chances to be creative in class, defined as making things, designing things, producing things, using the arts, etc. Tables in Display 3 provide data for both questions.

Students indicated that they did have choices, and in a roughly 2 1/2 to 1 ratio (229 said "yes"; 95 said "no"), equally split between males and females. The students who acknowledged having choices offered five major categories of choices that they felt they had: deciding what activity to do, determining what topics they would pursue, figuring out what to do during free time, choosing task details within a lesson or schedule set by the teacher, and opting to do what they were supposed to or getting in trouble. Two examples of each follow below.

Activities — when students get to choose individually the way in which they will learn material or portray what they have learned:

- I: Do you get choices in class?  
 S: What you mean?  
 I: Do you ever get to decide what you do in class or how you do it?  
 S: Oh, yeah. That's how we do it for science experiments. Put all our data down and our hypothesis and our conclusion and write it all out. (382611)

*In math, you can't make a choice; you just learn it. In social studies, you can say "I'll do the questions or make a map..." (282812)*

Topics — when students get to choose individually the content they will learn:

*When we doing states, we get to choose what we want to find out about the state. (171612)*

*Mmhmm, you mostly always get choices...like when you choose your own book you want to do. (464611)*

Free time — when students choose what to do when they are not doing classwork:

- S: We do what they tell us to do.  
 I: You don't have any choices?  
 S: Specially when we come to work but when we have free time, he write on the board and say 'ya'll can work, have a spelling bee, play checkers, or sit down and read. (271612)  
 I: Do you ever have choices about what you do in class?  
 S: Sometimes, but not a lot, but like on Friday, do we want to draw or do we want to do it in a group? (353612)



Task details — when students get to choose whether they work with a partner or when they will do a subject within the context of a teacher's planned lesson or schedule:

- I: Do you have any choices you can make in class?  
S: They give us choices.  
I: Could you give an example?  
S: Like in science, she give us choices of how we work, by ourselves or in groups. (581611)  
I: Do you have choices in class about what you do?  
S: Certain times we have and certain times we don't.  
I: Could you give an example?  
S: The teacher will ask, 'Ya'll want to play?'  
I: Play what?  
S: We play games with science to help us study and she'll say, 'Do you want to play the game or do math?' And we say, 'do science.' (157612)

Whether to work — where the choice is to do what the teacher wants or to do something else:

*Teachers give choices: be quiet or do work. That's like the same thing: I would like different choices. (471622)*

*Yeah, say we like about to take a test, and then we get to arguing, the teacher say 'do your test or get out.' (385611)*

With respect to the value of choices, one of the above students simply said, "When you have a choice, you really wanna do it; you gonna do it." (281812) For that reason, we do not make any judgments about whether any of the above choices were more substantial than others. There was likely some benefit in students simply recognizing that to an extent they had some control over what happened in class. Nevertheless, there were scattered examples of students playing fairly large roles in determining the direction of instruction. For example,

- S: We negotiate when we're doing writing activities. We give her ideas and everybody vote and sometimes we do what we want to do.  
I: What do you mean by negotiate?  
S: We doing that because it give students a chance to express their opinions about how they feel. (260612)

- S: We told the teachers the stories was boring and she let us read seventh grade stories.  
I: What was boring?  
S: "Circuit" — there was this bad boy who was going to different places in a circuit; it was boring; I didn't understand it.  
I: How did you get to change stories?  
S: We told her the stories were not fun, but that we like to read and could we read more exciting and fun stories. (265612)

Students were less likely to claim that they had opportunities to be creative in their regular classes than they were with choices. We concentrated on regular classes because students spent the overwhelming majority of their class time on math, science, social studies, English and reading. Students were nearly equally divided on whether creative activities occurred in their regular, "major" subject classrooms at times other than "free time": 125 said "yes," 119 said "no" with respect to their major classes, and 45 said "only during free time," with females seemingly seeing more creative opportunities than males.

The above data contribute to a picture of inconsistent opportunities for being active as students moved from class to class. Students provided examples of classrooms where active learning occurred and where it did not; students varied concerning whether they could make choices about instructional matters in class and concerning the types of choices they could make; and some students indicated they routinely had chances to be creative in their major subjects while others had few, if any, such opportunities.

But the discussions of choice and creativity also make it critically important to note that not only did students collectively make a cogent argument for constructivist approaches to instruction but also they buttressed the research on learning styles. Having choices and being creative were not relished by all students. Of the 66 students specifically asked if they wanted more chances to make choices than they currently had, exactly half said that they did have enough, 29 felt they needed more choices, and four claimed that they did not want any choices (data not shown in Display 3). Neither did all students desire increased creativity in the classroom. Of the 67 students who were explicitly asked about this, 31 said that they had enough opportunities currently, 33 wanted more, and three did not want such opportunities (data not shown in Display 3). Likewise with the other active learning characteristics we discussed, not every child proposed working in groups and doing projects as the methods by which they learned best; nor were copying notes, doing worksheets, and listening to the teacher talk universal "don'ts." There was at least a handful of students in

each school who, in fact, thought these latter approaches were both “fun” and “helpful.” For example,

*I like copying notes cause when we have tests we have open notes sometimes or, even if we don't, I like to study (them) a lot. (253612)*

- S: I like doing worksheets.  
I: Why?  
S: I just like it. (376812)  
I: What kind of work don't you like to do?  
S: I don't like doing all that research.  
I: What do you mean?  
S: All that kind of stuff.  
I: What do you like to do?  
S: When the teacher is talking and give us worksheets. (170611)

Of course, these few examples do not negate the overwhelming student preference for action in the classroom, but they should serve as a reminder that no adjustment to instruction is likely to be uniformly welcomed.

### Compliant Behavior and Completing Assigned Work Were the Paths to Success in School

An important cornerstone of most educational reform is that adults must believe all students can learn at high levels. An essential corollary is that students themselves believe they are successful in school and that the criteria for judging their performance are meaningful. In our interviews, students discussed two issues, their definitions of success and their ideas about how they were assessed by teachers, that reflected on the extent to which high levels of learning were an integral part of their schooling. Generally, the students said that they considered themselves successful more because they did their work and/or behaved than because of how well they did.

**Student Definitions of Success.** There was almost universal consensus among the students that they were successful — a term that we used in our interview question but left it to the

students to define by probing “why” they said they were or were not successful. They then supplied the criteria by which they judged their success. Of the 361 students, 335 supplied a definition and only 16 of them claimed to be unsuccessful (see Display 4). A larger group (N=33), but still representing less than one in ten, gave a qualified “yes.” In all, 85 percent of the sample responded affirmatively, lending itself to a conclusion that students had considerable self-confidence regarding their school success. This held true for both males and females.

Students rarely offered a single characteristic of success. There were 658 responses from the 335 respondents, or just under two per student. These opinions reflected even the self-identified unsuccessful students, since we asked them to also define what success should be. We coded 20 different categories or attributes of success, but the majority of them (e.g., “getting along,” “being planful,” “being a leader,” “being responsible”) were mentioned by only a handful of students. The three most frequent attributes, accounting for two-thirds of the responses (N=419 out of 658), were behavioral compliance, doing the work, and getting good grades—each of which is developed below. Males seemed to emphasize doing the work more than females.

One hundred and eighty-eight of the 335 students who gave a definition talked about behaving. Interestingly, students were as likely to define behaving as not doing something negative as they were doing something positive, as illustrated by the list below.

#### Don'ts

talk  
play around/act up  
fight  
talk back  
be a problem  
cut  
look for trouble  
be rude  
be late  
steal  
hang with the wrong crowd  
curse  
cheat  
bring weapons  
have an attitude  
run

#### Dos

behave self  
listen  
do what teacher says  
act good  
pay attention  
be good  
do the right thing  
follow rules  
stay in seat  
have good attitude  
be helpful  
raise hand  
be quiet

The frequency of responses among the “dos” and “don’ts” were about equal. That is, students were just as likely to talk about behavior in terms of what they did not do as what they did do that made them successful. Although, “listen”, “pay attention” and “don’t fight” seemed to occur the most frequently, the richness of the concept — as reflected by the sheer number of elements in the category — conveyed the important role that behavior played in defining school success for these students.

One hundred and forty-five students talked about “doing their work” as an important criterion of success. Students did not say much about the quality of the work they were expected to do. Rather, the focus was on just doing it, as these comments illustrate:

*I am into my work. I do it. (104612)*

*I do all my work. (513612)*

*I stay on top of my work. (525812)*

*I do my work and I keep my head in my book. (404821)*

*I am always on task and always study. That is why I am in honor society. (409812)*

The final predominant characteristic of success was grades, being mentioned by 86 respondents. Examples included:

*I try not to get two Fs on my report card. (125611)*

*I get good grades and try to bring the bad grades up. (205612)*

*Yes, I am on the honor roll and in Academic Plus class since elementary school. (206612)*

*Yes, I never get low grades. (313812)*

*Yes, my grades are good. (525812)*

However, grades trailed the other two criteria significantly, suggesting that the quality of one’s work was downplayed, either in students’ minds or in school or both; instead, success

hinged on simply doing the work and behaving. Just “minding your ps and qs,” as one student put it, made you successful in the eyes of many.

**Student Views of Assessment.** With the strong push nationally to identify stringent performance standards and to improve the quality of student learning, we explored students’ comments about the nature of assessment in their classrooms. For students to achieve tough standards, they will need to understand the assessment system that gives them feedback on their progress. We asked students, “How do teachers figure out what grades to give you?” Two-thirds of the students (N=241) offered an opinion, with the most frequent answers being classwork/homework/tests, behavior, participation/effort in class, and an average of grades.

One hundred and fifty-two said their grade was determined by a combination of measures of their classwork, homework, and tests. Most of these answers were very matter of fact, indicating that there was little mystery in the process.

*She adds up the test grades, classwork, projects, and extra credit reports. (124811)*

*How I do on tests and how I do when I go up to the board. (136612)*

*He uses tests and extra credit points. (211611)*

*In music we are graded on tests and classwork, but no performance. (302812)*

*Tests are the main part and classwork and homework are ten percent. (409812)*

The second most frequently mentioned assessment criterion was behavior. Fifty-eight students mentioned this, most using the generic term “behavior.” But the ones that did elaborate generated a list similar to the one above in the section on success, including:

*Staying out of trouble. (406822)*

*The way we act. (203812)*

*Cooperative behavior. (206612)*

*Paying attention and listening. (223611)*

The third category, participation or effort, was talked about by 43 of the students. The students who discussed this item did so in terms of putting forth some personal energy into class:

*Math is my favorite subject. If you try, she gives you half a grade. Your grade is mostly on effort. (129612)*

*If you try hard and you are close to a B, she will raise it up. (236612)*

*You get a good grade if you come prepared. (332612)*

*If you participate in class (you get a good grade); I always raise my hand. (429621)*

The fourth criterion was simply that teachers kept track of grades without mentioning where the grades came from, in contrast to the first category. Thirty-eight students made mention of grades in this way.

*The teacher has a book that tells her how to do it. (106612)*

*She crosses out all the wrong answers. Then she gives us a number from 60 to 100. (125611)*

*She has a book and she puts checks in it. She is always writing in her book. (224812)*

What was omitted by students was as interesting as what was included by students in their comments about classroom assessment. Only one student in the entire sample even mentioned the idea of thinking. Likewise there was very little discussion of how they did their work, that is, little emphasis on performance. The few instances where students did talk about performance was in subjects other than ones in the core curriculum (i.e., music, computer, gym). What was also surprising was the number of students who really had no clue how their teacher came up with their grade. In fact, 36 answered "I don't know" or more emphatically "I have no idea" in response to our assessment question.

As with defining success, students focused more on doing the work than doing it well. There was little or no mention made of having to apply or use knowledge in a critical thinking way and there was a pretty strong emphasis on behavior, even in the assessment arena. Thus, norms surrounding what doing well in school meant were generally non-rigorous.

### Individual Students Valued Education Within the Context of a Non-instruction Focused Student Culture

Students posed a curious paradox. Individually, in interviews, no one discounted the value of getting an education. Indeed, despite the fact that the students in this study come from a population highly likely to drop out of school (at least according to a study of middle school drop outs conducted by Rumberger, 1995), no one said that he or she was planning to leave school early. However, collectively students fought, cut classes, disrupted the ones they attended, and only occasionally did their homework. Thus, their words and their actions contradicted one another. In this section, we explore this paradox in more detail and provide some of the students' explanations for why they behaved the way they did.

Some of the above discussions have already hinted at evidence that students as individuals valued education or took pride in their accomplishments in school. First, almost all of them saw themselves as either already being successful students or trying to become more successful; they wanted to take pride in themselves as students (see Display 4). Second, a solid majority believed that they were getting a good education in their respective schools and those that did not feel that way expressed dismay that their time in school was not being well spent (see Display 2). Third, students tended to define having fun in class as referring to activities that helped them learn (see Display 3) and no one said that they wanted to be in a class where all students did was play. Fourth, the numerous quotes scattered throughout this paper contain indications that students took school fairly seriously and thought everyone else should as well.

We have one additional bit of evidence in support of this general point. Students were asked to talk about what they wanted to become when they grew up and what they would have to do to become what they wanted. The list was heavily weighted with the professions — doctors, lawyers, and teachers; services — primarily computer technicians, hairdressers, and local business owners; and an assortment of crafts — jewelry makers, carpenters, and the like. The important point is that in describing how they would achieve these goals, two-thirds of the students (N=245, equally divided among gender and grade levels) specifically mentioned the need for college or some sort of post-high school education, and almost all of them said that they would have to do well in school, even if they did not say

anything about going to college (see Display 5).

- I: Have you thought about what you want to become?  
S: I want to be an astronaut.  
I: Why?  
S: I would get to go up in space and travel to the planets.  
I: How do you become an astronaut?  
S: I have to go to college and get a degree (sic). (464611)
- S: I want to go to college.  
I: What do you want to be?  
S: I want to play basketball or be a cop.  
I: Why a cop?  
S: It's the only best job girls, ladies, females have. (159612)

- I: What do you want to be?  
S: A hairdresser.  
I: Why?  
S: My aunt is one.  
I: How do you become one.  
S: My aunt had to go to hair school. I don't got to go to college; I just gotta stay in high school for four years or something. (272612)

Thus, students were hopeful for the future and saw education as the means to fulfill these aspirations.

But day-to-day life in these schools just did not look like students possessed a strong valuing of education. Students **fought and picked** at one another constantly, with two-thirds of our sample acknowledging that this was either a "somewhat" serious problem or a "serious" problem (data not shown in Display 5).

*It's rough in this school. They fight over dumb stuff. I asked my mom if I could transfer but she say "stay."  
(274811)*

- I: How do students treat one another?  
S: Some be nice, like your friends. Some want to fight for nothing.  
I: Do you think there are a lot of fights?  
S: The past two weeks, three to four fights in one week...a boy's teeth be bleeding.  
I: Why do the fights start?  
S: An argument — and they start cussing each other. (176811)
- I: Are there many fights here?  
S: There is a lot.  
I: What causes them?  
S: Rumors, looking at each other harder, call each other a profanity. (480822)

The list of students' reasons for why fights started suggested that one would have to be extremely vigilant to avoid triggering one. The list: "he say, she say," "picking and someone gets tired of it," "showing off," "trying to rule," "bullying," "busting on someone," "talking about they moms," "looking at people hard," "being nosy," "calling someone names," "bumping into someone," "saying 'excuse me'," "not saying 'excuse me' (the tone made the difference)," "getting revenge," "not being friends," "defending a friend," "not being from around my way," "feel they can get away with it," "cursing someone," "messing with someone," "not having no manners," "trying to prove something," "owing money," "think they big," and "stealing someone's girl (or boyfriend)."

Students **cut and came late** to class frequently, according to over half of the students (data not shown in Display 5).

- S: A lot of people cut.  
I: How?  
S: When they supposed to be in class, they use a hall pass. I think with the hall pass, the NTA (non-instructional aide) will say they should go to class and then they make sure unless the kids tell them exactly where they are going. But, students are like 'I'm going to the bathroom.'  
I: Who cuts?  
S: Like a lot of kids, but seventh and eighth grade are most likely to. (455621)

*They try to get to class late and then miss half of the work; some don't go at all. But most of them in my class come to class. It's hard to cut class cause we only got two teachers and they next door. She take roll and ask where you are. If nobody say something or they not in the office, then she put in a cut slip. (181812)*

As with so much of what went on around them, some students shrugged off behavior that did not affect them directly. However, this nonchalance was not universally shared.

- I: What's the worst thing about this school?  
S: It be a lot of people hanging around, hookying. They say a lot of bad stuff and you wouldn't know if they have a gun or something.  
I: Who is doing the cutting?  
S: All grades, even some sixth graders.  
I: You?  
S: I never done it; I wouldn't think it easy. (270612)

It did seem difficult to get away with cutting, as only one in four students from a subsample of 80 said that students usually did not get caught when they "hookyed" (data not shown in Display 5). So, an additional question arose: Why would students engage in an action that had limited chance of success? The answers seemed to coalesce around two factors: the class that they were in and their friends. With respect to the former, one student explained:

*Some kids don't feel like going to class or they don't want to take a test. (381811)*

- I: Do students you know ever cut class?  
S: Mmhmm.  
I: Do they get caught?  
S: They get caught cause they do it all the time.  
I: So why do they cut?  
S: Sometimes the don't like the teacher. (Like) in (one class), if a paper gets ripped, the teacher blames it on the whole class and the whole class has to write.  
I: How do they cut?  
S: They stay out for awhile and come in with a nurse note; they act like they hurt. (468621)

*It ain't too much, but some kids try; but always the NTAs be walking around. They would get into their work if it were interesting. I know that for a fact. Like if doing Black History, they would start getting interested. (383812)*

If something about the class or the teacher was a primary "push" factor, friends were a "pull" influence.

- I: Do students ever cut class or come late?  
S: Uh-huh, they be ringing the fire bells.  
I: Why do they roam the halls?  
S: Cause they be like following other kids and that's when one gets caught.  
I: So it's not easy to cut?  
S: Some of 'em get caught cause be like 15-20 of them running and two of 'em will fall. (350611)

Students **did not always do their homework**, yet students' assessments of what they did could be viewed both positively and negatively. For example, 175 of them said "I always do my homework" while 147 indicated that they "usually," "sometimes," or "never" did theirs. Eighth grade males were least likely to say that they "always" did their homework while eighth grade females were most likely to say they did, on a percentage basis (see Display 5). Of course, all three verbal descriptors were relative, self-defined, and — according to teacher feedback — overly positive. Still, whether one takes heart in these figures or not, any particular school day was likely to find a noticeable portion of students without their homework papers.

Why did they not do homework? Sometimes they did not understand what to do:

*I be interested in doing it but if I don't understand it and I have trouble, I don't do it. (476822)*

Sometimes they had other things to do:

*When I'm home, I got a lot to do. (170611)*

And sometimes there were several reasons.

- S: I never do it...because she gives us hard homework. She explains it but not so I understand it; she doesn't say what to do.  
I: When you understand, what do you do?  
S: I'll do it but sometimes it takes up time from going outside.  
I: What happens to you when you don't?  
S: I get in trouble from my ma and I flunk; if I flunk, I get in more trouble. (471622)

Students were clear about why they did their homework. It was so they could get good grades and complete their education for a better future.

- I: Do you sometimes do your homework, never do it, always do it?  
S: Always.  
I: Why?  
S: Because I want to stay on the honor roll and keep my grades up. (450611)  
  
I: Do you do your homework?  
S: I always do my homework.  
I: Why?  
S: To help me get a better education and get a better job. (574612)  
  
S: I always do it.  
I: Why?  
S: I want to go somewhere in life. (363611)

Generally the students who claimed that they always did their work attributed their positive attitudes to someone in their family.

- I: When you do get homework, do you do it?  
S: All the time; my mom makes sure I do. (162612)  
  
I: Do you do your homework?  
S: I always do it.

- I: When do you usually do it?  
S: As soon as I get home, I do it so I get it over with. My mom told me to get it over with. (265612)

Finally, and most tellingly, a raucous and non-instruction-focused atmosphere pervaded the classrooms themselves. In a subanalysis of 153 students, two-thirds of them (N=104) reported that in class either half or most of the **students did not pay attention or do their work** (see Display 5). Interestingly, while the males were least likely to say that they always did their homework, they were more likely to say that most students in their classes did their work, especially in eighth grade.

One student compared the different atmospheres in two of his classes:

- I: Are you getting a good education here?  
S: Not really.  
I: Why?  
S: If you try to learn you can't cause it is noisy in class.  
I: Why is that?  
S: I think maybe cause we just like to talk to friends cause we don't see 'em or we just trying to show 'em we can be bad.  
I: Is this what all your classes are like?  
S: We behave with [one teacher] but when we go to [another class] we be talking.  
I: Why?  
S: This is hard to me to say. They can't get away with [the first teacher] but when we go to [the other teacher], the teacher won't get on our case. I talk too sometimes.  
I: Why do you behave differently?  
S: Cause you learn [in the first class]; she'll teach you well.  
I: Any advice to new teachers?  
S: When you first walk into class, you should be strict with students but not mean. (261611)

The reasons why students disrupted the class or cut class or did not do their homework varied, from how they felt about the teachers — as the above student explained — to being bored to not understanding what was going on in class to being with friends to having problems at home to just not caring. Examples of the last five of these reasons included the following:



*They don't have...they really get bored and we do the same thing over and over. (278811)*

I: Do most of the students do what the teacher expects?

S: A lot of them don't; not a lot do.

I: Why?

S: Probably cause teachers expect a whole lot that kids can't do. It takes a long time to learn stuff and you have a test quick and you don't understand it and if you don't understand it, you give up. (172612)

S: Most of the whole class talks. I set in the way back. That's where most of the noise comes from so I get caught up with that.

I: Why do students talk?

S: Because most of them sit next to friends. They been with them since sixth grade, the same kids in class over and over and became best friends. It builds up. (182811)

I: What does your teacher expect?

S: Don't want you to be bad, want you to be good.

I: What do most students do in your class?

S: Play around.

I: Do you have any reasons why?

S: Yeah, cause they mom don't help at home. (365611)

I: What does your teacher expect?

S: Sit down.

I: Do most students behave in class?

S: Some of them are acting up, always the boys.

I: Why?

S: I don't know; they don't want to learn. (262612)

The five reasons given above — not wanting to learn, being bored, not understanding, home situations, and getting friends' attention — were five of the six most frequently mentioned, with teachers being second on the list of reasons why students did not do their work. The role of teachers was amply discussed in the second theme and, thus, will not be revisited here; suffice to say that this list only serves to reinforce the exceedingly large role that teachers played in students lives. However, we think that the explanations as a whole in the table in Display 5 are more noteworthy than any single item because this variety

reflects a collective student understanding that the causes of disruptive behavior were not simplistic and would likely escape the influence of solutions that regarded the causes as such.

In summary, the above discussion tries to convey the individual/collective paradox in students' approach to their education. The numbers of students who individually expressed realizations of the importance of education were too great to be able to simply explain away the paradox by saying it was only the "good" students who said that. Most students, even the ones that openly admitted their lack of commitment to schoolwork, acknowledged education as the means of achieving their goals. So, the answer was complex, just as the students argued in the section on why they were disruptive in class, with the reasons being a composite of personal, family, instructional, and peer-related factors.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR REFORM

The students offered a number of ideas that teachers and administrators might use to get adolescents more involved in their classwork, such as putting more student action into classroom activities, concentrating on being fair, making sure that students understand their assignments, specifying what determines one's grade, limiting class disruptions, giving one-on-one help, etc. These ideas are not trivial; they flow from the kind of day-to-day classroom interactions that ultimately will determine whether reforms succeed.

The value of what students have to say, however, is not limited to a list of student-valued instructional practices. Cutting across the discussions of the five themes are two "big picture" conditions of students' educational experiences that we think have considerable implications for how adults should go about reforming urban school systems: (1) the clearly apparent inconsistencies in students' educational experiences within an individual school and (2) the non-instructional flavor to students' interactions with each other.

### Inconsistent Educational Experiences

We think it is extremely noteworthy that there were decided differences in how students were educated within a school. The data we use to justify this observation dotted the discussions of the five themes and stemmed from the variations in student responses. For example, students described teachers who established desirable instructional relationships with them and those who did not; they talked about teachers who were fair and those who were not; some students claimed they had opportunities to make choices and be creative and others did not; and some portrayed their classrooms as mostly focused on instruction while others said that their classes were only partially instructionally focused or not focused at all.

That these differences existed is not startling, and perhaps for that reason, they are often overlooked as endemic to schools. In the Philadelphia middle schools, for instance, there always seemed to be a sixth grade teacher that everyone wanted to have, or a house to which many students wanted to be assigned, or an exploratory class that excited all of the students. However, the reverse — poignantly portrayed in the students' quotes — were the situations students wanted to avoid, where learning did not flow as readily from the experiences they had. From the student perspective, then, such contrasts were noteworthy and not to be accepted as inevitable.

In our view, differences in the quality of students' education within schools represent major obstacles to successful reform. This is not a question of examining the half-full glass and deciding to be either affirming of progress or critical of the lack of it. For the student in the disruptive class, the glass was always empty. There was no optimistic spin to put on the situation, no excitement in science, no improved math skills, no growth in reading.

The school reform and school improvement literatures have an obsession with differences among schools, particularly with trying to characterize those that seem to be highly innovative and/or effective (see Lightfoot, 1983; Rutter et. al, 1979 for trendsetters in this regard). The assumption seems to be that these productive situations can be recreated in other situations, although the evidence is more discouraging than encouraging (e.g., Cuban, 1990; Sarason, 1990). The students' collective comments suggested an alternative way to think about what a school should be trying to "re-form." Within each school, there seemed to be "effective" and "ineffective" situations, at least in terms of engaging the students in school-work and learning. From the standpoint of students, it was a question of luck — i.e., the whimsy of classroom assignments and teacher mobility — as to which situation they encountered (see also Corbett & Wilson, 1992). A reasonable goal of reform, then, could be to reduce the variation from situation to situation — for example, from "pockets of student passivity" to "pockets of student activity" — with the school seeking to emulate noteworthy aspects of its own operation.

### A Non-instructional Tone to Students' Interactions with Each Other

Individually students espoused a belief in the value of getting an education and had much to say about schooling that was positive. They wanted to be in classes where students worked rather than played; many of them wanted to go to college; and most felt they were getting a good education. Clearly, they did not discount schooling as an important aspect of their lives.

One possible "slant" to give these data, then, is that they provide "good news," that education in the city, at the middle level at least, is not as bleak as other reports indicate. And we

feel that the data do point to a positive individual student outlook on schooling that often goes untapped as a resource and uncelebrated as an accomplishment. There is a considerable moral commitment to education among students — i.e., education is good for its own sake — as well as a more calculated commitment — i.e., education will translate into jobs.

However, this commitment was not apparent in day-to-day school life. Instead, students acted as if getting instruction and doing good work were not concerns of theirs. But this lack of concern did not translate into a collection of moping, sullen, and reluctant people who disinterestedly slumbered through the halls of these schools. No. They bounded, bubbled and bragged their way through the school day, flocking together at every appropriate and inappropriate opportunity. It was just that they did not bound, bubble, or brag about instructional matters when they flocked. Instead, they played, they fought, and they teased their peers who did try to work.

The extent of the apparent individual valuing of education, however, suggests that the widely-documented disengagement of students from school (see Steinberg, 1996, for example) is not likely the cumulative product of individual predispositions against schooling. Instead, something happens in the mix, in the daily interactions of adolescents with each other that causes such dramatic differences between their words and deeds. What causes adolescents as a group to act as if education does not matter is unclear, although there is no lack of speculation — parents, MTV, drugs, schools themselves, etc. These are issues to be further examined with the students in this study, but it is instructive that acting as if instruction does not matter emerged as a social rather than an individual phenomenon. This means that solutions more than likely lie in establishing effective group processes among students rather than in continually preaching to individuals. If students together act as if they do not value education, then strategies to combat this must involve students acting together.

### A Recommendation

The goal of all educational reform remains clear — improved learning for all students. In middle schools, proposed paths to this end are generally agreed upon — for example, interdisciplinary teaming, heterogeneous groupings, small learning communities, advisory periods, involved families, community service opportunities, and flexible scheduling. But these paths likely will not follow a direct route to the ultimate goal of success for all. Instead, there are intermediate junctures along the way that, if reached, will enhance the probability of completing the journey. We feel that the students who participated in this study have surfaced two conditions that have to be altered to achieve this goal: the educational quality differences within schools and the peer-reinforced, non-instructional focus that dominates student-to-student interactions. Positively influencing these two conditions should serve

as intermediate destinations that will enable reform to remain on a productive path.

Importantly, the resources for reaching these intermediate targets reside within these very same schools. The "half-full" student examples told us so. Each school had situations in which students became excited about learning and were unable to retreat from participating even if they wanted to. Thus, a means for achieving significant reform would be to unleash these within-school resources in hopes of raising the level of quality education to the level of the best the school has to offer. Instead of trying to improve these schools by generating policies that pressure them to become more like other schools (the so-called "effective" ones), schools should be encouraged to become more like the school they already **partially** are. In other words, the students made it clear that there were pockets of excellence and effectiveness in each school; the rest of the school should be brought to the levels that these pockets are already achieving.

A simple call for increased staff development does not go far enough. Instead, we feel that a more fruitful approach would be to encourage school development, wherein resident staff experts become key reform leaders who design and implement activities that require the collaboration of students and adults. Rather than isolating teachers from students, such an approach would bring the two together, creating opportunities for both to create a future together.

There is another consideration that we feel we need to bring up with respect to the content of this collaborative endeavor — particularly in the context of Philadelphia's "Children Achieving" initiative which is so keen on engendering greater achievement among urban youth. High expectations and world-class standards establish the inescapable need to determinedly pursue quality. However, we did not see much of an emphasis on quality work reflected in the students' accounts of their experiences. Instead, for them, success was mostly "either/or" — you behaved or you did not, you did your work or you did not. Moreover, "easy" work played an important role in making the transition to middle school and determining their favorite classes. This lack of awareness or interest in the quality of one's work, if not addressed, will clash with the standards movement, especially if standards appear out of the blue as a redefinition of school as students have traditionally experienced it. "Springing" reform on professionals historically has undermined innovation. A similar effect may be experienced with students if school development-like activities do not help prepare them for new notions of acceptable performance. This argues strongly for students becoming participants in standard-setting debates and co-constructing the levels of performance that will more objectively determine who is successful in school.

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## APPENDICES

### A. Interview Protocol

What do you plan to do in the future, in terms of further schooling and in terms of work? Do you feel this school is preparing you well to do that? What happens here at school that is particularly helpful to your learning? What happens that is not helpful? What else could the school be doing to help you with your plans?

What kinds of activities in class help you learn best? Why? Do you get to do these activities in all of your subjects or only in some? Could you give some examples? What kinds of activities do not help you learn? Why? What do teachers do that help you learn? How does this help? What could teachers do to help you more? Why? What opportunities do you have to work with computers or other technology?

What is your favorite subject? Why? What activities do you like to do in this subject? Are you successful in school? Why do you say that? What does it take to succeed here? That is, what do your teachers consider a successful student to be? How do they let you know? Is this definition the one that should be expected of you? Why? Is it difficult or easy for you to be successful?

Do you feel safe here at school? Why? Would you share any ideas you have on what else the school should be doing about safety?

What do you like best about being in this school? Why? What do you like least about being here? Why?

Do you feel like you are a part of the school? Like you are welcomed here? What happens that makes you feel welcomed? What happens that makes you feel unwelcome? Do you have any concerns about coming to and being at school?

Why do you think some students do not want to go to class? What could be done to change this?

Why do some students hang in the hallways? What can the school do to help them? Are you involved in any extracurricular activities? Which ones? Are there other activities you would like to see offered that aren't? Which ones?

How often do you have homework? Do you do yours? How often? Why? When do you

do it? Do you prepare for your classes and tests? How? What help do you have available to you to prepare for school?

How do you feel about school lunches? What's the reason students don't eat them?

How easy was it for you to make the change from elementary school to middle school? Why?

Do you usually know how well you have done on a test or project before you receive a grade or do you rely on the teacher to tell you how well you have done? How do your teachers figure out what grade to give you? Could you explain how your grade is determined?

Who decides which activities you will do in your classes? Are you ever asked for your advice on what to do? Would you share any ideas you have on activities that you would like to see in your classes?

Do you get much of a chance to be creative? Why? Would you give some examples? Would you like more opportunities to have choices or be creative? Why?

Are you treated fairly here? Why do you say that? What do students do that gets them in trouble? How are these problems handled? Do you think they should be handled differently? How? What do students get praised for? Could you give some examples? Are there other things that students do that you think should be recognized? Please explain. What consequences have an effect on students?

How do students treat one another here? How can the school get students to show respect for one another?

B. Data Displays for the Five Themes

Display 1  
Transition Theme

Ease of Transition From Elementary School to Middle School (N=323 Students)					
Transition for:		Easy	Difficult	Both	Total Students
Sixth Grade	Males	74 (66%)	25 (28%)	13 (12%)	112
	Females	74 (66%)	27 (24%)	11 (10%)	112
Eighth Grade	Males	27 (54%)	18 (36%)	5 (10%)	50
	Females	33 (67%)	12 (25%)	4 ( 8%)	49
Totals		208 (64%)	82 (25%)	33 (10%)	323

Reasons Why the Transition Was Easy or Difficult or Both (Only answers > 10% listed)								
Easy (N=216 Reasons)			Difficult (N=82 Reasons)			Both (N=33 Reasons)		
Reason	#	%	Reason	#	%	Reason	#	%
Knew people	65	30%	Didn't know	25	30%	Hard/Easy	16	49%
Work easy	43	20%	Work hard	24	29%	Easy/Hard	4	12%
Just was	40	19%	Bad kids	7	9%			
Prepared	30	14%						
Behaved	22	10%						
Total Reasons	200	93%		56	68%		20	61%

Display 1: Transition Theme (continued)

Favorite Subjects (N=368 Selections from 280 Students)			
Subject	Male	Female	Totals
Math	74 (56%)	58 (44%)	132
Reading	18 (36%)	32 (64%)	50
Science	25 (58%)	18 (42%)	43
Social Studies	20 (53%)	18 (47%)	38
English/Spelling	16 (47%)	18 (53%)	34
Other	12 (46%)	14 (54%)	26
Computer	11 (44%)	14 (56%)	25
Phys. Ed.	14 (70%)	6 (30%)	20
Totals	190 (52%)	178 (48%)	368

Reasons for Selecting a Favorite Subject (N=327 Reasons from 261 Students)			
Reason	Male	Female	Totals
I like it	65 (50%)	64 (50%)	129
I'm good at it	29 (55%)	24 (45%)	53
It's easy	22 (52%)	20 (48%)	42
It's fun	15 (36%)	27 (64%)	42
I can use it	16 (59%)	11 (41%)	27
I like most of them	8 (53%)	7 (47%)	15
It's challenging	3 (25%)	9 (75%)	12
The teacher	2 (50%)	2 (50%)	4
I like none of them	0 ( 0%)	3 (100%)	3
Totals	160 (49%)	167 (53%)	327

Display 1: Transition Theme (continued)

Types of Rumors Students Heard (N=46)		
Rumor	Number	Percent
Their school was bad	31	67%
Didn't hear any rumors	5	11%
Their school was good	5	11%
Other schools bad	3	7%
School too big, get lost	1	2%
School was "corny"	1	2%
Total	46	100%

Display 2  
Teacher Theme

Getting a Good Education (N=330 Students)					
		Yes	No	Somewhat	Total Students
Sixth Grade	Males	84 (73%)	12 (10%)	19 (17%)	115
	Females	84 (74%)	11 (10%)	18 (16%)	113
Eighth Grade	Males	39 (71%)	7 (13%)	9 (16%)	55
	Females	35 (74%)	4 (9%)	8 (17%)	47
Totals		242 (73%)	34 (10%)	54 (16%)	330

Display 2: Teacher Theme (continued)

Factors Affecting the Kind of Education Students Received (N=323 Explanations)			
Explanations	Males	Females	Totals
The Teacher	81 (52%)	78 (48%)	159
Student Does Work/Learns	39 (47%)	44 (53%)	83
Discipline in the School	20 (59%)	14 (41%)	34
Special Activities/Programs	9 (38%)	15 (62%)	24
Prepared for Future	6 (50%)	6 (50%)	12
Other	7 (64%)	4 (36%)	11
Total Explanations	162 (50%)	161 (50%)	323

Desirable Teacher Characteristics (N=470 Responses from 292 Students)						
		Willing to Help	Nice	Strict	Explains Clearly	Totals
6th Gr.	Males	44 (28%)	35 (23%)	42 (27%)	34 (22%)	155
	Females	53 (32%)	36 (22%)	32 (20%)	43 (26%)	164
8th Gr.	Males	27 (38%)	11 (15%)	24 (34%)	9 (13%)	71
	Females	21 (26%)	14 (18%)	23 (29%)	22 (28%)	80
Total Responses		145 (31%)	96 (20%)	121 (26%)	108 (23%)	470

Display 2: Teacher Theme (continued)

		Teacher Fairness (N=321 Students)			Total Students
		Yes	No	Somewhat	
Sixth Grade	Males	67 (62%)	16 (15%)	25 (23%)	108
	Females	63 (58%)	15 (14%)	31 (28%)	109
Eighth Grade	Males	33 (62%)	10 (19%)	10 (19%)	53
	Females	26 (51%)	11 (22%)	14 (27%)	51
Totals		189 (59%)	52 (16%)	80 (25%)	321

Reasons for Fairness and Unfairness Organized Under the Two Categories Discussed in the Text (N=219 Reasons)			
Reasons	Males	Females	Totals
<b>Treat Equally</b>			
- Same attention to students (fair)	14 (45%)	17 (55%)	31
- Treat students like they act (fair)	9 (50%)	9 (50%)	18
- Have favorites (unfair)	12 (44%)	15 (56%)	27
<b>Treat with Respect</b>			
- Give respect/nice to students (fair)	17 (59%)	12 (41%)	29
- Give second chances (fair)	15 (79%)	4 (21%)	19
- Listen/help (fair)	7 (44%)	9 (56%)	16
- Handle kids badly (unfair)	28 (49%)	29 (51%)	57
- Show lack of respect (unfair)	10 (45%)	12 (55%)	22
Totals	112 (51%)	107 (49%)	219

Display 3: Active Learning Theme

Elements	Active Learning Elements (N=464 responses from 248 students)				Totals
	Males		Females		
	6th Grade	8th Grade	6th Grade	8th Grade	
Doing experiments/ projects	50 (31%)	19 (26%)	38 (22%)	26 (43%)	133 (29%)
Make it fun	39 (25%)	18 (25%)	52 (30%)	13 (22%)	122 (26%)
Work with friends/ groups	16 (10%)	8 (11%)	27 (16%)	9 (15%)	60 (13%)
Play games	15 (9%)	9 (13%)	24 (14%)	5 (8%)	53 (11%)
Find information/ do research	21 (13%)	8 (11%)	15 (9%)	2 (3%)	46 (10%)
Make things	16 (10%)	4 (6%)	10 (6%)	3 (5%)	33 (7%)
Use imagination	2 (1%)	6 (8%)	7 (4%)	2 (3%)	17 (4%)
Total Responses	159	72	173	60	464



Display 3: Active Learning Theme (continued)

Do Students Have Choices in Class? (N=324 Students)					
	Males		Females		Totals
	6th Grade	8th Grade	6th Grade	8th Grade	
Yes, have choices	74 (65%)	45 (76%)	74 (70%)	36 (78%)	229 (71%)
No, do not have choices	40 (35%)	14 (24%)	31 (30%)	10 (22%)	95 (29%)
Totals	114	59	105	46	324

Do Students Have Creative Opportunities in Major Subjects? (N=289 Students)			
	Males	Females	Totals
Yes, in major subjects	56 (38%)	69 (48%)	125 (43%)
Only during free time in major subjects	22 (15%)	23 (16%)	45 (16%)
Not in major subjects	68 (47%)	51 (36%)	119 (41%)
Totals	146	143	289

Display 4: Success and Assessment Theme

Do You Consider Yourself to be a Successful Student? (N=361 Students)					
	Yes	No	Somewhat	Don't Know	Totals
6th Grade Males	102 (84%)	4 (3%)	11 (9%)	4 (3%)	121
Females	108 (86%)	6 (5%)	11 (9%)	1 (1%)	126
8th Grade Males	48 (81%)	4 (7%)	6 (10%)	1 (2%)	59
Females	47 (85%)	2 (4%)	5 (9%)	1 (2%)	55
Total Students	305 (85%)	16 (4%)	33 (9%)	7 (2%)	361

Characteristics of Success (N=419 Responses from 335 Students)					
Characteristics	Males		Females		Totals
	6th Grade	8th Grade	6th Grade	8th Grade	
Behavioral Compliance	70 (47%)	23 (35%)	66 (47%)	29 (48%)	188 (45%)
Doing the Work	55 (36%)	27 (41%)	45 (32%)	18 (30%)	145 (35%)
Good Grades	26 (17%)	16 (24%)	30 (21%)	14 (23%)	86 (21%)
Total Responses	151	66	141	61	419

Display 4: Success and Assessment Theme (continued)

Components of Assessment (N=327 Responses from 241 Students)					
Components	<u>Males</u>		<u>Females</u>		<u>Totals</u>
	6th Grade	8th Grade	6th Grade	8th Grade	
Classwork/homework/tests	46 (46%)	38 (53%)	43 (44%)	25 (43%)	152 (47%)
Behavior	18 (18%)	11 (15%)	21 (21%)	8 (14%)	58 (18%)
Participation/effort	8 ( 8%)	11 (15%)	13 (13%)	11 (19%)	43 (13%)
Grades	13 (13%)	7 (10%)	10 (10%)	8 (14%)	38 (12%)
Don't Know	14 (14%)	5 ( 7%)	11 (11%)	6 (10%)	36 (11%)
Total Responses	99	72	98	58	327

Display 5: Student Behavior Theme

Students Who Intend to Pursue Post-High School Education (N=245 Students)			
	<u>Males</u>	<u>Females</u>	<u>Totals</u>
Sixth Grade	87 (51%)	82 (49%)	169
Eighth Grade	38 (50%)	38 (50%)	76
Total Students	125 (51%)	120 (49%)	245

Display 5: Student Behavior Theme (continued)

How Often Do Students Do Homework? (N=322 Students)					
		<u>Always</u>	<u>Usually</u>	<u>Sometimes/Never</u>	<u>Totals</u>
Sixth Grade	Males	52 (51%)	27 (26%)	23 (23%)	102
	Females	68 (58%)	29 (25%)	21 (18%)	118
Eighth Grade	Males	24 (44%)	22 (41%)	8 (15%)	54
	Females	31 (65%)	9 (19%)	8 (16%)	48
Total Students		175 (54%)	87 (27%)	60 (19%)	322

How Many Students Do Their Work in Class? (N=153 Students)					
		<u>Most Do</u>	<u>Half Do</u>	<u>Most Don't</u>	<u>Totals</u>
Sixth Grade	Males	16 (37%)	10 (23%)	17 (40%)	43
	Females	16 (27%)	27 (45%)	17 (28%)	60
Eighth Grade	Males	13 (46%)	8 (29%)	7 (25%)	28
	Females	4 (18%)	13 (59%)	5 (23%)	22
Total Students		49 (32%)	58 (38%)	46 (30%)	153

Display 5: Student Behavior Theme (continued)

Reasons for Non-Compliant Behavior (N=343 Responses from the Total Sample of 361 Students)			
Reason	Males	Females	Totals
Students don't want to learn/Don't care	24 (40%)	36 (60%)	60
Students are bored/nothing happens	19 (36%)	34 (64%)	53
Students don't understand/work too hard	23 (45%)	28 (55%)	51
The teacher	17 (49%)	18 (51%)	35
Home situations	16 (46%)	19 (54%)	35
Friends/Getting their attention	17 (50%)	17 (50%)	34
Students forget	15 (56%)	12 (44%)	27
Students have other things to do	16 (59%)	11 (41%)	27
Students don't like the subject	6 (67%)	3 (33%)	9
Student is sick or tired	3 (43%)	4 (57%)	7
Students can get away with it	2 (40%)	3 (60%)	5
Total Reasons	157 (46%)	185 (54%)	343

