

Report Findings

Based On A Survey Among California Ninth and Tenth Graders

Conducted on Behalf of
The James Irvine Foundation

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On March 20 to 23, 2006, Peter D. Hart Research Associates, Inc., conducted a survey among a representative cross section of 619 ninth and tenth graders throughout California at risk of falling behind academically and not reaching their full potential. The margin of error for this survey is ± 4.1 percentage points.

California high schools' current structure works well for many students, but there is clear room for improvement for the majority of students in their high school experience's, success and effectiveness.

Among a representative sampling of all ninth and tenth grade students in California public schools, 39% say it is definitely true of them that they like going to school, and that their school does a good job of motivating them to work hard and do their best. But 61% of all ninth or tenth graders in California have a significantly less positive assessment of their experience; these students say that the statement "I like going to school and my school does a good job of motivating me to work hard and do my best" applies to them only somewhat or definitely does not apply to them.

Our survey for the James Irvine Foundation takes a closer look at the experiences and attitudes of these ninth and tenth grade students who feel less positive about their high school experience and are the most at risk of not reaching their potential in high school. The key findings from this research include the following:

- The vast majority (73%) of these students say they could be doing better in school if they were motivated to work harder;
- The idea of a school where academic work is more closely tied to preparing students for college and careers is highly appealing to a large majority of students. 73% of students say this kind of school appeals to them at least a fair amount;
- 89% of students believe that a school where they could take courses that they need for college but also have more opportunity to acquire skills and knowledge relevant to future careers would be more interesting to them. 91% say they would be more motivated to work hard and do well if they attended this kind of a school; and
- Three in four students say that a smaller focused learning community would be better for them in terms of helping them meet higher standards and expectations.

Key Findings

Students could be motivated to work harder and do better. Most ninth and tenth graders do not work as hard as they could to get good grades in their academic subjects. However, students say they could be motivated to work harder and do better:

- 27% say they work as hard as possible, compared to 34% who say they could do somewhat better and 39% who say they could do much better;
- Boys (79%) are more likely to believe that they could be doing better in school than are girls (67%);
- 77% of Hispanics say they could work harder and do better if they were properly motivated; 70% of their white peers agree; and
- Notably, 82% of students who say that school is boring or irrelevant believe that they could be motivated to work harder and do better.

A school that combines academics and preparation for college and future jobs appeals to most students. We read ninth and tenth graders the following description of a type of high school and then asked how much it appeals to them:

In some places in California, students are offered the chance to attend local public high schools and charter schools where the academic work is more closely tied to preparing students for jobs and careers. In these schools, students take the courses they need for college, but also acquire skills and knowledge that are relevant to success in the workplace. For example, in one district, there is a health sciences academy where students earn both a high school diploma and a certificate that qualifies them to get good paying health care jobs. The kinds of schools I am talking about place a greater emphasis on teaching academic subjects in ways that are more relevant to the real-world workplace—such as tying history courses to law and government, or tying science courses to health care or robotics.

Nearly three-quarters of ninth and tenth graders say this type of school is appealing:

- 42% say that this type of high school appeals to them a lot and 31% say it appeals a fair amount;
- This type of school's appeal hardly varies between race (71% of whites, 74% of Hispanics) or gender (73% of boys and girls);
- Among students who say that school is boring or irrelevant, 68% say this type of school is appealing; and
- Even 70% students who say they are currently working as hard as possible in school say this type of school appeals to them.

In a follow-up question, we asked students why they found the idea of attending this kind of school appealing. Students believe that a high school experience that places greater emphasis on teaching academic subjects in ways that are more relevant to the real-world workplace, as well as preparing them for college, are interesting and would motivate them better to work hard and do well. The vast majority of students could volunteer a clear and articulate reason why this kind approach would be more valuable to them. The top three most-frequently volunteered reasons are:

- It would better prepare them and motivate them for a job, career, or their future;
- It would be challenging, help them focus on academics and that they would study more; and
- It would better prepare and motivate them for college and that they would learn more.

In their own words, students said:

"I think our schools don't prepare us enough for after college or jobs."

"I think it is more useful, especially if you are choosing a medical or government career because it helps you understand what you are learning about in college."

"It would give you a jump start on what you want to do after high school."

"It would prepare us better for the real world, now we aren't as prepared, not enough hands on experience."

More job-focused, future-oriented, and hands-on classes would motivate students. We read ninth and tenth graders some changes that could be made in schools and asked them to tell us the size of the effect on motivating them to work harder and do their best in school. Students say that three of these would have a very big effect in motivating them to work hard in school:

1. Tying what they learn in school more closely with the skills and knowledge they need to get an interesting job when they are done with school;
2. Making courses more relevant to their future by showing how what they are learning applies outside of school; and
3. Providing more hands-on experiences that give them the chance to personally apply what they are learning.

Students say that the biggest effect would come from tying what they learn in class to the skills and knowledge they will need to get an interesting job after high school:

- More than half (53%) of ninth and tenth graders say that this would have a very big effect and 25% say it would have a fairly big effect;
- Boys (54%), girls (52%), Hispanics (55%), and whites (52%) agree that this change would have a very big effect;
- 58% of students whose parents have not gone to college and 46% of students whose parents went to college, see this change as having a big effect; and
- Not surprisingly, of those students who do not plan to go to college, 61% believe that tying classes to skills they will need to get a job would make the biggest difference of all the options read to them.

Almost as many students (52%) say that making courses more relevant to their future by showing how they might apply them outside school would have a very big effect on motivating them and 21% say it would have a fairly big effect:

- Whites (54%) are slightly more likely than Hispanics (50%) to identify this as a change that would have a very big effect; and
- 52% of those who say that school is boring or irrelevant believe this change would have a very big effect.

Finally, 47% of students say that providing more hands-on experience that would give them the chance to personally apply what they are learning would produce a very big effect, and 27% say it would have a fairly big effect:

- More girls (51%) than boys (44%) say increasing hands-on experience will have a very big effect.

A strong majority of ninth and tenth graders say this type of school would be more interesting than the school they currently attend.

Nine in ten (89%) ninth and tenth graders believe that attending a school where students take courses they need for college and also have opportunities to acquire skills and knowledge that are relevant to success in the workplace would be much (46%) or somewhat (43%) more interesting than their current school:

- Girls (91%) and Hispanics (94%) are slightly more likely to favor this type of school than are boys (88%) and whites (87%); and
- 88% of students who say high school is boring or irrelevant believe this alternative would be more interesting, and 93% of students who say they could do much better in school agree.

Most students (88%) say they would enroll in a high school with this kind of approach (32% definitely, 56% probably). Eighty-five percent of students who find high school boring or irrelevant say they would enroll.

Smaller learning communities would help students meet higher standards and expectations.

We read ninth and tenth graders the following description of the smaller learning communities and then asked whether it would help them to meet higher standards and expectations:

Many of the schools we have been talking about get students involved in smaller learning communities where there is a central focus on a particular career or profession. Subjects such as math, English, science, and history are taught in terms of how they relate or apply to that topic. The same group of students and teachers work together throughout the school day and school year, spending a lot of their time on projects that help students learn the skills and knowledge from all their different academic subjects.

Three-quarters (76%) of students say that this kind of smaller, focused learning community would be better for them. Twenty-one percent say it would not be any better:

- Girls (81%) are especially favorable toward smaller learning communities, compared with boys (71%);
- Hispanic students (77%) are slightly more likely than white students (73%) to say that smaller learning communities would be an improvement; and
- Four in five students who find school difficult say that the smaller learning community model, where there is a central focus on a particular career or profession, would be better for them.