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# Students' Perspectives on Their High School Experience

Kathleen M. Cauley
*Virginia Commonwealth University*, kmcauley@vcu.edu

Carl Chafin
*Chesterfield County Public Schools*, carlk_chafin@ccpsnet.net

Janine Certo
*Virginia Commonwealth University*

# STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES ON THEIR

# HIGH SCHOOL EXPERIENCE

Prepared by:


Kathleen M. Cauley
Associate Professor, Educational Studies
Virginia Commonwealth University

Carl Chafin
Assistant Superintendent for Administration
Chesterfield County Public Schools

Janine Certo
Research Assistant, Metropolitan Educational Research Consortium (MERC)
Virginia Commonwealth University

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**Executive Summary**

**Students' Perspectives on Their High School Experience**

This study explored what it is like to be a high school student today. Our purpose was to describe the extent to which the schools in the metropolitan area are meeting the needs of their diverse body of students.

Knowing whether disengagement and alienation are widespread is important if we are to determine whether systemic change is needed or a more localized approach that targets particular students. We looked at those internal (school) factors related to instructional time; non-instructional time in school, extracurricular activities and school climate that help or hinder students' perceived levels of engagement. Obtaining a snapshot of high school students' opinions about instruction, teachers, friends, and activities can be telling about students' levels of belonging and engagement in high school. In order to obtain rich, informative data from students, qualitative research techniques were chosen.

**THE STUDY**

The seven participating school divisions each selected a comprehensive high school that was representative of its student body. Central office members drew a stratified random sample of students evenly distributed across sophomores, juniors and seniors. Out of a total of 400 letters sent to parents, we received permission to interview 33 students. The interview protocol was structured to lead the student through his or her school day. The principal investigators, a research assistant, and five team members conducted the interviews. All interviewers had previous experience interviewing or participated in an interview training session prior to visiting the field. The 30 to 45 minute interviews, which were conducted between March and May 2001, took place during the day in private rooms at students' high schools. All interviews were audiotaped and transcribed. The data were analyzed inductively to identify important themes.

# FINDINGS

The themes identified in this study suggest that high school students in the local schools have a generally positive view of their education. Approximately 85% of the students appear to be engaged in school and feel as though they belong. These students tell us that their day begins comfortably with opportunities to meet with friends or to catch up on homework. They generally like their classes, reporting that their best classes were "challenging," and utilized debate and discussion, "hands-on" activities, curriculum integration, or group work. They disliked unauthentic activities such as worksheets and notetaking. The motivating teachers were enthusiastic, could relate to students, and offered variety in their teaching. Conversely, students were cognizant of how current trends in the State Standards of Learning (SOL) have caused their classes and teachers to move away from authentic work and their earlier teaching styles. Findings revealed that students thought the SOL caused teachers to emphasize facts without meaning, to focus on coverage over depth, to increase seatwork and worksheets, and to reduce differentiation of instruction.

As their day progressed, the students looked forward to the non-instructional times between classes and at lunchtime to interact with friends again, enjoy some "down time" and relax. The students reported that groups in the school generally got along, although individual students were picked on at times. Nevertheless, having and seeing friends throughout the day was what many students looked forward to the most. Participating in extracurricular activities was another good time to touch base with friends, and helped them feel like a part of the school. While most students reported having ample opportunities to participate, about 42% of the participants reported that working after school limited their participation.

Most students described a positive school climate and felt that most adults were caring, fair, and listened. Most of the students could identify at least one adult in the school who cared about them. However, they also reported that adults in the school often seemed busy, and it was sometimes difficult to get in to see their counselor. An interesting finding in this study is that all 33 students felt safe at their school. Comments included "this school is very safe", and "this school is not like other schools". Students were aware of security measures in their school, such as the presence of a security officer, yet they explained that they were not being adversely affected by it.

While students felt pressures, they appeared to be typical adolescent concerns: "fitting in," getting good grades, and getting into college. Only about 25% mentioned feeling pressure to use drugs or alcohol.

## IMPLICATIONS

The instructional program influences students' academic engagement through the use of "authentic" teaching techniques, the ways in which teachers are implementing the SOL, and the relationships that teachers establish with their students. Students' preference for authentic teaching techniques included a desire for more discussion, debate, hands-on activities and less use of worksheets and notetaking. Students (even advanced diploma students) told us that their teachers often responded to the SOL with instruction that was more rushed and less challenging than before and with numerous worksheets.

Teachers who challenge students and help them be successful create the kind of student-teacher relationship that motivates students. Teachers should be made aware that caring about students is not about being students' friends or about being a "bleeding heart". Rather, a caring teacher is one who provides authentic learning experiences and interest in all students to help them succeed.

Non-instructional time (in the morning, between classes, at lunch) did not seem to have a direct bearing on engagement, but students told us that it is important time to be with friends. For many students, it was the most important part of the school day. Students told us that interpersonal relationships with teachers, other adults in the school, and students, are important to their sense of belonging. Students frequently described non-instructional time as crowded and rushed. Schools should pay more attention to places and opportunities for this to take place, and pay attention to creating a culture of acceptance for all students.

Students felt that participation in extracurricular activities helped them feel like a part of the school, but many could participate only to the extent that their work schedules allowed. These activities were also valued as an opportunity to meet with friends.

For most students, the school climate appeared to be positive. Almost all students described their schools as safe. They generally appreciated the safety measures taken and the presence of resource officers. Students reported that while they could identify at least one adult who cared about them, they also found that most adults, including counselors, were too busy to see them. Schools should think about ways to free up adults to meet with students more frequently.

The majority of our students appeared to be engaged and to like school. A minority (about 15%) found school to be boring and not connected to "real life" and felt that adults neither listened to nor cared about them. The schools are doing a good job for most students. Yet, they should strive to understand the needs of a minority of students, understanding that those students may require specialized help. For example, some may require instructional adjustments, help dealing with home situations, or finding a caring adult at the school.

# STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES ON THEIR HIGH SCHOOL EXPERIENCE

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## Preface

This is the final report of a project sponsored by the Metropolitan Educational Research Consortium. The Metropolitan Educational Research Consortium (MERC) is a collaborative research effort in central Virginia which involves Virginia Commonwealth University and seven surrounding school districts: Chesterfield County, Colonial Heights City, Hanover County, Henrico County, Hopewell City, Powhatan County, and Richmond City. This study was initiated in 1999 to provide information on high school students' perspectives of the school experience. The project was directed by a research team that included representatives from each of the MERC public school systems, one professor, and a MERC Researcher from Virginia Commonwealth University. This included the design and implementation of the study. The final report reflects findings as interpreted by the research team and do not constitute official policy or position by Virginia Commonwealth University.

## Research Team

Kathleen Cauley, Principal Investigator, VCU
Carl Chafin, Principal Investigator, Chesterfield County Public Schools
Janine Certo, MERC Research Assistant, VCU
Diane O'Connor, Chesterfield County Public Schools
Ada Liles, Colonial Heights City Public Schools
Gwen Moseley, Colonial Heights City Public Schools
James Bagby, Hanover County Public Schools
Vince D'Agostino, Hanover County Public Schools
Carolyn Bush, Henrico County Public Schools
Kae Kindle, Henrico County Public Schools
Brenda Pleasant, Hopewell City Public Schools

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Sarah Jones, Hopewell City Public Schools

Gary Blair, Powhatan County Public Schools

Willie Stroble, Richmond City Public Schools

STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES ON THEIR HIGH SCHOOL EXPERIENCE

The purposes of this project were threefold: 1) to review pertinent literature on high school students' perspectives of the school experience, 2) to present a study of the perspectives of high school students, and 3) to outline implications of the study for school personnel.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

What is it like to be a high school student today? To what extent are the schools in the metropolitan area contributing to student success by meeting the needs of their diverse body of students? The literature suggests that student success is influenced by a number of factors, including a need for relatedness, autonomy, and competence (Connell and Wellborn, 1991; Ryan, 1995). Students need to feel that they belong to their school community; that they are accepted and respected by peers and teachers. They need to feel competent as learners, and in control of their learning with some opportunity to make decisions and work toward personal goals. These needs are interrelated, such that students who feel accepted and secure are also more likely to show autonomy (Osterman, 2000).

Students who feel a sense of belonging also show higher academic engagement and academic achievement (Osterman, 2000). Conversely, students who are rejected or feel alienated or estranged from the group show behavioral problems in school, lower interest in school, lower achievement, and frequently drop out (Osterman, 2000). The strongest associations emerge between belongingness and student engagement with support from teachers being particularly important. "How students feel about school and their coursework is in large measure determined by the quality of the relationship they have with their teachers in specific classes" (Osterman, 2000).

Most recent research suggests that student engagement levels are actually *flexible* and *responsive to teachers' actions*, such as creating a caring atmosphere and enthusiastically presenting active learning opportunities (Cothran & Ennis, 2000). For example, Newmann (1989a, 1989b) found that student engagement is not likely in bureaucratically organized schools perpetuating low-level school work

and impersonal relationships with teachers and students. In fact, Connell and Wellborn (1991) found that positive relationships with and support from adults in school had more effect on students' engagement than from support from home. Expanding on this, York-Barr et al. (1996) found in their focus groups and surveys of high school students that adolescents have a desire for quality relationships with students and teachers, and that they want a curriculum relevant to their current and future life.

Belonging and engagement go hand in hand. Obtaining a snapshot of high school students' opinions about curriculum, instruction, teachers, friends, and activities can be telling about students' levels of belonging and engagement in high school.

## RATIONALE FOR THE PRESENT STUDY

The research on adolescents' sense of belonging and engagement in school presents two pictures. Some implies that schools are not structured to promote a sense of belonging and engagement (eg. Newman, 1989a and 1989b). This perspective is also reflected in Cothran and Ennis (2000) which suggests that the number of disengaged students may exceed two-thirds of the high school population. Other research suggests that the problem of alienation and disengagement may affect only a minority of students in some schools. For example, Goodenow (1993) observes that in generally supportive schools, some students still feel marginalized or excluded. Knowing whether disengagement and alienation are widespread is important if we are to determine whether systemic change is needed or a more localized approach that targets particular students.

Our goal was to take a snapshot of high school students' opinions about instruction, teachers, friends, and activities to get a broad picture of factors affecting students' engagement in school. It is important to determine whether disengagement and alienation is a widespread problem that affects typical students in the Richmond metropolitan area. The researchers wanted to look at those internal (school) factors that help or hinder students' perceived levels of engagement. In order to obtain rich, informative data from students, qualitative research techniques were chosen.

LITERATURE REVIEW

## Belongingness, Participation and Engagement

Because the terms "belongingness", "participation", and "engagement" are used frequently and widely, some clarification of definitions is in order. The concept of belongingness is a broad one, often defined as relatedness, sense of community, sense of school or classroom membership, support, and acceptance. It has a far-reaching impact on human motivation and behavior. The need to belong is a fundamental human motivation defined as "a pervasive drive to form and maintain at least a minimum quantity of lasting, positive, and significant interpersonal relationships" (Baumeister & Leary, 1995, p. 497). Indeed, those students who belong behave differently from those who do not belong. Students who experience a sense of belongingness:

- Have more positive attitudes toward school, classroom, teachers, and peers,
- Are more likely to like school,
- Are more engaged,
- Participate more in school activities,
- Invest more of themselves in the learning process,
- Have a strong sense of social competence,
- And interact with peers and adults in prosocial ways.

Research tells us that the conditions in both the classroom and the school influence students' feelings about themselves; these, in turn, are reflected in levels of student engagement. Not all students experience alienation to the same extent, but for the most part, researchers and students describe schools as alienating institutions (Anderman & Maehr, 1994; Hargreaves et al., 1996; Johnson Farkas, & Bers, 1997; Newmann, 1981; Wehlage, Rutter, Smith. Lesko, & Fernandez, 1989). Heightening cause for concern is that secondary schools, in general, are less supportive and more impersonal than elementary schools (Jules, 1991).

The research clearly places the concept of belongingness as an umbrella term over participation and engagement, with participation and engagement positioned as outcomes of the experience of belongingness. Leithwood and colleagues (1996) defined participation broadly in terms of student

response to requirements, such as classroom initiative, extracurricular activities, and decision-making, all of which can lead to a sense of engagement.

Engagement, as distinct from participation and the antithesis to dropout, is a multidimensional variable including behaviors, emotions, and psychological orientation (Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Newmann, 1992). Engaged students are those that are interested in learning, appreciate challenge, and persist in task completion. Student engagement is generally conceptualized as a psychological process, specifically, the attention, interest, investment, and effort students expend in the work of learning (Marks, 2000). The conception is consistent with other researchers' definitions of engagement: "students' involvement with school" (Finn, 1989, 1993), their "psychological investment in and effort directed toward learning, understanding, or mastering the knowledge, skills, or crafts that academic work is intended to promote" (Newmann, Wehlage, & Lamborn, 1992. p. 12); and students' "interest" and "emotional involvement" with school, including their "motivation to learn" (Steinberg, 1996).

Engagement depends on the personal background of students. For example, at all grade levels, girls are more engaged than boys (Finn, 1989; Finn & Cox, 1992; Lee & Smith, 1993; 1994), students with higher SES levels are more engaged (Finn, 1989; Finn & Cox, 1992; Lee & Smith, 1993, 1994), and more academically successful students report greater engagement with school and their class work (Lee & Smith, 1993, 1994). While understanding student background factors is important, it is also necessary for researchers to expand investigation into whether schools themselves can enhance engagement through particular efforts.

Researchers have proposed theories to explain the vital role of student engagement (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Finn, 1989; 1993; Newmann et al., 1992; Wehlage, 1989). The most comprehensive theory proposed thus far is that of Wehlage et al. (1989), whose framework describes engagement not as an isolated construct, but as connected to additional concepts that mediate the extent to which a student is actively involved in the educational process (See Figure 1). According to Wehlage, students bring with them personal problems and social or cultural conditions that affect the type of experience they have in school. In school, several factors also add to that experience, such as the quality of

instruction, a students' success in school, and getting along with others. The exact mix of these factors influences a student's personal, social and academic development.
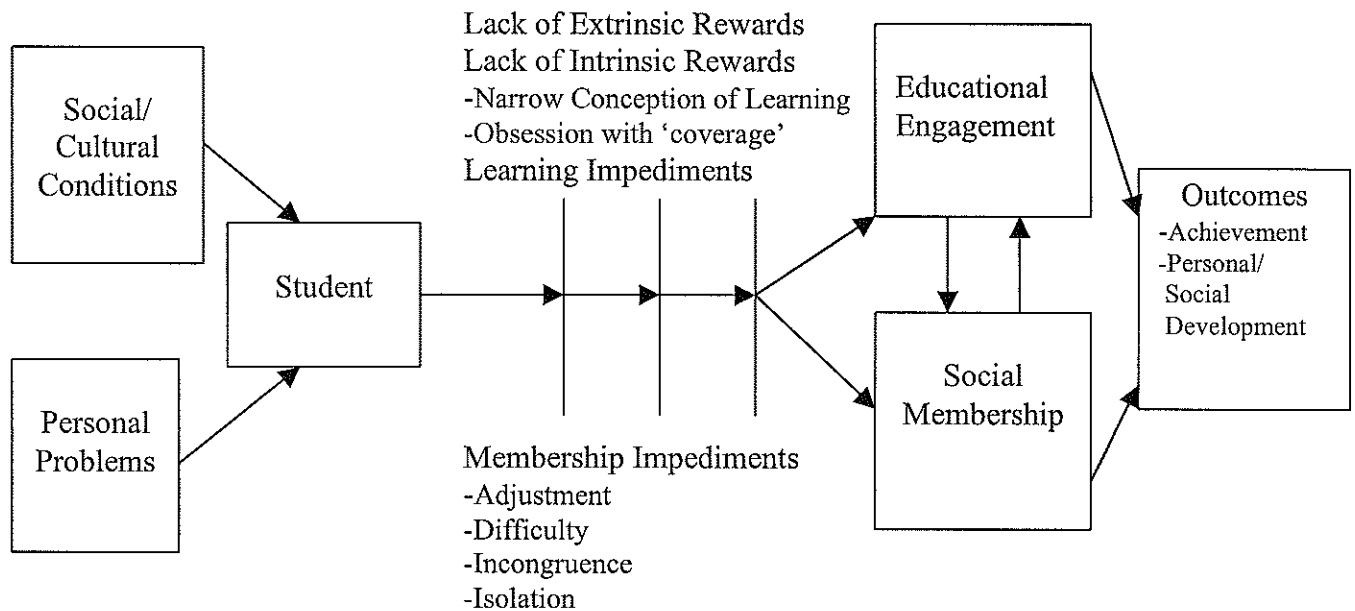


Figure 1. Wehlage et al. (1989) model

## Methods of Instruction

Research has documented a variety of instructional variables that influence belonging and engagement, including the presence of authentic work, cooperative learning and opportunities for discussion, and participation in decision-making. For example, Leithwood and colleagues (1996) presented data showing that the quality of instruction accounted for 46% of the variation in students' sense of belonging. The study used students' perceptions of different aspects of their classroom experience, including teacher support.

Dewey (1958) and Vygotsky (1978), emphasize the importance of social interaction as a basis for learning. Dialogue brings forth ideas, but it also can help students to appreciate others more and to experience themselves as part of a supportive community of learners. Battistich, Watson, Solomon, Schaps, & Solomon (1991) maintain that discussion in classrooms where students have the opportunity to express personal opinions gives students the opportunity to discover that others care.

Gamoran & Nystrand (1992) similarly state that "regardless of the activity in which students participate, discourse is a critical indicator of the extent to which school offers membership" (p. 40).

Research on cooperative learning and dialogue also directly relates to students' experience of belonging. Offering evidence from 98 empirical studies conducted between 1944 and 1982, Johnson and colleagues established that in cooperative learning situations, interaction among and between homogeneous and heterogeneous students was more frequent and more positive than in individualistic or competitive learning situations. In the cooperative setting, there were more incidents of helping behavior, greater satisfaction with the group experience, more frequent perceptions of group cohesiveness, and greater attraction to other group members. While students in these studies preferred cooperative learning, a study by Sharan and Shaulov (1990) showed differential affects on achievement related to individual learning preferences, a factor that must be considered.

Yet opportunities for discussion and cooperative learning appear to be minimal in some schools. For example, Gamoran and Nystarnd's (1992) study of discourse in 54 high school classes found that the group discussion incorporating student contributions averaged 15 seconds per 50-minute period. Thirty-three classes had no discussion time at all; only four had more than a minute. These patterns were unaffected by class size.

Another aspect of instruction that has been found to affect engagement and belonging is opportunities to be autonomous and make decisions about learning. Teachers in Cothran & Ennis' (2000) study who allowed and encouraged student involvement were rewarded with students who generally respected them and were engaged in their classes . Nevertheless, their interviews with students indicated that students did not believe most of their teachers encouraged or allowed student involvement in class decisions and this lack of involvement contributed to their lack of engagement in those classes. Most students recognized the teachers' constraints and responsibilities, yet students wanted to be involved in at least some of the class decisions. Students in their study described certain activities as enhancing their engagement, regardless of subject matter. Engaging teachers:

- Did not talk too much
- Allowed students to be involved actively in a learning task

- Permitted students opportunities to work together
- Were enthusiastic about the subject matter.

Consistent with Wehlage et al.'s (1989) model, isolation was an impediment to student engagement.

In high school, there is a tension between adolescents' growing need for autonomy and the actual decreases in opportunities for student autonomy in the classroom (Anderman & Maehr, 1994; Eccles et al., 1993; Goodlad, 1984; Hargreaves et al., 1996). According to de Charms (1968), the experience of having little control over learning leads to a sense of alienation. He also showed that teachers could learn to utilize autonomy supportive strategies in the classroom and that allowing students to, for example, set their own goals or choose their own projects, led to gains in motivation and achievement.

Finally, the presence of authentic work supports the engagement of students. Marks' (2000) study of 49 urban high school students in social studies and mathematics found that students who perceived classwork to be authentic and their teachers to be supportive showed enhanced engagement in school. Of course, authentic instruction comes much easier with a curriculum that supports authentic work. In small focus group interviews with 29 students from a large suburban upper midwest high school, York-Barr et al. (1996) found in their focus groups with high school students that adolescents wanted a curriculum relevant to current and future life with more in-depth and applied learning. Suggestions for instructional design included more projects and less "lecture-cram'n-test" teaching, smaller and more interactive classes with dialogue and small group work. All focus groups expressed a desire for teachers who are interested in what they teach.

To conclude, engagement and belonging can be influenced by paying attention to instructional variables such as the quality of instruction and opportunities for authentic work, opportunities to discuss academic content and participate in decisions about learning.

**Teacher Support**

Teachers play a major role in determining that students feel cared for and that they are a part of school, yet not all students experience teacher support. Research establishes consistently that

students receive differential treatment based on race, gender, class, ability, and appearance, and that differentiation begins early in the school career and increases as student progress through school. For example, high school students in the Altenbaugh et al. study (1995) disclosed accounts of teacher favoritism. The favorites were "the kids that were real smart in class. The other ones, they just ignored altogether." Those teachers with favorites would display it in various ways, but, as one student put it, " They was always nicer to those students and always mean to the others. . . If a kid missed a day of notes, he would give it to him and help him out, but he wouldn't the other students" (p. 87). Elliot & Voss (1974), Schwartz (1981), and Gamoran and Berends (1987) all find differential treatment among lower tracked students. Schwartz (1981) observed that teachers distanced themselves from lower tracked students, and, in examining end-of-year reports, found that teachers described low track students with brief and negative comments. Many of the negative descriptors mentioned in the reports---"disruptive", "nonconformist", "withdrawn", "daydreamers", "non-participants"---are symptoms of disengagement.

The importance of teacher support must be highlighted since studies show that teacher preferences and patterns of interaction with students also influences the nature of peer relationships, with peer acceptance mirroring teacher preferences (Green et al,. 1980; Kinderman, 1993; Ladd, 1990; Schwartz, 1981; Swift & Spivack, 1969; Wentzel & Asher, 1995). In general, studies show that peers as well as teachers prefer students who are academically competent and engaged, and shun those who are perceived as less capable or less engaged. Interestingly, Osterman (2000) points out that while none of the studies yield any information about causality, inherent in the research designs and discussions is the assumption that levels of teacher and peer acceptance respond to student behavior rather than the reverse. While behavior does play an important part in peer acceptance, one could easily interpret the correlation data in a different way. That is, student behavior and levels of engagement are simply a response to teacher and peer acceptance. Hymel, Wagner, and Butler (1990) offer one explanation. They argue that "popular children acquire a 'positive halo' and unpopular children acquire a 'negative halo', which colors how their behavior is perceived, evaluated, and responded to by others" (p.157). These biases "serve to maintain positive and negative reputations. . . ensuring that status distinctions are preserved" even when behavior of the rejected children shows improvement or when the behavior of the popular children slips. By the time student enter high school, their status has been clearly defined by school authorities.

In fact, Cothran and Ennis (2000) found in their interviews and observations of four teachers and 51 students from three urban high schools that students' own engagement levels were flexible and responsive to teachers' actions. From the students' perspectives, engaging teachers communicated, cared, and enthusiastically presented active learning opportunities. Teachers in the study agreed that the single greatest impediment to student engagement was that students arrived in their classes with poor attitudes and low engagement. In contrast, students observed that they often began class with a low engagement level and waited for the teachers to provide some reason to engage. The teachers, however, did not believe they should, nor did they feel prepared to, fill the role of primary motivator and engager of students. Rather, their role was to supply valuable information to receptive students. The study raises questions about who should be responsible for student engagement. Building on Wehlage's model shown earlier (1989), Cothran and Ennis proposed that teachers use their interpersonal skills to "build a bridge" over the learning and membership impediments that can keep students from educational engagement. Figure 2 on the following page illustrates the teacher "tools" that helped them build the bridge: communicating, caring, and presenting content with enthusiasm and active learning opportunities.

Examples of teachers' who cared in Cothran and Ennis' study were teachers who were willing to work with students until they mastered the content. In their study, 'Rob" suggested his math teacher, was the best teacher at Longwood High because, "He comes around and he helps you. You just don't have to figure it out by yourself." Caring teachers were not easy teachers, but they created environments where students could feel successful and not abandoned when faced with challenging assignments. Other caring examples included teachers that cared about what they did outside of class, and offered advice about how to keep safe and out-of-trouble. Consistent with student reports of teacher caring to be a key factor in their engagement, a number of educators promote a focus on
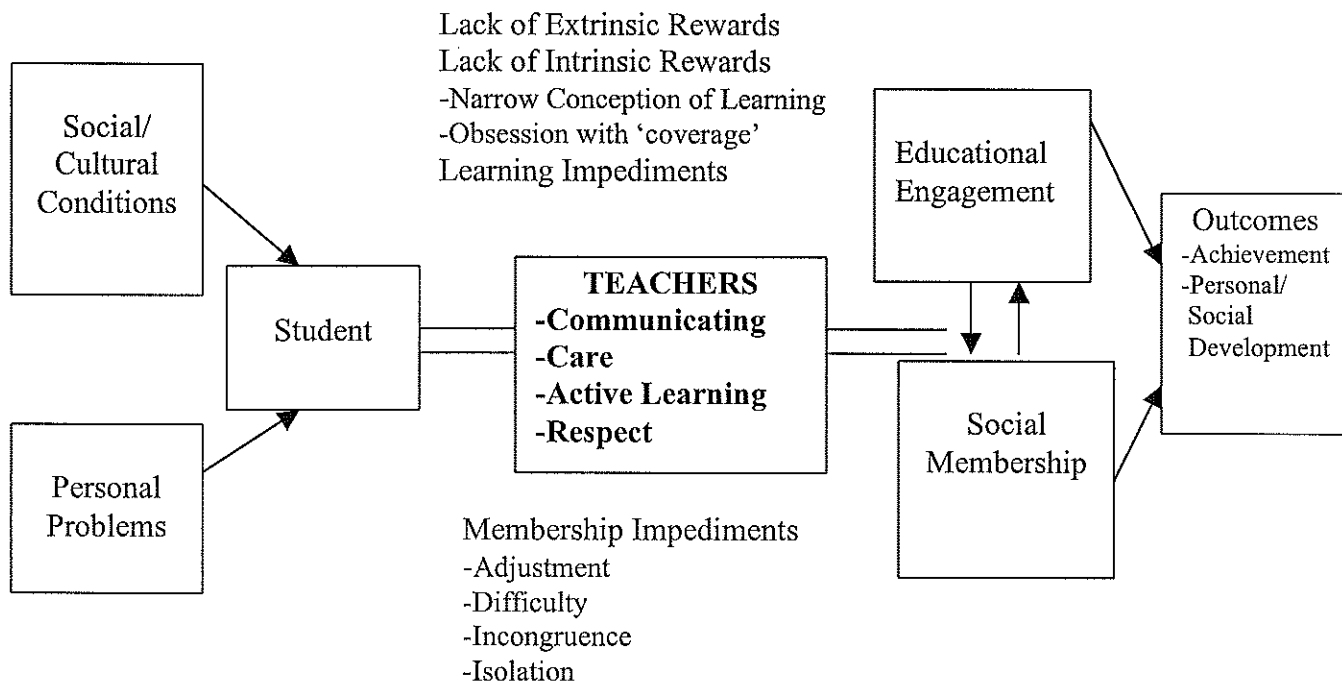
Figure 2.  Teachers as Bridge Builders          (Cothran & Ennis, 2000)

caring in schools.  Noddings (1984) called for the entire school curriculum to be built around an ethic of care, a presence of a committee, caring, reciprocal relationship between the teacher and student. Through that caring relationship, the teachers develop a commitment to understanding the students' experiences and assumes personal responsibility for the student' learning and total school experience.

Ryan et al. (1994) found a strong positive relation between how students relate to teachers, parents, and peers and measures of academic motivation, including engagement, and self-esteem. They found that students who were more secure with teachers were also more engaged, and students who saw teachers as sources of support were more willing to rely on teachers for support and to demonstrate stronger coping behavior.  On the other hand, those students who were "unlikely to turn to others for

help showed poorer school adaptation and motivation and lower self-esteem and identity integration" (p. 243).

Wentzel (1998), too, investigated the ways in which parent, teacher, and peer support are related to various measures of adolescent motivation including psychological distress, interest in school, and interest in class. Interest in class referred to the degree to which students engage and persist in classroom activities, based on teacher ratings and self reports. With a sample of 167 sixth-grades students from a 6-8 middle school in a suburban, middle class and predominantly with community, she found that teacher support was the only source of support contributing significantly to student interest in and/or engagement in class.

To summarize, when teachers show care for and concern about students' learning, as well as their outside life, students are more motivated and engaged.

**Peer Interaction**

While the teacher-student relationship is clearly a crucial one, peer relationships also have a significant impact on students' levels of engagement. Yet, there is very little work focusing on the quality and effect of positive interaction among students in the classroom and the school. Existing research suggests that there are few opportunities for student interaction during the school day—during both instructional and non-instructional time. Studies have shown that students have little time to get to know one another, and peer interactions are limited largely to out-of-school activities (Phelps, 1990; Hargreaves et al., 1996). Participation in after-school activities also works to improve peer interaction and identification with the school. Finn's theory of school withdrawal, for example, maintains that sustained school involvement and participation in extracurricular activities contributed to identification and an increased satisfaction with peer relations (Finn, 1989).

Although the study is somewhat dated, Goodlad's (1984) unpublished study in a wealthy suburban high school found that the average number of interactions with other classmates tended to be very infrequent and differed by academic level. With an interaction being described as any verbal contact, the average number of interactions based on full-day observation of six students was 8 per 50-minute class in special education classes. In middle- level and advanced classes, means were 1.54 and 1.76

respectively. A mid-level student would have approximately 12 interactions with peers during the entire day in six classes. Typically, the interactions were brief and consisted of a singe comment or question. In very few instances were students part of a dialogue.

It is clear, however, that teachers in the classroom can play a part in promoting positive peer relationships. In terms of classroom involvement, several studies relate participation to a sense of belongingness. Johnson, Lutzow, Strothoff and Zannis (1995) used an action research model to encourage supportive relationships among students through cooperative learning and bonding activities within and between classes. Researchers found that behavioral referrals had dropped by as much as 71% and students indicated a higher level of comfort and satisfaction with the group. Students reported a greater ability to make friends, to express their ideas and feelings, and to make mistakes in a small group without concern about being put down.

Another study (Jones & Gerig, 1994) observed that teachers in classes with supportive peer groups were "warm and caring" and found a balance between teacher-initiated communication with students. Conversely, they concluded that silent students used silence as a way of avoiding personal risk, and, consequently, those students clearly did not experience themselves to be a part of a supportive peer group. Several students also described low levels of engagement, spending most of the time daydreaming, though not enough to affect their grades.

So, while the available research suggests that there are few opportunities for students to interact in schools, when students feel accepted by their peers they are more engaged and less disruptive.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The review of literature highlights the fact that how students feel about school and their classes, their relationships with teachers and peers, in large part, influences their sense of belonging and acceptance in school and their academic engagement. School based personnel and the public often attribute low levels of student engagement to factors intrinsic to the child or the home environment. The research challenges that perspective showing that the school directly contributes to engagement

over and above the contribution of family and peers and that parents and peers affect student behavior in very discrete ways.

There is clearly a need for descriptive studies that focus specifically on students' own perspectives of their high school experience and their levels of engagement in school. Obtaining this snapshot of high school life is necessary to guide local school improvements.

This study employed a qualitative methodology focusing on in-depth, semi-structured interviews of 33 high school students from metropolitan area comprehensive public high schools. Foreshadowed questions included:

1. What aspects in the instructional program contribute to high school students' sense of engagement in school?
2. What aspects during non-instructional time (before, between, and after classes, at lunch) contribute to high school students' sense of engagement in school?
3. What aspects in extracurricular experiences contribute to high school students' sense of engagement in school?
4. How does school climate (rules, administrators, etc.) contribute to the high school students' sense of engagement in school?

METHODOLOGY

**Participants**

Selecting the high schools for this study involved purposeful sampling. The seven participating school divisions each selected a comprehensive high school that was representative of its student body. Central office members drew a stratified random sample of 45 students (15 sophomores, 15 juniors and 15 seniors). Thirty of those students' parents were sent a letter inviting their adolescent to participate. When response from a division was low, letters to parents of the remaining 15 students were sent. When response was still low, an additional 45 students' names were drawn, and letters were sent. Only those students whose parents provided permission were interviewed. Out of a total of 400 letters sent, 44 were returned. Eleven declined participation resulting in permission to interview a total of 27 students. Six students interviewed in the pilot study were added to the sample for a total of 33 students. Demographic data was gathered for each of the high school students, and is

summarized in Table 1. Twenty-three of the students were participating in an Advanced Diploma

Program, and 10 students were in a program leading to a Standard Diploma.

**Table 1: Demographic Summary of Student Participants**

| Grade Level | Total | M | F | Black | White | Other |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 10 | 9 | 3 | 6 | 1 | 8 | 0 |
| 11 | 16 | 6 | 10 | 2 | 13 | 1 |
| 12 | 8 | 3 | 5 | 2 | 5 | 1 |
| Total | 33 | 12 | 21 | 5 | 26 | 2 |

**Procedures**

The research team members representing the local school divisions assisted in developing the

interview protocol (See Appendix A). In order to obtain a "snapshot of the high school experience, it

was decided that the interview protocol would be structured to lead the student through his or her

school day. The protocol was also designed to obtain perceptions of student engagement in aspects

of high school life. Open-ended responses permitted the researchers to understand the world as seen

by the informants. The *general interview guide* approach was chosen, so as to "make sure that

basically the same information was obtained from a number of people" (Patton, 1990, p.283). The

interview guide was also appealing because it provided topics in which interviewers were free to

explore, and probe to illuminate a topic. The interviews were semi-structured, with probes as

appropriate to investigate perspectives of activities and experiences of the high school students. The

protocol was piloted by two members of the research team. After pilot interviews with a total of six

students, the research team reconvened for minimal revision of the protocol. The interview protocol

questions, and their probes are in Appendix A.

The principal investigators, a research assistant, and five team members conducted the interviews.

All interviewers had previous experience interviewing or participated in an interview training session

prior to visiting the field. Interviews were conducted between March and May 2001, lasting between

30 to 45 minutes. All interviews took place during the day in private rooms at students' high schools.

Interviews were audio-taped. Researchers made field notes of observations or nonverbal behavior as appropriate. An independent professional transcribed tapes, verbatim, for analysis.

**Data Analysis**

Data analysis was conducted continually and simultaneously with data collection, with one school being analyzed immediately following transcriptions. One team member coded interviews and another, for cross-examination purposes, independently coded 10 interviews using Hyperresearch software. Researchers used low-inference descriptors when coding to honor the language of students. The principal investigators and the primary coder met to review codes and identify common themes and issues. Those themes and issues were used to answer the original research questions, offering both a "snapshot" of the high school student experience from the perspective of adolescents and a model of factors internal to the school that affect high school student engagement.

The coding for analyzing the transcripts are illustrated in Figure 3. Several of the codes listed had numerous subcodes, particularly the codes *best classes, motivators, caring examples, student pressures, SOL, preferred teaching strategies* and *motivators*. Each school division research team member independently reviewed a randomly selected a set of five interview transcriptions to answer the research questions. The entire team met to synthesize findings from the analysis of the transcripts and integrate conclusions with reviews of the principal investigators and primary coder.

**Figure 3**

**Transcript Codes**

1-Acceptance of groups

2-Activities keep you busy and engaged

3-Activity barriers

4-Adult accessibility

5-Aware of security measures

6-Best classes

7-Boredom/Monotony

8-Caring examples

9-Conflicts between groups

10-Friendships

11-Motivators

12-Pressures

13-Preferred teaching strategies

14-Purpose of high school

15-School feels rushed

16-School size affects

17-SOL

18-What I'd change if I could

19-What's fair and what's not

RESULTS

The results are presented by important themes that were identified in analyzing the student

interviews, culminating in a picture of what it's like to be in a comprehensive high school. The

themes are defined as described by the students themselves, with direct quotations listed to support

themes. A model that integrates the themes is also offered. Seven themes emerged from the data: authentic curriculum and classwork, Standards of Learning impact, teacher support, peer relations, extracurricular activities, student pressures, and overall school climate.

## Theme I: Authentic Curriculum and Classwork

High school students in this sample had a clear preference for instructional activities that could be described as "authentic". They described their preferred instructional strategies as ones that were hands-on, and that contained opportunities for debate and discussion. These findings are consistent not only when asking students about what teaching strategies they prefer, but also about their best classes and what the teacher does to motivate them. Also, not surprisingly, about one third of the sample described their best classes as those that were their strength or those that were in an area of the students' interest.

> Going against what they say. Like in a debate in a class. Which I like that teaching style too, debating. It is a good teaching style.

> I like it when we can get up and do things other than sitting around and taking notes, because I can't, I understand it better if I can do it. Lab stuff.

> I like a lot of classes where I can have a lot of group discussions and communications where I can work and debate certain topics and just have big discussions on different things.

> . . . because that's [Science and Math] what I'm best in, and Science has always been a big love of mine, and I've always been really good at Math, so I like that too.

> My Journalism [class]—that's what I'm interested in.

By contrast, students related a dislike of "unauthentic" activities such as worksheets or notetaking. Many students described a teacher they had that used worksheets or notetaking, in their views, far too much. These students felt like teachers, in doing this, created a barrier between themselves and the students, locking out a chance for dialogue or discussion. It appears students wanted to both see and to hear the teacher.

> I don't like classes where all you do is take notes, do some classwork, then the bell rings and you go home and do homework.

> Well, I don't like it when the teacher just kind of hands you work and says do it and that's all you really do. Every now and then they'll [teachers] say a few things, or if you don't understand something, they might help you. But it's for our own good and nice to have that one-on-one talk or whatever, kind of group teacher talk to the class.

> I don't like it when somebody just hands out worksheets and tells you to do them. Or like I had a teacher last year, all he would do is like 10 worksheets a day and you sat there and you're supposed to do them but half the kids would just sit there and do nothing or whisper. It was real boring.

> She did all the notes at the beginning of the year and she just started giving us worksheets and making us look through the book, and that's just reading through the book too much.

Only one student in the sample felt that the best classes were the easy classes. In fact, about one fourth of the students voluntarily offered that the best classes were often the challenging ones, where they learned new content or gained new experiences through real-world activities or problem-solving. These classes were often advanced or elective courses. A handful of students described the best classes as those in which they received individual attention, looking forward to those classes that happened to have a lower class size.

> It is a lot harder [English class] than a regular level class would be and I am starting to have to stretch myself there too, which is starting to expand my thinking and all those other nice things.

> It is just fun because it is challenging, and I can make myself better.

> Well, I made an incomplete in US History, and that was the incredibly hardest class I've ever taken in my life. It's really, really hard, but for once I really find though it's hard, I'm enjoying it. Because you learn so much. And even if my grades aren't as high in that class as they are in my other classes, I'm still learning every bit as much and I'm starting to realize that that's what's really gonna count.

Students also called for more variety in the classroom when it came to teachers' instructional strategies, with a balance of student-reported suggestions such as lecturing, role-playing, using visuals, group-work, questioning skills, games, hands-on activities, and drawing on a sense of humor when teaching. Students articulated that even if they had a favorite type of activity, it would "get old" if the teachers did it too often.

If there was like a combination, like, I think the teacher should definitely have like a variety, like sometimes we could be taking notes, sometimes you should lecture, sometimes you should let us do worksheets out of the book.

She's [the teacher] kind of let up a little bit, but every day it would be two worksheets in class and them some book work. We'd come back the next day, review the homework, do two worksheets and then she'd assign us the homework. And that's how she teaches almost the whole year, every day.

I like when they put us in groups, but it gets kind of old if they do it too often.

Students' desires for more variety in the classroom stem from not wanting to feel bored. This relates to teachers being more enthusiastic and avoiding a monotone voice when teaching. These desires also seem to carry over into desires for more variety in the school day. For example, students told stories of being excited getting off the bus if there was some deviation to the "normal schedule", and reported that, in classrooms, it was often "hard to pay attention for the whole period".

It's like their tone of voice, like if they talk in like the same pitch the whole time, . . . and you just sit there and it is like hummmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm and it makes you want to go to sleep.

I have English first period. . .My teacher has a voice that's calm and makes you want to fall asleep. So, that's the reason why it's not good to have English first period.

Well, the majority of time , it's kind of oh, I don't want to be here [at school] unless something exciting is happening today or I am doing something different. Then it's kind of exciting because it's not the same old schedule.

I guess it was his voice and how he'd teach. And the funny stuff that he used to bring to school that he'd set on his desk, so that's how he'd get our attention and then go into the lesson.

**Theme 2: Standards of Learning Impact**

"SOL ride over everything. SOL rule the whole school" was a quote by one student that summarizes nearly all of the student opinions as related to the SOL. What is concerning about this finding is that more students in this sample were in the advanced diploma strand as opposed to the standard diploma. One might expect that students in the advanced diploma strand, more so than students

seeking a standard diploma, might have some refuge from classroom focus on the SOL given the nature their challenging classes, which traditionally go above and beyond the standards.

All students were familiar with the Virginia Standards of Learning, and only two students said that their presence has not changed their classes or the way their teachers teach. The only positive report from students related to the SOL is that passing the SOL frees them from taking traditional classroom final exams. Only one student thought the SOL were a "good thing" because "now teachers had something to go by instead of making up their own stuff." Almost unanimously, students did not like what the SOL were doing to their classes or their teachers. Sixty-eight comments emerged from students related to the SOL, and 72% were negative comments about changes in teachers and changes in the learning process. Of the remaining comments, 21% were moderate, and 1% were positive. Students disagreed about whether or not the SOL were increasing or decreasing the instructional pace, with more students reporting that they increased the instructional pace. From the quotes below, "rushed" is a common descriptor used by several different students.

> They have really rushed us. You know how I said I like to take my time to learn what we're doing? There's none of that. It's push, push, push all year long and no breaks or anything like that.
>
> I mean it's OK to test you at the end, but I think it makes teachers rush to get everything in.
>
> [It's] horrible. You can't learn at a certain pace. You have to keep going, and going, and going. Even if you don't learn it. So, we end up getting rushed to do work twice as fast and you don't learn as much.
>
> Since it [SOL] wasn't there when I was a freshman, I know that class seems to be more rushed. And the teachers are scared to not get right to the point.
>
> I used to get pretty good grades. But now it's kind of just boring stuff and we're moving so fast and it's like I never really learn it.

Some students, by contrast, felt that the SOL had decreased the instructional pace. These students felt that their teachers were "waiting" for students who did not understand a concept to "catch up".

> Well, it slows down like the process of, like in Math, it slows down everything from us learning more each and every day because we want to learn something every day but we had to catch up from like 2 weeks ago and it was hard.

Because the lessons are put on hold and we can't like carry on every day.

Related to student reports of an increase in the instructional pace, almost half of the students shared that with the SOL, their classes focused more on coverage over depth and facts over meaning. Students shared that the SOL only "touched on" concepts and narrowed the area of learning. Students also witnessed that teachers' teaching styles had changed. One student below felt that teachers are not really teaching at all, and other has noticed "legendary" teachers do away with their old, engaging teaching styles. A few student reports indicated that teachers made no attempt to differentiate instruction with the SOL.

> The SOL are just making one solid level for people to comprehend better and go to. And that just messes everything up for the people that can be more than that. Their potential is greater. But you can only teach to a certain level when it comes to SOL. And I think that kind of backfired on them and they're not realizing that yet. That's totally-it's screwing up everybody, really.

> The SOL, it touches on stuff, but it never actually digs into it. Whereas in school you're supposed to learn the whole thing whereas the SOL is touching on, you know, it's touching on the whole thing but it's just touching on it. Bits and pieces of it.

> I think it's narrowed the area of learning. Like you can't really go off and you have to discuss World War II, you can't really go into one specific area. You have to like cover the whole thing and sometimes I think it helps me learn and it's fun to talk about what's an interesting aspect of a certain area.

> And it affects the students because we've always heard, you know, old so and so, it's always the legendary teachers, the wonderful teachers and then you kind of got here and they can't really do that because they've got to rush through all this stuff and make sure they cover every single bit of it. I mean, they probably would have covered things before but not to great lengths as what the SOL wanted.

> I dislike the way the classes are run here because they don't actually teach. They don't really educate. They just teach essentials for the SOL. And I talked to a high [level] person here and he actually went over with me the chart, the essentials that they were supposed to teach. And we have to teach the essentials before we can actually educate, which I found out to be totally bogus. Because like a person, a student should not just know who Machiavelli is, but also all the literature. Because when you get to college, that's the stuff you're gonna learn.

Thirty-six percent of students articulated their feelings toward the high-stakes aspect of the SOL, and how the tests caused both teacher and student stress. Students did not feel it was fair for a student to be held back in their grade based on the results of one test.

> Yeah, it makes me feel like a failure if I don't do good.

> They're not really hard but it's a bad thing that you've got to take them, pass or fail. If you pass them you go to the next grade. If you don't you have to go to summer school. And that's no good.

> Basically, the SOL, that's all we go by in class. It's like, every two weeks is a different topic for SOL. And, well it's a whole school year for SOL. But I guess in a way, that's good so we will be able to pass it.

> I can't stand them. I'm not one for standardized tests. But some people, it's hard for some people to take standardized tests like that. So I don't really like how, you know, that one class that gets affected, I think it's with the class of 2004 or something, where if they don't pass the SOL then they don't pass, you know, the grade. So I think that's kind of hard, you know, that one test would hold somebody back, you know, they work for a whole year and they still get held back because of one test.

Of some concern in the data was the students' expressing confusion about the teachers' motivation for being a teacher. That is, because of the high-stakes aspect of the SOL, some students were not sure if teachers were pushing the SOL to keep their jobs or because they cared about student learning.

> Because the teachers, like when they're teaching something that you have to learn for SOL, they get upset when you don't listen or like if you happen to talk to somebody they'll get like real upset as to where before if they're just teaching something regular they wouldn't mind it so much because like I guess their job depends on them teaching those SOL or whatever.

> Yes, they made it known that it affect them, but if you don't get that certain percentile, I guess we lose our accreditation as a school. And they could lose their jobs. So I think in my sophomore or junior year they told us that. I thought they were just teaching us to push so they could keep their jobs, not whether we learned or not. I don't know.

Students also recounted that there is now more "seatwork/worksheet"-type instruction occurring with the emphasis on the SOL.

I mean, they're teaching SOL the whole year, but then before, like the week before they give you all these papers and like the stuff you haven't learned, you have to learn it like real fast. And that's not fun.

As to the SOL it's just you have a guideline. You have to stick with that. And it's kind of like that's kind of why some teachers are just sitting there with worksheets, or you know you have to take tests on an SOL in a month. It's kind of like frustrating.

We do practice worksheets and games. And that's pretty much it. And we just like go over it, to do notes and stuff like that.

## Theme 3:  Teacher and Staff Support

All students appreciated teacher and adult support, but reports were mixed about adult accessibility. Students bragged about administrators and teachers in their schools who did tangible things to make themselves accessible to students.  Some students complained that it depended on how busy teachers were, and that often it was very difficult to get in to see the counselor.

I mean, our administration is awesome at getting out to the students, being in the halls. Making sure everybody knows that they are there and you can talk to them.  All the teachers give you their e-mail address at home so you talk to them at night if you need them.  And, it's wonderful.

I think a lot of that comes down to how busy everyone is.  Whether you see it or not, everyone has something to do.  Earlier I was talking about counselors and it takes so long to get in to see your counselor.  And I've been waiting for 2 weeks to see mine and you take for granted sometimes how busy they are.  And as far as that, you got to play it how it goes.  If it's a particular semester, exams or the SOL testing, or if SATs are coming up & your teachers are sort of telling you about SATs, it just depends on what's going on, how busy everyone is.

When asked to describe the adults at their schools further, responses varied.  While most students could name one or two teachers who they knew cared about them, students were also perceptive and cognizant of differences among the faculty.  Students willingly volunteered examples of teachers who cared and who did not care.  The caring teachers were described, in the students' words, as "relating to us", "encouraging" and "helpful".  The most mentioned descriptor of a teacher who cares, however, was one that listens.  These teachers could read student moods, "cared about what grade you got", and offered appropriate guidance or direction.  Caring teachers listened to students' ideas about classroom rules or about classroom projects, letting them have some choice into their classroom projects.  These teachers also knew about students' lives outside of school, and often

attended extracurricular activities that the students were involved in. These teachers were never described as the "easy" teachers.

> The principal, he's always walking around, asks me how I'm doing. He always takes time. I mean if I see him he always speaks to me, asks me how I'm doing, how's my day going and stuff like that. Teachers, if I'm like down and they know it, they come up to me like "what's wrong", am I feeling bad, or something like that.

> They show it. You might see them in the hall way and they ask how you're doing, how was your last report card, is there anything you need. Or, maybe one day you're looking a little upset. They'll pull you to the side and ask you what's wrong, is there anything I can do. They just show a real concern for us students.

> Because they always talk to you, always ask you how you're doing, ask you if you're going to college, always willing to work with you, making you better at the stuff you're doing.

By contrast, students perceived teachers that did not care as those that did not try to connect with the students, did not thoroughly explain concepts, and those that did not care about what grade the student received.

> And then she'll [the teacher] make us take notes out of the book. And we'll get to school and I'll be sitting there, and I don't really understand the concept. And she's like, "Well, that's why I had you read the notes. If you don't understand, I don't feel like re-teaching it to you."

> And I think a lot of teachers here have-especially with SOL coming to play because SOL aggravate them so much. And they see how aggravated the students are that they just give up. And they don't-I don't know. Half the teachers I've encountered here don't care much about anything.

> And the teachers, they don't even care what kind of grade you get. They don't want to help you if you ask for it. My History teacher, I'll say, 'I need help' and he's like 'You don't need any help. All you have to do is pay attention in class.' And I do pay attention in class and the questions I ask, he's like, 'I already told you what the answer was.' No teacher in this school, except for one teacher that I like - no teacher in school cares about what you get.

An interesting finding was that similar replies came from students' when asking about what the teacher does that is *motivating*. That is, when asked the direct question, "What does the teacher do that motivates you?" several students' responses in the transcripts were coded *motivators: teachers*

*that care.* That is, teachers who are motivating relate to students, encourage students, are helpful, and listen. It seems that aside from appropriate teaching strategies, students are motivated to learn by teachers who care. Students clearly linked the way a teacher taught to how much that teacher cared for the students, and even to the grade the student received. Students reported, for example, that teachers who cared and who were motivating were ones that make you do more than just take notes or do worksheets and tried to make class interesting. The following student quotes demonstrate that immediately after or prior to discussion of teacher instruction, students comment on teacher caring or lack of caring.

> I know she cares about us because she pays attention to what we say and in that class we do a lot of exploring, thinking and creating. She is always there with ideas and suggestions. Same thing with my English teacher.

> He [the teacher] doesn't care. All he does is give us worksheets and we sit at our desk.

> And like I'll ask the question and they're like, "That has no relevance to the subject" when actually it does. And they just don't know the answer to it. They don't want to go in-depth of it. And that makes me mad. My Math teacher-she could care less about her students.

> She um, I can tell that she cares because she's always um, encouraging me to try really hard in her class encouraging me instead of getting a B to get an A.

> Because some teachers-they're, like I said, they're just like, "'Oh well. It's a job. I really don't care." But some people actually like push you to do better and make something out of yourself rather than just sitting there and falling asleep in class.

> I think a lot of the teachers here don't know how to connect with the students that they go through college and they learn how to teach, but they don't learn how to connect and teach at the same time. I think that's really important. It affects the grade you get.

Finally, the students who appear to be disengaged, most frequently cited issues related to adult support such as teachers not caring about whether students understand, adults being unfair or not listening.

> ...and I'll be sitting there and I'd be like Miss _____, I don't really understand the concept. And she's like, "Well that's why I had you read the notes. If you don't understand that, I don't feel like re-teaching it to you."

> There's nobody that's gonna help me. Calculus, no. And the teachers, they don't even care what kind of grade you get. They don't want to help you if you ask for it.

They don't - the adults here don't give the students the chance to be able to explain about how they feel about school. The adults want it their way. You do wrong, you get punished. If you do something good, they don't really care.

## Theme 4: Peer Relations

Most students pointed out the "clique" aspect of high school, but were able to accept it as both a universal phenomenon in high schools and a reality of human nature. While some groups did not get along, students generally felt that everyone at their school got along compared to other schools.

They get along pretty good. I mean, it doesn't matter what school you go to. There's always going to be groups and all like that. But, everyone gets along pretty good. Especially compared to other schools.

Fairly well. I mean there are the different groups and people clash. It is just like any other place. It is human nature. All people don't get along.

I understand that everybody doesn't get along with everybody and they feel better with people that they do get along with, like their own group of friends. So I understand that's how it is.

Again, students accounted that "most kids got along well at this school" or that they tolerated one another, but a handful offered examples of conflicts between groups that were problematic. There were mild racial tensions and conflicts between particular cliques.

They can tolerate each other, I mean, our school they can just tolerate each other. They could probably hate the person but they could still be nice to them.

Like the athletes and the kids that have, I guess you could say that are well off and have money or whatever. They tend to pick on the kids that, like if their parents aren't doing so well, like with their jobs or whatever, and all the kids, like kids that dress like I guess you call them Gothic, they dress like that in black clothes, and we don't have many here, like we don't have a lot like many other schools, but they tend to pick on those and then I don't know they can do it to where you know that they're picking on you but then they can do it to where you don't notice it, you know what I'm saying? Like they can act like they're being your friend but then behind your back they're talking about you and all this other stuff.

They stay in their race. . . And in my country there's none of that. You know, like my friends--they don't look like me. And then, and it never matters. I even forget how I look. You know, just when I meet someone that looks like me, I remember, "Oh." And here you have to remember all of the time like-some people are friendly to you, but people in your race are more friendly. So it's just kind of hard, like I never thought it would be like that.

Many students in this sample offered that they, themselves, were not the targets for getting picked on. By report of the students, peers who got picked on tended to be the students who were not in any of the groups or cliques. A few stories revealed both perceptions and facts that students who got picked on could potentially become behavior problems, or even become violent.

> I know with having a large commons and a small commons, some people label the small commons as the 'freak commons' or for the people who don't fit in. So, that kind of gets me mad sometimes. But, you sit where you want to with your friends and just have fun.

> There are a lot of people that get picked on . . . I don't feel picked on, but they are the ones that have been picked on and they might make it a whole lot worse in the future for everyone.

> She's [a friend] smart but she's a little on the freaky side. She keeps to herself and people just pick on her because she's quiet. She's not pretty, she's kind of heavy and she doesn't wear nice clothes. She's comfortable with who she is, though, and lately she was suspended from school because a person picked on her and she chased him around with a knife in Culinary Arts which is like cooking.

More than widespread popularity, it seemed that it was extremely important for these adolescents to have their "own small group of friends". It was a worst case scenario to be in a hall, a class, or a room where there was no one that you knew, or no one that was your friend. Friendships were such an important aspect of school life for these students that many said it was what they looked forward to about school the most. Students felt a strong sense of belonging when they had opportunities to see or to socialize with friends, such as at lunch or in between classes. For students who did not have many friends, these times of the day created much tension.

> I want to come to school. I like to come to school, the social part of meeting with my friends every day.

> I like to learn new things. Also it's more kind of friends, I get to see everyone because you know, in the summertime I don't see everyone but I'd like to and being at school you're kind of all here together and you can see everybody and that's nice. You know, I enjoy most of my classes and it's kind of fun, you know, it's usually just the student body that really keeps me coming.

> Lunch time is good because we get to talk to our friends, and we can sit wherever we want. We have a huge place to eat and a lot of places to sit, and meet different people. Usually most

of the time, during a whole year, we'll sit at one table. But sometimes if you want, you could switch and go sit with other friends and meet more people.

Everybody's in groups. I stand in a certain area of the commons with my boyfriend and his friends and you usually stick to your group.

Students felt that teachers could be more involved in trying to keep peer relations healthy and in trying to reduce students being picked on. One student wished that teachers would allow "less student talking and insults in class".

I think teachers are too loose with letting people just outright insult others. Right in front of them. I mean verbal and emotional abuse is the same as physical abuse. It just lasts longer.

## Theme 5: Extracurricular Activities

In response to a direct question, students described participation in extra-curricular activities as increasing their sense of belonging in the school. Several students conveyed that participation in extracurricular activities added to a sense of school spirit, keeping them busy and engaged. They felt like "a part of the school" and also part of a group.

I feel like I am a part of something and I'm actually contributing something and when we go to play other schools I'm showing that school how our school is kinda of like representing us.

Yeah, it gives me more school spirit. It makes me feel as if you know I am really part of the school and it's making a difference because you know being on a team you're representing that school and just leads into school spirit.

If you feel like you have something to do after school, it's really neat. You get to talk to people in the hall, like, 'Oh, is that meeting today?' Or, 'What are we doing next week?' It gives you a feeling of, I have people who are in the same club with me.

Yeah, it gives you, you know, because when you, it's kind of interesting, you know, as a wrestler being at the school and you're able to run around the school by yourself and actually just see this school by itself with no people in it and you know, it's almost like the school becomes a part of you when you always have to do stuff here. It's almost like a second home to an extent.

Their reports clearly highlight the relationship between peer relations and extracurricular activities. Most students agreed that extracurricular activities helped to increase relationships with other

students, and only a few felt excluded from particular clubs or activities, because they didn't "fit in". Students who were picked on in school, avoided involvement in after-school activities to escape begin picked on further.

> Extra curricular is just like icing on the cake because, you know, you get involved with the school, you make friends-just impacting relationships. That kind of ties in with the whole academic thing too.

> I don't play sports. One sport I actually do like but I never get to play it because I'm the one that gets picked on for many things because they're saying the baseball team really, the seniors this year that I used to be friends with, they think I'm gay and so they pick on me.

Some students specifically shared that involvement in extracurricular activities kept them out of trouble and occupied their time in a productive and meaningful way. Students purposefully sought out activities with peers of similar interests and personalities, offering a refuge from peer pressure traps.

> It's something to do with your time. Like if I wasn't doing this, I don't know what I'd be doing. I'd probably [be] driving around at the mall. I don't know, it occupies my time. And I think it's a good use of my time rather than just to be at home.

> I think it's important because you sit around and do drugs and everything, you should like do something with your life and get involved. You don't have to deal with drugs when you're busy. You get your mind kept on something else.

> Drugs, dating, sex, smoking, drinking, it's just all kinds of stuff going on. I think that's one of the reasons why I'm so active. It's kind of a refuge. By being active, I get to choose who I'm going to be around.

In this sample, fourteen of the thirty- three students mentioned that they worked after school, and a few said it was a barrier to participating in after-school activities. The time spent working varied from a few hours a week one day after school to 30 hours a week, including weekends working. These students wanted to work for the extra money, so they did not feel as though they were missing out too much. With the combination of keeping up with school work and the schedules of an after-school job, the extracurricular activity picture for these students was inevitably a small one. Some

students wished they could participate more, but because of the traditional placement of extracurricular activities immediately following school, this was not possible.

> A lot of schoolwork and working a part-time job after school [keeps me from being more involved in extracurricular activities].

> Yes, especially here. A lot of people work because they want the car and the cell phone and stuff like that so a lot of people have jobs, part-time jobs after school. A lot of my friends do and they still play sports and they still have a job. It's pretty amazing. I don't know how they handle it.

> Some kids feel the pressure that they have to have a job because their family, you know, they need them to have a job and school at the same time and that's kind of hard probably to do. But it's usually kind of workload type stuff. And that's probably changed because of SOL because you know, they have to get all that stuff done which puts a larger workload on the teachers and students.

> Unfortunately I go straight to school after work. Monday - Friday I have to be at work at 2:30. And I was participating in a play that we took out of town recently. And that was fun. It was for drama. The only bad part was because the rehearsals are always after school, I had to take off from my job. And I think it would be better, of course this is just me, if more things could be held at evening rather than directly after school or in the mornings, if there could be more groups like that. Or even on the weekends.

> The main thing about football is it was a privilege taken away in my house. That's one of the reasons why I'm not doing it now. I guess I couldn't do the schoolwork, too. They took it out and I just -eventually I was more interested in other stuff, like- I concentrated on where I worked and that gave me something to do after school.

**Theme 6: Student Pressures**

"The pressure is mostly fitting in". When asked about what pressures they face as a high school student, nearly all students mentioned popularity and peers, "fitting in", as a pressure in high school life. Costs of fitting in often meant dealing with peer pressure to do drugs or drink alcohol or to pick on other students. Specifically, about one fourth of the students felt that drugs and alcohol were pressures, and those pressures were linked to popularity and peer pressure.

> Sometimes, to me it makes me feel as though I don't belong. Because, like popularly for me has always been a problem. I used not to fit in that well. I've a little bit more friends now, but

it's kind of like, some of the groups-they don't accept you. Like, they remember you as like some child that was like not the prettiest little thing, or popular.

And then there's all the alcohol. Every time you have alcohol, marijuana. Every party you get to, there's marijuana, there's alcohol. In high school, there's drugs. You can get sucked in to the peer pressure.

You know, they might look a little abnormal, a little weird, but you know, they're kids. Sometimes we do crack jokes on them, but I think that's not a good thing to do. You know, the peer pressure sometimes does get in.

Um, there is the pressure to be popular and to have friends.

High school students are mainly pressured by their peers, student pressure, pressure to do things like drugs, alcohol. I mean there is a lot of pressure for me, but I think people would just have to learn how to like say no and overcome peer pressure.

The next greatest pressure was getting good grades and getting into a college. These pressures sometimes ran alongside pressures from parents, teachers, and the students themselves to do well.

I could be in honors but I chose not to be so I could have better grades, and not be pressured.

Grades are probably the biggest pressure. I don't know anything else that pressures me, really.

Passing, getting good grades, pleasing myself and my parents.

You have to start taking SAT's and hope you get a good score back and apply for different colleges. And just choosing what college you want to go to is a major pressure.

Only four students were concerned with passing a course, the SOL, and, ultimately, high school itself. A few students expressed frustration over trying to do well in school, yet, in spite of various efforts, continually failing. The high-stakes aspect (pass/fail) of the SOL was a top pressure for three students.

SOL. Pressured definitely. They always preach SOL's. It doesn't matter really who you are. You're kind of handled as a whole body.

> SOL [are a pressure]. Because it's pass or fail.

> I guess, I gotta have school to do anything. You gotta pass high school. My main concern now is passing high school. If I pass high school, there are other things I can do. Beginning of my life ends with school.

> I think a lot of times, I get frustrated because I get school work and I don't understand it. And I try my hardest. Like in Math. I'll try my hardest to like, I'll do everything I think-get a tutor, go online, read my book for five hours straight, do everything I can to try and learn it so I understand it. Sometimes it's so frustrating because you don't understand it. It's just kind of like, you put pressure on yourself to get it done because you don't want to got to school the next day and be like I don't have my homework. Because then, your grade will go down drastically. Like, with research papers and all. You try your hardest to get it right and you still get an F. It's like, really frustrating.

Workload was a problem for some of the students in this sample. Students felt like they had very busy schedules and several projects that were fragmented from each other. A few students recounted how they often have several papers due at the same time, whose topics seem unrelated. They simply felt as though there was not enough time to get all the work done. Some students sensed that school was getting harder, and in classes that were "boring", it was becoming even more difficult to be motivated to do the work.

> It's probably workload because we are busy as teenagers, you know, we're always doing something. So you know, if we have so many projects piled up in one, that's a lot of pressure and stress on us as students.

> Because sometimes, stress completely takes over and you've got so much work and so little time to do it. It's kind of like I don't feel like being in school. I used to love school. I'd go every single day, never miss a day unless I was sick. And if I would miss school, I was sick. So, but now it's kind of like I'm getting older and it's getting harder. It's getting more boring and I'm like, don't feel like being here.

> And a lot of classes you have so many projects and with all this writing across the curriculum, you have so many papers to write and all these teachers. It's like you learn your lessons and then there's always a day or a couple of days if it's an Even/Odd class where you're doing nothing but papers. It's just writing across the curriculum. You can come in and you write one, then the next day you turn it in and you're assigned another one.

Lastly, other pressures such as sex or smoking were also mentioned by students.

Sex is probably a big problem. It's a small, small city so there's not much to do. I mean, teen pregnancy. It's not too bad, I mean, it's kind of like wow, because you kind of recognize it more being small so you know, if there are 5 girls that are pregnant, it's kind of like, wow, it's a lot. Whereas that wouldn't be that big of a problem in a larger school. But you know, abortion, I know a lot of girls who have had abortions and stuff like that.

You know. Sex, things like that. Smoking.

## Theme 7: Overall School Climate

The findings of the above themes work together to create a positive school climate, but other aspects of school life emerged in the interviews that also relate to school climate. Students' reports reveal that school climate is positive for the most part, "and better than most" schools, but that sometimes other students, adults, and particular school and/or classroom policies and procedures worked against a positive school climate.

Students did mention feeling that school was rushed, and that time in between classes and at lunch could often be stressful. Many students expressed frustration over the limited space in their school, overcrowding, and large class sizes. It was compelling how most students wanted smaller classes.

> I'd make it [school] bigger and get more teachers. So that we wouldn't feel so cramped together.
>
> Some classes are a bit too big. I know a lot of the classes, we have trouble finding seats for all the students.
>
> It's crowded. That is the biggest thing. It's very, very crowded. It's noisy and it's rushed.

This is contrasted against reports of students who were fortunate to have small classes. Students not only felt like they were getting a better education, but they also felt more secure, comfortable, and generally supported by teachers.

> I feel that I'm getting a better education and it's, you know, even though we have such a small number of people in this school, I think it benefits us because the student/teacher ratio is, you know, there's less students for each teacher; therefore you get more benefit out of the teacher and the kids feel a sense of confidence being there. Less kids bugging them and you feel better. And it just, it adds to the comfortability that you get from being here.

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> Um, well, this is a small community and you kind of know all of the people in the school anyway so you kind of know them outside of school plus inside of school so, I mean, it's probably a lot different from the other counties and cities around here because you don't really know everybody but knowing everybody makes it a lot easier and I could probably go up and talk to most of the faculty about anything if I needed to.

An interesting finding is that all students described feeling safe in their school. More students appreciated that their systems had beefed up security in recent years, and felt safer as a result. All students were aware of various security measures in the school, such as resource officers or administrator visibility, and with the exception of a few students, they did not seem adversely affected by such measures.

> I feel it's safe because like we have the security guards, we have officers, like an officer here and then um, like I know that like a lot of the time the doors are locked and it just makes it feel like if there was an intruder they couldn't get in.

> I think we've gotten a lot safer in the past couple years than we used to be. I think I feel a lot more comfortable now than I did last year.

> But I always felt [secure]. We have a security officer here and our administration is always walking in the halls. And I never feel unsafe.

Only one student conveyed that these security measures were "not a healthy environment."

> It may not be the safest, but I don't see why the atmosphere would be allowed because without having all the metal detectors and the lame sphere doors or whatever makes me start feeling like a criminal at the school. And if you feel confined, then that's gonna be a problem all the time and . . I don't think that's a very healthy environment for people to learn.

Many students had ideas of what they would change about school. This part of the interview protocol offered the most variance with regard to student responses. Literally, responses varied almost from student to student and included such suggestions as stricter school discipline, inclusion policies, reducing cliques, and providing working technology.

> If they could get people that like cause the problems and maybe do something to them so they don't keep on causing problems. Cause it seems like the same people over and over again.

Well, I don't go to the cafeteria during lunchtime because it's like children. They holler, scream, they stand on the furniture, and then they don't really like listen, ... I don't even go down there, it's not even worth it. I like sit in the library. I don't go in the cafeteria at all when it's my lunchtime. I don't think I should have to go to the library on lunchtime, because of how other students act. I think that it is not fair to me because I should be able to go eat my lunch in the cafeteria. That part don't make me feel like I belong in the cafeteria.

I think they [students with special needs] should be in classes with the rest of the kids. I don't think they should have their own, I don't think they should be so off to the side because that's like discrimination. Because they're like, it would be like the same thing if they separated all of the athletes from the other kids. I guess, but I think they should be in the same classes as the rest of the kids because it would help them, I think. They'll get better with their people skills.

I wish everybody wasn't so cliquey. Because, you know, it would be a better way for everybody to know each other more.

I think if we had more computers in our schools then students could like have something to do. Me, personally, I love computers. I have a computer at home. When I get to school the computers are slow, half of them don't work. When they do work, everybody know that computer works so like everybody on that computer so I don't have a chance to get on, something like that.

Other students wished that their schools would offer more of a variety of classes, more sports programs, or various other extracurricular activities. Among the suggestions were the addition of a ROTC program and foreign languages other than French or Spanish. Four students expressed a desire for an addition or an improvement of a fine arts program.

Languages, I think there's. . . we only offer 3 languages, French, Spanish and Latin. And a lot of other schools offer more languages. I've read about culture. It opens up your mind to other cultures, there's a more diverse atmosphere in the school I think.

Yes, I would like a photography class during the day. Like during the actual school day. We only have photojournalism. I would also like a better drama department. We really don't have a good drama department. Basically arts. There is not much funding for arts.

Overall, students felt that they were getting "a pretty good" education at their schools, but they wished that learning would expand outside the walls of the school building. Again, students expressed a disdain for sitting at their desks and taking notes; they wished they could "get out and experience it." Along those same lines with regard to a dislike of notetaking, students wished that they could have more choice into their learning and engage in more reading of books.

I think maybe more exposure to the outside as in, see we used to, by increasing the respect, I think our administration would believe that we're capable of going out on field trips again too. You know, it's not a big deal, but like field trips to government agencies, maybe, welfare centers, too, to see how other people live.

Um, I think I'd probably make it so that you had more like I said more time to get out and experience things during the school day because that's just like my worst thing that I hate is the class that you sit and take notes and read and don't get to experience it.

SOL. SOL, SOL, SOL. I don't know, I feel really bad saying that because like the average student says that. But if they changed the SOL and taught education, we would do so much better on standardized testing. I feel...I mean, have you read *Hard Times* by Dickens?

Most students felt that teachers and other adults treated them fairly, but offered that they had witnessed some students being treated unfairly. Students believed that their peers who "were in trouble in the past" often were blamed for events based on this past record.

In most cases I think they are treated fairly. And I think in cases where we're not, if you want to change it, then you can. All you have to do is go through the proper ad-ins and be organized. And just do everything the proper way. And then if you have reason to complain, then you can change it.

There are some exceptions because some students who have caused trouble in the past are automatically deemed trouble makers. And they kind of don't get the second chances and the third chances they deserve.

Because like if you had a past record or whatever like in middle school if you got in trouble like at all, they would think that you're a slight trouble maker and if you got in trouble again, they would always, if you were anywhere that something bad happened or something against the rules or whatever, they pick you first because they think that you have a past. So they wouldn't like pick the kids that had never done anything or whatever.

Then you go to the principal, and, of course, they're not going to believe the kids. They don't like the kids. I don't mean they don't like 'em, but they never listen and they never believe what the kid has to say. They all believe what the adult has to say.

Students' also perceived that there was favoritism for certain students or certain groups on the part of teachers and/or administrators.

The whole like desegregation issue. So a lot of, you know, we kind of have a small amount of minorities here and it's kind of, you know, they don't get treated as harshly or they don't get caught as often as like the other people here. You know, they kind of bend the rules sometimes for the minorities and I don't think that's fair. I mean, everybody should be treated equally.

But I see some of the minorities, they'll walk through the halls you know, with their CD player or they're in the cafeteria with a CD player and they're dancing and listening to it and they don't get in trouble. But as soon as one of the popular guys or whoever does that, they get in trouble and get sent down to the office.

But sometimes when someone say there are kids that play sports or are in some school activity and they do something wrong they tend to get punished less severely than the ones that do not do anything. And I don't know why. It just sort of happens because they can't get in trouble, because then they won't be able to play their sport anymore. I don't think it is intentional; it just happens.

**Summary of Results**

The themes identified in this study suggest that high school students in the local schools have a generally positive view of their education. Approximately 85% of the students appear to be engaged in school and feel as though they belong. These students tell us that their day begins comfortably with opportunities to meet with friends, catch up on homework, etc. They generally like their classes, reporting that their best classes were "challenging," utilized debate and discussion, "hands-on" activities, curriculum integration, and group work. They disliked unauthentic activities such as worksheets and notetaking. Students were motivated by enthusiastic teachers who could relate to students, and offered variety in their teaching. Conversely, students were cognizant of how current trends in the State Standards of Learning (SOL) have caused their classes and teachers to move away from authentic work and their earlier teaching styles. Findings revealed that students thought the SOL caused teachers to emphasize facts without meaning, to focus on coverage over depth, to increase seatwork and worksheets, and to reduce differentiation of instruction.

As their day progressed, they looked forward to the non-instructional times between classes and at lunch to catch up with friends again, gain some "down time" and relax. This was sometimes difficult to accomplish since the halls and lunch rooms are often crowded, and the short time allocated to get from one place to another or to buy lunch and eat made everything seem rushed. The students report

that groups in the school generally get along, although individual students sometimes feel picked on. Nevertheless, having and seeing friends throughout the day were what many students looked forward to the most. Participating in extracurricular activities was another good time to touch base with friends, and helped them feel a part of the school. While most students reported having ample opportunities to participate, about 42% of the participants reported that working after school limited their participation.

Most students described a positive school climate and felt that most adults were caring, fair, and listened. Most of the students could identify at least one adult in the school that cared about them. However, they also reported that adults in the school often seemed busy, and it was sometimes difficult to get in to see their counselor. An interesting finding in this study is that all 33 students felt safe at their school. Comments included "this school is very safe", and "this school is not like other schools". Students were aware of security measures in their school, such as the presence of a security officer, yet they explained that they were not being adversely affected by it.

While students felt pressures, they appeared to be typical adolescent concerns: "fitting in," getting good grades, and getting into college. Only about 25% mentioned feeling pressure to use drugs or alcohol.
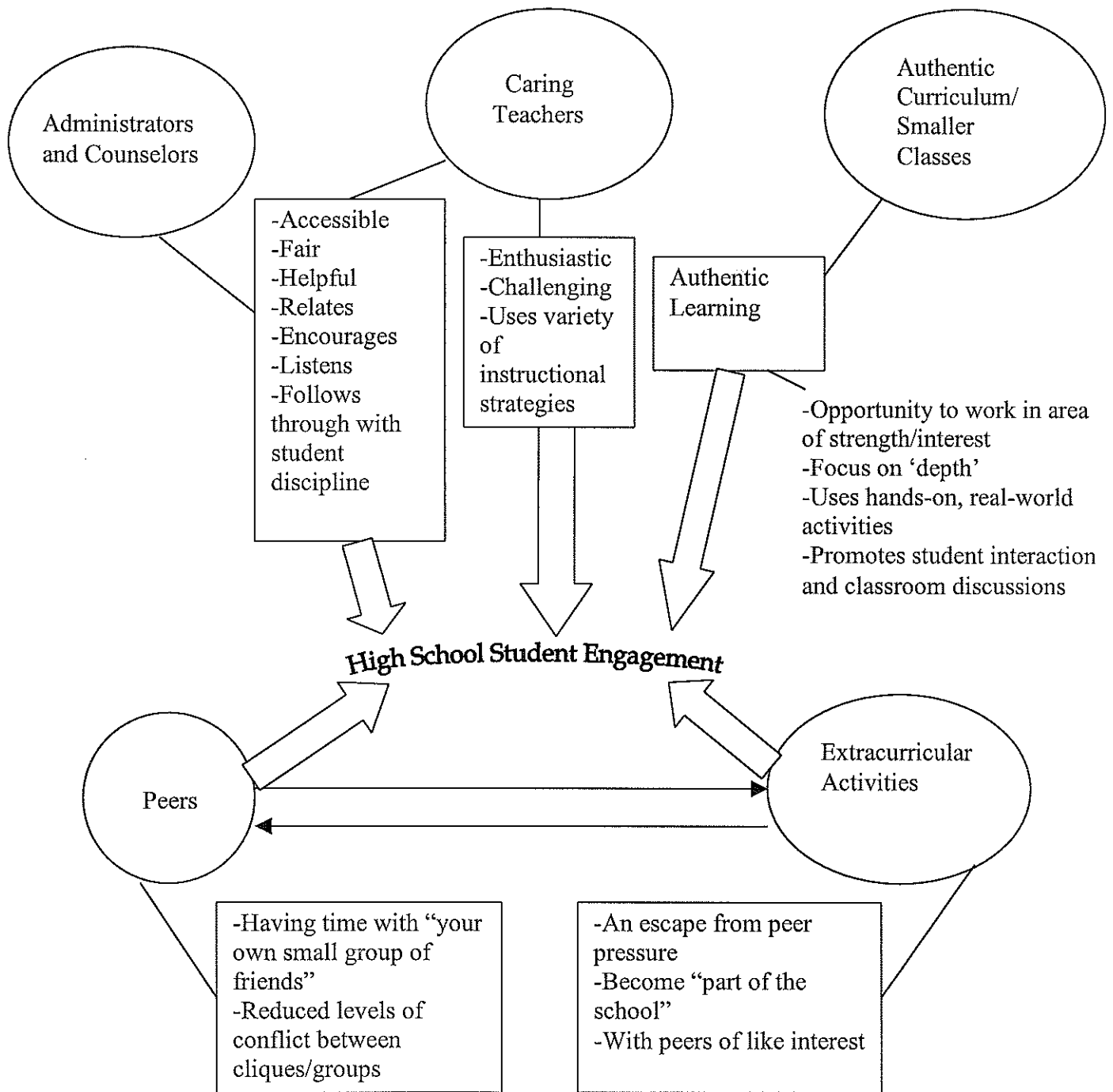
Perspectives and characteristics of students with lower levels of engagement (15% of the sample) varied. Four students complained that "their voices were not heard", and 3 students perceived that school was unfair. Three students described school as boring and irrelevant, with classes being perceived as disconnected from "real life". Two students felt that there was a lack of teacher support, and that teachers had a "sink or swim" mentality of student learning. Two students expressed a dislike for the peer culture in the school, offering examples of getting "picked on" and of not feeling welcome in the school. Finally, two students expressed difficulties with academics.

While the 33 students offered different perspectives of what contributes to their belonging and engagement in school, the themes discussed in this report were evident across all students, and can be represented visually. Using the themes and codes from this study, as well as the language of the

students, Figure 4 models how those factors internal to the school work to add to students' levels of engagement in high school.

The interrelatedness of the themes must be underscored. For example, students often cited best classes as those in which the teachers were caring and made personal connections with them. Also, in this sample, school climate was generally positive and related to student fulfillment in classes and the degree to which students got along with one another and with teachers. Research finds that adolescents describe the quality of their friendships as the most memorable aspect of the high school experience (Collinson & Hoffman, 1998). For many students in this sample, friendships were made through participation in extracurricular activities.

**Administrators and Counselors**

**Caring Teachers**

**Authentic Curriculum/ Smaller Classes**

-Accessible
-Fair
-Helpful
-Relates
-Encourages
-Listens
-Follows through with student discipline

-Enthusiastic
-Challenging
-Uses variety of instructional strategies

Authentic Learning

-Opportunity to work in area of strength/interest
-Focus on 'depth'
-Uses hands-on, real-world activities
-Promotes student interaction and classroom discussions

**High School Student Engagement**

**Peers**

**Extracurricular Activities**

-Having time with "your own small group of friends"
-Reduced levels of conflict between cliques/groups

-An escape from peer pressure
-Become "part of the school"
-With peers of like interest

**Figure 4.  School Climate (Internal) Factors Affecting High School Student Engagement**

**IMPLICATIONS**

*Research Question 1: What aspects in the instructional program contribute to high school students'*
*sense of engagement in school?*

**Summary of Findings:** The students told us that the instructional program influences their

academic engagement through the teaching techniques and motivational techniques chosen by

individual instructors; the ways in which teachers are implementing the SOL; and the relationship

that teachers establish with their students.

The high school students in this sample had a clear preference for the sort of instructional activities

that Marks (2000) described as authentic: debate, discussion, labs and other hands-on activities.

While no one particular technique was mentioned by a majority of students, a number did mention

that variety was important. Students frequently expressed a dislike of "unauthentic" activities such as

worksheets or notetaking. They also commented that these activities were boring and not

motivating. Running parallel to such reports, however, is that students also stated that teachers were

doing more "seatwork/worksheet" teaching as a result of the Standards of Learning, and had more of

a focus on facts than meaning. Often they were rushed to learn the SOL only because they were on

the test, rather than worthwhile things to know in their own right.

Students perceived caring teachers as those that offered challenge, help, and a listening ear. These

teacher characteristics, as well as teacher enthusiasm, worked to motivate students.

**Implications:** Our findings fit what Marks (2000) defined authentic instructional work, that which is

"cognitively challenging and connected to the world beyond the classroom." It includes asking

students to solve new problems, answer interesting questions, dig deeply into a topic, apply learning

to situations outside of school, and engage in discussion. These were the sort of techniques

mentioned by many of our students. Marks (2000) research finds that these authentic activities bring

about more academic engagement. There is a concern, however, that the benefits of authentic work

may be lost because of the ways in which the SOL are implemented. When the focus of instruction is

on learning facts to pass the test, this can lead to what Wehlage (1989) referred to in his model as

"obsession with coverage," a practice that keeps students from seeing the intrinsic rewards of learning.

Some students in this study questioned whether or not the information being learned was really "sticking" with them, and many students called for more active, experiential learning, both within and outside the walls of the school building. Students also wanted to know how what they learned would help them in the real world, hinting that the current curriculum lacked purpose and relevance. When students "rush" through learning, they have not time to check understanding or to transfer learning to new contexts. Even if test scores rise, there is not always independent evidence of increased student learning. A recent study by Kentucky's Office of Educational Accountability suggests that test-score gains in that state are a function of students' increasing skills as test takers rather than evidence of increased learning (Hambleton et al., 1995).

This study reveals that, particularly in the classroom, there is an increased risk of student disengagement because of how the SOL are implemented. In fact, schools may be moving back to the problems in the mid-1980s when researchers presented a troubling picture of the organization and culture of comprehensive high schools (Cusick, 1983; Goodlad, 1984; Oakes, 1985; Powell, Farrar, & Cohen, 1985; Sedlack, Wheeler, Pullin, & Cusick, 1986; Sizer, 1984). The studies findings' resemble reports of students in this study, that is, dispirited teachers and their students "putting in their time", while negotiating a perceived meaningless curriculum. Studies in the mid -80s portrayed instruction as following the transmission model and inducing passivity and boredom among students, a portrayal reemerging from the students in this study. Consistent with the study conducted by York-Barr et al. (1996), these students wanted a curriculum relevant to current and future life. But, if students fail to see connections between academic knowledge and their current and future lives, there may be less reason to engage.

Marks (2000) suggests that to promote student engagement it may be necessary to go beyond generalized restructuring of academic environments, focus on the intellectual substance and quality of instruction. If the quality of instruction accounts for almost fifty percent of the variation in students'

sense of belonging (as found in the Leithwood et al. study (1996)), taking into account student perceptions of how instructional time is used is essential.

Other factors that were mentioned by students, such as having teachers who show interest in and concern for student learning reflect a desire for social support for learning. According to Marks (2000), this is a school environment in which respect for the learner and encouragement of learning are the norm. Marks found that student engagement was enhanced by a school environment that was respectful, fair, safe, and had positive communication. In fact, an interesting finding of our study was that students tended to link teacher caring with the way that teachers taught. Immediately after reporting that one teacher handed out worksheets and sat at her desk, one student replied, "That teacher doesn't care about us." Students were motivated by teachers who cared about their learning and who modeled motivation and enthusiasm. They introduced topics in an interesting and challenging way, use varied teaching strategies, and promote student involvement by participation in selecting learning activities. These findings are also very similar to Cothran & Ennis' (2000) study which found that engaging teachers did not talk too much, allowed students to be involved actively in a learning task, permitted students opportunities to work together, and were enthusiastic about the subject matter.

*Research Question 2: What aspects during non-instructional time (before, between, and after classes, at lunch) contribute to high school students' sense of engagement in school?*

**Summary of Findings:** Responses related to non-instructional time did not in and of themselves offer much information regarding students' levels of engagement in school. The students described non-instructional time as crowded, rushed and noisy. Students' reports also stressed that non-instructional time is important as an opportunity to socialize. In many cases it was the part of the day they most anticipated. The findings were consistent with existing research suggesting that there are few opportunities for student interaction during the school day (Phelps, 1990; Hargreaves et al., 1996).

**Implications:**

As observed by Wentzel (1998), students need opportunities to interact with one another. When their social goals are met, students' levels of engagement are likely to increase. We cannot underestimate the importance of opportunities to be with friends in school. Collinson and Hoffman (1998) describe teen friendships as their most memorable high school experience, and adolescent psychology has long held that peer relationships are important. Conversely, being rejected by peers has been related to low levels of interest in school (Wentzel & Asher, 1995). Teachers and staff should be aware that for students who are rejected or do not "fit in", non–instructional time provides a looser environment for students to be picked on by peers.

School environments that offer some time for students to talk with and support one another can help increase students' sense of belonging and consequently engagement. Equally important is creating a climate of acceptance and tolerance to minimize the teasing, etc.

*Research Question 3: What aspects in extracurricular experiences contribute to high school students' sense of engagement in school?*

**Summary of Findings:** In this sample, students, for the most part, are as involved as they want to be with activities. Many students also worked part-time after school instead of opting for additional after-school activities. Most students mentioned directly that their participation in extracurricular activities helped increase feelings of belonging, specifically because they met more people of like interest and "felt like a part of the school". What was more important is the friendships that were created within those extracurriculars that seemed to have more of an impact on feelings of belonging.

**Implications:** The fact that high school students are working more and more lends support for a reconceptualization of the relationship between student belonging and extracurricular activities. That is, what is the right amount of extracurricular activities to take on in order for a student to feel a part of the school? The reports of these students seem to suggest that it is possible to still work and feel engaged in school, particularly if students' enjoy their jobs and can feel competent in them. Since participation in after-school activities works to improve peer relations (Finn, 1989), adults in the

school should still encourage participation in activities to some degree. Consistent with other research (McMillan & Reed, 1993), students who are involved in extracurricular activities perceive that such involvement "keeps them out of trouble". Creating times for clubs to meet during the school day may be important for students who work to benefit from the extracurricular activities.

*Research Question 4: How does school climate (rules, administrators, etc.) contribute to the high school students' sense of engagement in school?*

**Summary of Findings:** School climate appears relatively positive, with most students reporting a positive school experience. Students were pressured by a myriad of things, including peer relationships, parents, and keeping up with schedules and grades, but the pressure did not appear to be overwhelming. Students felt that enough of the staff-- teachers, administrators, and counselors-- were caring, fair, and listened. Teachers and staff showed their care and concern by asking about students' lives and learning. They showed a willingness to help. All students also reported feeling safe at their school. An interesting phenomenon is that many students from different school divisions said their school was "good compared to other schools". This is similar to polls that have found that parents rate their schools better than other schools. Lastly, students got along "pretty well" at their schools.

**Implications:** The findings on school climate gave a reassuring picture of the schools as places that the students felt good about attending. The measures that the schools have taken to ensure student safety appear to be working well. In addition, students could usually identify at least one person who cared about them, and generally felt that the staff listened to them and was fair. The schools seem to be working for most students. Many adults, including teachers, administrators, and counselors, by being fair, caring and accessible, can create a climate where students are more likely to get along and where students have authentic curriculum and classwork.

There is a minority, however, who don't perceive the climate as a positive one. They feel as if they do not belong at the school and appear to be disengaged. These students have not been reached by the measures already taken. These students don't all fit into one description. Some have academic difficulties, some feel that they do not have friends, others feel that the adults at the school do not

care or are unfair. These students and others like them need to be identified and dealt with as individuals rather than as a homogeneous group.

Changing the school climate is so often clouded by structural or resource limitations, that the challenge is even greater. For example, even if teachers acknowledge the role of trying to engage students, they may not have the skills nor be given the time to do this. Even if teachers are talented and idealistic, they may not be able to sustain the effort to serve their students under certain restrictive structural and systematic conditions in many urban school systems. The limited resources and mandated curriculum may create conditions that subvert the teacher's ability to meet their students' needs.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

There is no one set prescription, recipe, or program that will work to engage all students; the varied responses in this study suggest that student levels of engagement are affected to various degrees by various school factors for individual students. Indeed, the concept is a complex one. Instead of thinking of students as being "disengaged" or "engaged", it is advisable to think about the concept in terms of *levels* of student engagement. The following are recommendations that can be taken from this study for implementation in the schools.

**Table 2. Recommendations**

| Insights | Implications |
|---|---|
| 1. Students told us that they feel safe in their schools with security measures. | Continuing safety measures and enhancing the ways in which resource officers are integrated with the student body can add to students' sense of belonging. |
| 2. Students told us that there is a focus on coverage over depth with the SOL. | Providing support for teachers to maintain a high quality of instruction with the SOL, not just content coverage, can increase student engagement. |

| | |
|---|---|
| 3. Students told us that teachers, administrators and counselors are often too busy. | Considering ways to free up adults to meet with students is essential to student engagement. |
| 4. Students told us those characteristics that differentiated between teachers who care and teachers who do not care. | Making teachers aware that "caring" is not about being students' friends, or a "bleeding heart", but rather a teacher who provides authentic learning experiences and interest in students. |
| 5. Students offered that they wanted more time to interact with their peers. | Considering places and opportunities for students to be with peers is critical to students' sense of belonging. |
| 6. Students told us that non-instructional time was noisy and rushed. | Addressing student concerns of physical surroundings can be important. |
| 7. Students told us that interpersonal relationships with teachers, other adults in the school, and students, are important to their sense of belonging. | Creating a culture of acceptance for all students and for each student as an individual is important. |
| 8. A minority of students offered comments revealing a dissatisfaction with or disconnectedness from teachers, peers, and schoolwork. | Striving to understand that a minority of students require specialized help, such as instructional adjustments or finding a caring adult at the school, can work to increase students' levels of engagement. |

APPENDIX A

Interview Protocol

# Interview Protocol

Introductions

Start with small talk.

Hi _____ Thanks for coming. I've invited you here because I want to know more about what it's like to go to school here. The superintendents in the area all got together and decided that they needed to learn more about what can be done to make high schools better places for students. So myself, and some others, are interviewing students like yourself from this school, as well as schools in the other counties to get your advice. Before we start, did you have a chance to talk with your parents or guardian about this study? OK, that's fine. I need to have you read this form, which tells you about what we're going to do today. GIVE STUDENT ASSENT FORM.

**When student is finished reading, ask:**

   **What more would you like to know?**

   **What are your concerns? Is tape recording OK with you?**

   **Do you understand that we are doing everything possible to keep what you say to us confidential? You also need to remember that to keep your input confidential, you shouldn't talk to your friends about what you said here or it could get spread over the school.**

   **Are you ready to sign? OK. Here's a copy for you, and copy of the form your folks signed** (Student should sign both copies---one for us, one for him/her). If not, let them go back to class. If the student does not seem to understand the study or consent documents, send him or her back to class.

Ok, let's get started. Have you decided on a name you'd like to be called during the interview?
Ok, Let's begin. (Turn on tape recorder.) Say: **This in an interview with a student from school #_____. He/she has asked to be called _____ through out the interview. He/she has given permission to tape this interview.**

**Let's begin by walking through your day. As we talk, I want you to be careful not to mention particular names of people or even the name of your school.**

1. **Tell me what it's like when you first get to school in the morning?**

   - What do you do?

   - What are the other students doing?

   - Describe for me in a few sentences how you feel about that?

   - Describe how it does or doesn't make you feel like you belong at school?

2. **Let's talk about school from an academic perspective.**

   ❖ **What do you like about your classes?**

   - Why do you like -----------?

   - What teaching strategies do you particularly like?

   - What does the teacher do that motivates you?

   ❖ **Describe for me, as carefully as you can, how you feel about your education here.**

   - Are you familiar with the State Standards of Learning (SOL)?

   - How do you think SOL have affected your classes?

**3. What are the adults at school like?**

- Are there adults at the school that you feel you can talk to?

- Who here cares about you? How do you know?

- Do the adults in the school listen to you? How do you know?

- Do you think the students are treated fairly or unfairly here? Why do you think so?

**4. Let's shift gears a little.**

- **How do students get along here?**

- **What's it like between classes?**

  - How do you feel about that?

  - Does it make you feel like you belong in school?

- **How about at lunch time? What's that like?**

  - How do you feel about that?

  - Does it make you feel like you belong in school? Why

- **What about after school? What kinds of activities do you do throughout the week?**

  - Are you involved in things at school, outside of required things?

    - What are they?

    - Do these extra school activities make you feel like you belong at school? Why do you say that?

  - **Would you like to be involved in more school activities?**

- Are there things that prevent you from being more involved than you would like? What are they?

- Are there other things you'd like to see offered?

**I'd like to ask just a few more questions.**

**5. What keeps you coming to school?**

**6. What are the pressures facing you as a high school student?**

**7. How safe do you think your school is?**

- **What makes you feel safe (or unsafe) here?**

**8. What would you change about school if you could?**

**9. Finally, are you a sophomore, junior or senior?**

Great! That's it. Do you have any questions for me? You may go back to class, and remember to keep what you have said here confidential, you shouldn't tell other people what you told me.

APPENDIX B

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