

A young boy with dark hair, wearing a white t-shirt and a dark backpack, is in the foreground, looking up and to the right. In the background, a man and a woman are walking down a staircase. The man is wearing a teal t-shirt and light-colored pants, and the woman is wearing a blue top and blue pants. The staircase has a red handrail. The scene is brightly lit, suggesting an indoor setting like a school or office building.

**A Voice From the**

# Middle

Middle level students care about their education and their future.

**W**hatever were they thinking?" Anyone who has worked with middle level students for any length of time has certainly had that thought pass through his or her mind too many times to count. And although middle level educators may puzzle at the complex, confusing, and often contradictory thought process of young adolescents, they can learn a great deal about what motivates their actions by simply asking them and, more important, by taking time to listen to their responses.

NASSP, Phi Delta Kappa International, and the Lumina Foundation for Education recently joined together to do that very thing when they commissioned A Voice From the Middle. Working with Harris Interactive, this online survey was taken by more than 1,800 middle level students to determine what current young adolescents are thinking about their teachers, their schools, their fellow students, and their plans for the future. School leaders with an eye on school improvement should take note of the results of this survey because of the valuable insights that can be drawn from the students' responses.

By Patti Kinney

## Caring Teachers Are Key

Middle level educators have long recognized the impact that caring, supportive relationships have on the academic success of their students, so it should come as no surprise that young adolescents also see the importance of this connection. Eighty-four percent of the students surveyed felt that it was important that their teachers "liked them," and nearly everyone indicated that they had had at least one teacher who "really helped" them during their school career. Students went on to define helpful teachers as ones who gave clear explanations, were friendly and caring, listened, and provided them with extra help. In the words of one respondent, these teachers "related to kids well, [were] not superior or demanding. They tried to see things from my perspective, and help me understand, not just copy what is expected to [be] learned. They had an interest in ME, not the grade."

Although it is encouraging that such a high percentage of students have had at least one caring teacher, it is disturbing that nearly three-fourths of the respondents only recall between one and five teachers who have been very helpful to them. The academic achievement of middle level students cannot be pursued at the expense of a nurturing environment. Teachers must not only be highly competent in their subject matter but also be equally knowledgeable about the characteristics of young adolescents and how they can best be taught. Professional development must likewise be designed to help teachers maintain high expectations in a supportive, caring manner. As James Comer, who runs the School Development Program at Yale University, has said, "No significant learning occurs without a significant relationship."

## They Care About Their Education

The media often characterizes middle level students as self-centered, hormone-driven, and thoughtless—and yes, they can be. But they can also be concerned, caring, and compassionate, and the results of the poll indicate that they do care about their grades, their school, and their future. Of the students surveyed, nearly all of them felt that getting good grades was important to them, and regardless of the opinions one might hear expressed at report card time, 80% admit

that they are the ones responsible for the grades they receive. A large majority gave their school a favorable mark for being interested in their success: more than 90% gave their school an overall grade of C or higher. Middle level students are also concerned about their success in high school. More than 90% feel that the work will be difficult, yet nearly 9 in 10 feel prepared to succeed, and only 7% feel there is a chance they will drop out before graduation.

It is important not to sell young adolescents short by assuming that they really are not interested in doing well in school. But middle level students also indulge in a bit of magical thinking: although statistics for a national drop-out rate are hard to pin down, it is certainly larger than the small percentage of students who predict that there is a chance that they might drop out of high school. Schools must capitalize on students' belief in their own success and do everything possible to ensure it.

Starting points include establishing intervention programs to ensure that all students are prepared for challenging high school courses, giving middle level students and their parents the information needed for high school success, and implementing quality transition programs to ease the move from the middle level to high school.

### They Look to Their Future

Another insight middle level educators can gain from this survey is the young adolescent's perception of his or her educational plans beyond high school. Here again, optimism abounds. Ninety-two percent believe they probably or definitely will attend college, well beyond the estimate from Bureau of Labor Statistics that two-thirds of high school graduates begin college directly after high school.

Unsurprisingly, those who see college in their future are more likely to have parents with a college degree, be from urban or suburban schools, and feel their school is doing a good job giving them a chance to learn. Of those who do not see college in their future, the primary reason given is lack of money. The poll also reveals that most students do not feel that they have the information needed to choose high school courses that will prepare them to attend college.

Schools must take full advantage of students' belief that college is in their future and implement programs that inform students about the high school courses they need for college. High schools and middle level schools must collaborate to ensure a seamless transition between grade levels and schools. Partnerships with local postsecondary institutions can give students an early exposure to college life. The Lumina Foundation, one of the sponsors of this poll, also cosponsors the KnowHow2Go campaign (www

.knowhow2go.org), a program designed to help students attend college.

### They Want to Be Heard

One more important lesson from this survey is that young adolescents want to be heard by their school community. More than 90% of students feel that being given a choice in their classes is important to them, yet 4 out of 10 say that their school never or rarely includes their ideas and opinions in decisions that will affect them in the classroom. And it should come as no surprise that those who felt that their voice is being heard gave their school a much higher overall grade. Students rank the importance of attending a school that gives them a chance to speak their mind second only to a safe and orderly environment. Middle level leaders will do well to examine how their schools give their students a voice in their education.

It is also encouraging to note how strongly the student responses validate the foundations of middle level philosophy described in *Breaking Ranks in the Middle* (NASSP), *Turning Points 2000* (College Press), *This We Believe: Successful Schools for Young Adolescents* (National Middle School Association), and the Schools to Watch criteria (National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform). For example, *Breaking Ranks in the Middle* encourages schools to implement programs that personalize learning, improve the quality of interactions between students and teachers, prepare students for challenging academic work, provide smooth transitions between the middle level and high school, and involve students in the decision making process—all of which are themes that run through the students' responses. School leaders using these criteria as a basis for school improvement are clearly on the right track.

The entire version of *A Voice From the Middle* can be found at [www.principals.org](http://www.principals.org) and should be carefully examined by all those engaged in middle level education; the students' answers should spark valuable discussion among staff members. It is important to remember that this was a national poll conducted using accepted sampling methods and that where necessary, sex, grade level, race and ethnicity, parents' highest level of education, geographic region, and urbanicity were weighted to bring them into line with their actual proportions in the country's overall population. Do the results of the survey mirror your school? Maybe, maybe not. But there's only one way to find out—give your students a voice and ask them what they think. **PL**

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