



Do Schools Challenge Our Students?

What Student Surveys Tell Us About the State of Education in the United States

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Introduction and summary

You might think that the nation's teenagers are drowning in schoolwork. Images of sullen students buried in textbooks often grace the covers of popular parenting magazines, while well-heeled suburban teenagers often complain they have to work the hours of a corporate lawyer in order to finish their school projects and homework assignments. But when we recently examined a federal survey of students in elementary and high schools around the country, we found the opposite: Many students are not being challenged in school.

Consider, for instance, that 37 percent of fourth-graders say that their math work is too easy. More than a third of high-school seniors report that they hardly ever write about what they read in class. In a competitive global economy where the mastery of science is increasingly crucial, 72 percent of eighth-grade science students say they aren't being taught engineering and technology, according to our analysis of a federal database.

These findings come at a key time. Researchers increasingly believe that student surveys can provide important insights into a teacher's effectiveness. When the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation released findings from their Measures of Effective Teaching (MET) Project in 2011, they found that student feedback was a far better predictor of a teacher's performance than more traditional indicators of success such as whether a teacher had a master's degree or not. The mounting evidence on the importance of student surveys has also been shaping policy at the state and local level, and a variety of groups dedicated to the improvement of teaching—such as the New Teacher Project, a nonprofit that works to advance policies and practices to ensure effective teaching in every classroom—have been incorporating student surveys into their teacher evaluation and certification process.¹

Given the significance of this growing body of research on student surveys, we examined one of the richest sources of national student survey data and conducted an analysis of the background surveys of the National Assessment of Educational Progress.² Known as the Nation's Report Card, these assessments are

administered every two years by the National Center for Education Statistics. We looked specifically at the student questionnaire, which collects student-reported information on demographics and classroom experiences.

In reviewing the data, we examined a number of issues that track current debates over education policy and research. Given the recent debates over academic standards, for instance, we looked closely at issues of rigor and student expectations. Do students think that they are being challenged enough? Do teachers engage students in deep learning opportunities? We were also interested in issues of access since students provide an important, classroom-eye view of the resources that are available to them. Are all students being given access to the types of learning opportunities that they need to be prepared for college and the modern workplace? Are those resources distributed fairly among different types of students and schools?

Among our findings:

- **Many schools are not challenging students and large percentages of students report that their school work is “too easy.”**³ If students are going to succeed in the competitive global economy, they need to be exposed to a rigorous curriculum. But many students believe their class work is too easy. Twenty-nine percent of eighth-grade math students nationwide, for instance, report that their math work is often or always too easy.⁴ In some states like Virginia, nearly a third of middle-school students reported their work was often or always too easy.

This finding was consistent across grades and subject matter. We found that 51 percent of eighth-grade civics students and 57 percent of eighth-grade history students report that their work is often or always too easy. Elementary school students also revealed that they aren’t being challenged by their math work—37 percent of fourth-grade students reported that their math work is often or always too easy. Among high school students, 21 percent of 12th-graders said their math work was often or always too easy, while 56 percent and 55 percent respectively found their civics and history work often or always too easy.

- **Many students are not engaged in rigorous learning activities.** Almost a third of eighth-grade students report reading fewer than five pages a day either in school or for homework. That’s below what many experts recommend for students in middle school.⁵ Eighth-grade students across the country also report that they rarely write lengthy answers to reading questions on tests: approximately one-third of students write long answers on reading tests twice per year or less.

The issues are similar at the high school-level. Thirty-nine percent of 12th-grade students, for example, say that they hardly ever or only once or twice a month write about what they read in class. Nearly one-third said they write long answers on reading tests two times a year or less. Moreover, almost one-third of 12th-grade reading students say they rarely identify main themes of a passage when reading, and almost 20 percent said they never or hardly ever summarize a passage.

Note, however, that these data do not measure the quality of the work that students are performing in class—and the quality of the work can make a big difference in how much students learn. Students might be reading just a few, very rigorous pages every day, for instance. But given overall low reading scores—and the degree to which more reading promotes more learning—we believe these results should be cause for alarm.

- **Students don't have access to key science and technology learning opportunities.** For today's students, being prepared for college and the modern workforce means having access to high-quality curriculum materials in critical subject areas like math and science. But our analysis found that most teenagers say their schools don't provide important learning opportunities in science and technology. For instance, 72 percent of eighth-grade science students say they are not taught about engineering and technology.
- **Too many students don't understand their teacher's questions and report that they are not learning during class.** Nationwide, less than two-thirds of middle-school math students report that they feel like they are always or almost always learning in math class. Similarly, just under 50 percent of 12th-grade math students said they feel like they are always or almost always learning in their math class.

Students also often report difficulty understanding their teacher's questions. Twenty-five percent of middle school math students report that they sometimes or hardly ever understand what their teacher asks. Thirty-six percent of 12th-graders report they sometimes or hardly ever clearly understand what their math teacher asks.

- **Students from disadvantaged background are less likely to have access to more rigorous learning opportunities.** All students, regardless of their family background, should have access to a high-quality education. But our analysis of student feedback found that students from disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to have the same access to robust learning opportunities. Consider, for

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instance, that 74 percent of higher-income fourth-grade students report that they often or always understand what their science teacher is saying, compared with just 56 percent of lower-income fourth-grade students.⁶ Among middle-school students, 80 percent of higher-income middle-school students report often or always understanding what teachers ask in math class. In contrast, just 70 percent of low-income students report often or always understanding their math teacher. Meanwhile, 66 percent of higher-income 12th-graders reported they often or always understand what their math teacher is saying, compared with 60 percent of low-income students.

There are also racial gaps in some areas. For instance, in the fourth-grade 73 percent of white students and 72 percent of Asian and Pacific Islander students said that they clearly understand what their science teacher talks about. In contrast, only 56 percent of black; 54 percent of Hispanic; and 58 percent of Native American and Alaska Native students say they do. In middle school, 83 percent of Asian and Pacific Islander students and 79 percent of white eighth-grade students report that they clearly understand what their math teacher is saying. But only 67 percent of black students; 70 percent of Hispanic students; 69 percent of Native American and Alaska Native students report understanding their teacher.

To be clear, there were not opportunity gaps in every area that we looked at. We examined disaggregated data for all of the relevant background questions and we reported the results only for questions in which there were significant gaps.

Our analysis leads us to the following recommendations:

- **Policymakers must continue to push for higher, more challenging standards.** To ensure that all students are ready for the global economy, we need to expect more of our students and schools they attend. The Common Core standards are one way to help states and districts make progress on this issue, but far more needs to be done.
- **Students need more rigorous learning opportunities, and our nation needs to figure out ways to provide all students with the education that they deserve.** Too many students report not being engaged in class. They don't understand what their teachers are teaching them and they feel like they are not learning. Our nation can—and should—do more.

- **Researchers and educators should continue to develop student surveys.** We hope this report launches additional research into the use of student surveys. Researchers such as Ronald Ferguson, senior lecturer in education and public policy and director of the Achievement Gap Initiative at Harvard University, have made significant advances which we describe below. But we need to know much more about these tools, and what they reveal about the student experience.

Over the past few years, many states have engaged in promising reforms that address the issues we raise in this report. But our findings suggest we need to do far more to improve the learning experience for all students. We hope that the interactive state-by-state maps available on our website—together with the findings and recommendations in the following pages—will inspire engagement with students’ perspectives in the search to find new and better ways to provide students with the knowledge and skills that they need to succeed.

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