

Berkshire County Middle School Report

My Voice® Student Aspirations Survey 2006-07

June 6, 2008

A Note from the Quaglia Institute for Student Aspirations

Each year, the Quaglia Institute for Student Aspirations (QISA) uses the *My Voice*® student aspirations survey to ask thousands of students across the country what they think about school. The data collected from the survey is shared with educators in schools and districts to help shape decisions about how to improve the teaching and learning environment.

While the survey results have revealed important national trends, QISA knows each school is unique and that the *My Voice*® survey can make the greatest difference when the data is interpreted and reflected upon within the school community.

The enclosed report was written to allow Berkshire County educators to examine their *My Voice*® findings, consider their meaning within the district, celebrate strengths, and reflect on ways to improve areas of concern. While the report is not meant to provide a direct comparison of Berkshire County findings to the national data, questions that reveal important differences—positive or negative—are noted. Complete national data reports are available at www.qisa.org. In addition, gender and grade differences are discussed. To help focus understanding of the data as it relates to Berkshire County schools, there are two reports: one about the data from students in grades 6-8, the other about the data from students in grades 9-12. Each report has appendices at the back which highlight key differences between grade 6-8 and 9-12 data; Berkshire County and the national data; grades; and gender.

It is our hope that this information will help Berkshire County better understand how its *students perceive their educational environment*. With that knowledge comes the ability to help all schools reach their fullest potential...one student at a time.

Sincerely,

Dr. Russell J. Quaglia, President and Founder
Quaglia Institute for Student Aspirations

The Role of Student Aspirations in Today's Schools

When students have high aspirations, *they have the ability to dream about the future, while being inspired in the present to reach those dreams.* Whether the goal is to learn Algebra or a trade, get good grades or go to college, students want to be successful. Too often, however, students don't reach their goals and fullest potential because the conditions that inspire and support them are not in place. If students are to enjoy academic, social, and personal success, they must believe in themselves, be actively engaged in their learning, and see the connection between what they learn today and who they want to become tomorrow. When these experiences are absent, aspirations flounder and achievement declines.

In order for students to have and sustain high aspirations, the conditions that enable them to reach their goals must be in place. These conditions are known as the **8 Conditions that Make a Difference®** and are a critical, often overlooked, part of education and school improvement initiatives. The 8 Conditions have been identified and defined by Dr. Russell J. Quaglia, an internationally known leader in the study of student aspirations. The 8 Conditions are: *Belonging, Heroes, Sense of Accomplishment, Fun & Excitement, Curiosity & Creativity, Spirit of Adventure, Leadership & Responsibility, and Confidence to Take Action.* In order to measure these conditions in today's schools, the *My Voice©* Student Aspirations Survey was developed.

The My Voice® Student Aspirations Survey

The *My Voice®* Student Aspirations Survey assesses student aspirations by asking students to respond to 57 statements about the 8 Conditions, as well as demographic questions. The statements probe the conditions that affect students' aspirations and, ultimately, their personal, social, physical, and academic development. Students respond to the 8 Conditions statements on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree." The survey takes approximately 15 minutes to complete. By asking students how *they* perceive their school environment, *My Voice®* provides educators with a powerful tool for understanding both what motivates and inspires students to achieve, and how well students believe their school is meeting those objectives. *My Voice®* is a critical motivator for initiating innovative, meaningful school reform.

My Voice® Berkshire County Middle School Report for Academic Year 2006-2007

The *My Voice®* Berkshire County Middle School Report is organized around the 8 Conditions. In each section, the condition is defined and data on the survey statements about that condition are provided. The data are reported in percentages based on the combined number of students who responded "strongly agree" or "agree" to each statement. The data is then discussed in relation to key aspects of the condition with particular attention to areas of strength and weakness. Finally, questions for reflection are included to help guide discussion.

My Voice® Berkshire County Middle school Report: Demographics for Academic Year 2006-2007

A total of 3,834 Berkshire County middle school students completed the *My Voice®* survey. Schools of various sizes and socioeconomic backgrounds were represented. Thirty-three percent (33%) of the students surveyed were in grade 6; 36% were in grade 7; 31% were in grade 8. Fifty-two percent (53%) of the students surveyed were female and 48% were male.

Condition 1. Belonging

The Condition of Belonging means that a student is a valued member of a community, while still maintaining his or her uniqueness. It is a relationship between two or more persons characterized by a sense of connection and support. Belonging is a necessary condition for students' well-being, social engagement, and competence. The condition of Belonging increases intrinsic motivation, for it fosters self-confidence and investment in the community.

Students' Perceptions of Belonging

Berkshire County middle school students answered the *My Voice®* survey questions about the condition of Belonging as follows:

<i>Belonging Questions</i>	<i>% in agreement</i>
School is a welcoming and friendly place.	63%
I feel accepted for who I am at school.	76%
I have difficulty fitting in at school.	13%
Teachers care about my problems and feelings.	52%
I am proud of my school.	43%
I feel comfortable going to the cafeteria for lunch.	84%
I think bullying is a problem in my school.	40%

Discussion

There are two key aspects to the condition of Belonging in schools. First, students must view their school as a community where they feel connected, safe, and supported. Berkshire County middle school students reported mixed feelings about their sense of Belonging. While two-thirds (63%) of the middle school students surveyed agreed with the statement "School is a welcoming and friendly place," *more than one-third (37%) did not agree that their school is welcoming and friendly.* This percentage decreased between sixth (65%) and eighth (58%) grade. What is it like for students to spend every day in an environment they do not feel is hospitable? How do those feelings of disconnection impact student learning? How does the sense of Belonging change as students move through the grades?

Related questions look at specific aspects of the school environment and tell a similar story. Educators have always been aware that the cafeteria is a particularly challenging place for many students and 16% of all students surveyed said they do not feel

comfortable going to the cafeteria for lunch. How can students focus on learning when the daily routine of having lunch is difficult?

In terms of safety, the implications are obvious—if students do not feel safe, they are not going to feel connected or part of the school community. In keeping with national statistics, 40% of Berkshire County students surveyed agreed bullying is a problem in their school. When two out of every five students do not feel safe at school, the condition of Belonging is at risk. Like most schools across the country, Berkshire County schools must increase students' feeling of safety if they are to increase students' connection to the school community, and therefore to their learning.

The second key aspect of the condition of Belonging is that students feel valued as individuals. Seventy-six percent (76%) of the middle school students surveyed agreed with the statement "I feel accepted for who I am at school," while 13% stated they have difficulty fitting in at school. Taken together, these results reveal that out of every 100 Berkshire County students, up to one-quarter do not feel like they Belong. Given the foundational nature of the condition of Belonging, this suggests that one in four Berkshire County students is at risk for not reaching their fullest potential in school. Teachers also play an important role in how valued students feel. However, just 52% of students surveyed claimed teachers care about their problems and feelings; these percentages decrease from sixth (60%) to eighth (48%) grade.

Taken together, these results may explain why only 43% of all 6-8 students reported they are proud of their school. The percentages decrease as students moved from sixth (51%) to eighth (33%) grade. When students don't feel like they are safe, cared about, and recognized for who they are, how can they be expected to feel pride in their community? Why do students feel less proud of their school the longer they have been there?

While these findings may surprise teachers and school leaders who work hard to create a sense of community within the school building, students may have a different definition of Belonging than teachers and staff. For the condition of Belonging to improve, faculty, administrators, students and staff need to have open dialogue about what it means to Belong to the school community, and how to foster this condition in tangible ways.

Questions for Reflection

1. How would Berkshire County's middle school students create a welcoming, safe school, where everyone feels connected and, at the same time, valued for who they are as individuals? How can this feeling be maintained as students move through the upper grades?
2. How can the cafeteria be re-imagined as a place where all students feel comfortable?
3. How do middle school students define bullying? What strategies do students propose for solving the problem of school bullies?
4. What do teachers mean when they say they care about their students? What do students mean when they say that teachers care about them? What are the similarities and differences between these responses? How can they be better aligned?

5. How can schools help each student feel accepted for who they are? How can all students feel like they “fit in”—especially as they move from sixth to eighth grade.

Condition 2. Heroes

Heroes are the everyday people—teachers, friends, family—in students’ lives who inspire them to excel and to make positive changes in attitudes and lifestyles. Heroes are people students can connect with, those who have a positive influence on them, and who listen to and value their ideas. Heroes build trust in others and belief in oneself. Educators are by definition Heroes to their students who look up to teachers and school leaders as people to learn from and communicate with about many things. Building relationships with students through support, guidance, and encouragement enables them to become more confident in their academic, personal, and social growth.

Students’ Perceptions of Heroes

Berkshire County middle school students answered the *My Voice*® survey questions about the condition of Heroes as follows:

<i>Heroes Questions</i>	<i>% in agreement</i>
Students respect teachers.	40%
I have a teacher who is a positive role model for me.	62%
Teachers care about me as an individual.	52%
Teachers care if I am absent from school.	47%
If I have a problem, I have a teacher with whom I can talk.	48%
Teachers respect students.	62%
Students respect each other.	32%

Discussion

The condition of Heroes emphasizes the critical ways teachers believe in, support and inspire students. Part of being a Hero is being a role model--an adult who students can trust and turn to in times of difficulty. Sixty-two percent (62%) of Berkshire County middle school students said they have a teacher who is a positive role model. While this is a relatively strong finding, the fact that students have the chance to build relationships with so many teachers during a given school year suggests the percentage should be higher. How can Berkshire County help all students find a role model who inspires them?

Heroes is also about students having a person in their lives who cares about them, and who expresses that care in ways that students understand. Berkshire County results for this aspect of Heroes hovered around the 50% mark: 52% of students said “Teachers care about me as an individual”; 47% agreed “Teachers care if I am absent from school”; and 48% of middle school students agreed with the statement “If I have a problem, I have a teacher with whom I can talk.” Although teachers have the potential to inspire, support and encourage students, they are not doing so in ways students recognize.

The condition of Heroes is finally about respect, not just between teachers and students, but students and one another. Just 40% of middle school students surveyed said students respect teachers and even fewer (32%) reported students respect each other. Teachers fared better, with 62% of students agreeing with the statement “Teachers respect students.” Like many middle schools across the country, these numbers are alarmingly low and reflect that students perceive a severe lack of respect in their schools. If teachers are in a position to inspire and support students through their learning, the challenge of doing so increases significantly if there is an essential lack of respect on either side. How can a culture of respect be created in Berkshire County middle schools?

One item in this section had much lower findings than the national average: fewer Berkshire County students than their national peers agreed with the statement “students respect teachers.” This finding is worth exploring in more detail to gain a better understanding of how students perceive their teachers.

Findings for six out of the seven Heroes questions were lower for eighth graders than for sixth. All of the questions about respect revealed that fewer eighth graders perceived respect between teachers and students (as well as students and each other) than did sixth graders. Similarly, fewer eighth graders reported a positive connection with teachers. The decrease between the grades is critical to examine in more detail, especially as it paves the way for the condition of Heroes, and student aspirations more generally, in grades 9-12.

Questions for Reflection

1. How do teachers and students define the term “Heroes”? What are the similarities and differences between these definitions? How can these definitions be better aligned?
2. In what concrete ways do teachers show students that they care about them as individuals?
3. How do students know that teachers care about them? Where are the similarities and differences between the answers to questions 2 and 3?
4. The condition of Heroes is stronger for sixth graders than for eighth graders. What is happening around this condition as students move through the grades?
5. How can Berkshire County middle schools increase respect across and among all constituencies? What specific steps can be taken to ensure that a culture of respect is at the center of the school environment? In particular, what can be done to improve students’ respect for teachers?

Condition 3. Sense of Accomplishment

The Condition of Sense of Accomplishment recognizes effort, perseverance, and citizenship—along with academic achievement—as signs of student success. Educators have traditionally used a narrow view of accomplishment as it refers to innate ability, grades, or who is “best in the class.” The Condition of Sense of Accomplishment, however, views success in terms of personal growth and effort, not just class rank and test scores. Schools can celebrate their students’ accomplishments in visible ways.

Taking time to recognize and support students' efforts will result in students who are motivated to persevere through difficult tasks and to create a healthy learning environment through hard work and dedication.

Students' Perceptions of *Sense of Accomplishment*

Berkshire County middle school students answered the *My Voice*® survey questions about the condition of *Sense of Accomplishment* as follows:

<i>Sense of Accomplishment Questions</i>	<i>% in agreement</i>
Tests are an important part of my education.	73%
Teachers recognize students who are kind and helpful.	74%
I have never been recognized for something positive at school.	18%
I give up when schoolwork is difficult.	17%
Teachers recognize me when I try my best.	63%
I put forth my best effort at school.	71%
Getting good grades is important to me.	85%

Discussion

When asked questions about traditional forms of academic accomplishment, 85% of Berkshire County middle school students agreed with the statement: "Getting good grades is important to me." These percentages decrease between sixth (91%) and eighth (80%) grades. Seventy-three percent (73%) said tests are an important part of their education, with more sixth graders (83%) than eighth graders (67%) agreeing.

In general, this data suggests that Berkshire County students understand what schools expect of them in terms of academic achievement, though this understanding decreases between sixth and eighth grade. While these percentages could be higher, the majority of students surveyed report they want to get good grades and they understand the significance of testing.

When asked questions about their effort and perseverance, 17% of Berkshire County middle school students agreed with the statement "I give up when schoolwork is difficult." Conversely, 71% stated they put forth their best effort at school. This percentage is lower than the national average and is made more complicated by the fact that the number of students who say they put forth their best effort decreases from sixth (78%) to eighth (67%) grade. The drop between sixth and eighth grade needs to be examined more closely.

These numbers reveal that while most of the students surveyed want to do well in school, they are not necessarily putting forth the effort needed to achieve: almost one-fifth of them give up when they encounter difficult schoolwork and almost one-third do not try their best in school. Knowing how to achieve is not enough. Students must take the steps needed to reach those goals and persevere even in the face of obstacles.

When asked about whether accomplishments are recognized or citizenship is celebrated in their school, 18% of Berkshire County students reported they have never been recognized for something positive at school. Seventy-four percent (74%) stated teachers recognize students who are kind and helpful. Sixty-three percent (63%) of students surveyed said teachers recognize them when they try their best. These findings reveal that Berkshire County middle schools need to do a better job of recognizing student accomplishments of all sorts, as well as celebrating signs of good citizenship. Schools are very good at recognizing certain types of success—high grades, athletic ability, etc. Yet all students need to be recognized for their unique talents and interests, and middle schools need to reflect on how to create this type of an environment.

Findings for six out of the seven Sense of Accomplishment questions were lower for eighth graders than for sixth. Fewer eighth graders report that citizenship and effort are recognized, and fewer eighth graders try their best, persist in the face of difficult schoolwork, and view good grades as important. These changes are worrisome, especially as they connect to the condition of Sense of Accomplishment, and student aspirations more generally, in grades 9-12.

Questions for Reflection

1. How do Berkshire County middle school students know what is expected of them?
2. Are there a variety of ways that accomplishments are recognized and celebrated? What are they? What other ways can Berkshire County recognize student accomplishments of all sorts?
3. Do all students have an individualized plan for setting and reaching goals?
4. Are effort and perseverance recognized? How?
5. What role does citizenship play in the life of Berkshire County schools? Are good citizens as celebrated as good athletes?
6. How can Sense of Accomplishment be sustained as students move from sixth to eighth grade?

Condition 4. Fun & Excitement

The condition of Fun & Excitement is characterized by students being inspired to learn. They are actively engaged and emotionally involved in their school work. Students who exhibit Fun & Excitement are self-confident, curious, and prepared; they are willing to meet the challenges of the day. To foster this condition in schools, students need to be offered new opportunities, as well as meaningful challenges, that are connected with their individual interests.

Students' Perceptions of Fun & Excitement

Berkshire County middle school students answered the *My Voice*® survey questions about the condition of Fun & Excitement as follows:

<i>Fun & Excitement Questions</i>	<i>% in agreement</i>
I enjoy being at school.	44%
Teachers enjoy working with students.	63%
Teachers make school an exciting place to learn.	34%
School is boring.	51%
I enjoy participating in my classes.	54%
Teachers have fun at school.	43%
Learning can be fun.	58%

Discussion

Fun & Excitement is first and foremost about students being engaged in their learning. To be actively engaged in learning students must find it enjoyable and worthwhile. Two findings in particular capture the challenges Berkshire County middle schools face in this condition: Fifty-eight percent (58%) of students agreed with the statement “Learning can be fun” and a similar number (51%) agreed with the statement “School is boring.” The latter was higher than the national average. In other words, although most Berkshire County students said learning can be fun, half are also bored in the classroom. Males are especially disengaged: more males (57%) than females (44%) said school is boring and fewer males (54%) than females (63%) said learning can be fun. Supporting these findings, less than half the students surveyed said they enjoy being at school (44%); fewer males (38%) than females (50%) agreed with this statement. Just 54% said they enjoy participating in their classes; this number decreased from sixth (61%) to eighth (48) grade. Berkshire County middle schools must explore more effective ways of tapping into the potential for engaged learning. Middle school males deserve particular attention.

The condition of Fun & Excitement is in part determined by a teacher’s willingness to foster this condition. However, Berkshire County students do not perceive teachers as especially engaged in the learning process. While 63% of middle school students agreed with the statement “Teachers enjoy working with students,” just 34% agreed “Teachers make school an exciting place to learn,” and 43% agreed with the statement “Teachers have fun at school.”

Most Berkshire County students do not see their teachers enjoying working with students or in the classroom. Whether this is true or not, the fact that these percentages are so low indicates an area of professional concern for all educators. Are teachers having fun? Are schools limiting their ability to inspire student learning?

As with some of the other conditions, Fun & Excitement has poorer findings the longer students are in school: four out of seven questions had lower percentages for eighth graders than sixth. Fewer Berkshire County eighth graders said learning can be fun or that they enjoy participating in their classes. Similarly, fewer eighth graders than sixth graders view teachers as enjoying their work with students.

The condition of Fun & Excitement in middle schools is not about students laughing and playing instead of studying and learning. It is about students becoming so engaged in what they are learning that they stop watching the clock and looking out the window.

How can Berkshire County middle schools foster this condition throughout the curriculum?

Questions for Reflection

1. When is learning fun to Berkshire County middle school students? What do students think can be done to make learning more fun?
2. What, specifically, do students find boring? What would school look like *to students* if it were *not* boring?
3. How can teachers connect more effectively with students?
4. Are teachers engaged in their work? What are the obstacles to teachers having fun in the classroom, inspiring students to learn?
5. How can male students be more connected to the classroom?
6. What is happening between sixth and eighth grade around this condition?

Condition 5. Curiosity & Creativity

The condition of Curiosity & Creativity is characterized by inquisitiveness, eagerness, a strong desire to learn new or interesting things, and a longing to satisfy the mind with new discoveries. Curiosity triggers students to ask “Why?” while creativity gives them the initiative to ask “Why Not?” The intensity of Curiosity & Creativity tends to diminish over time due to the habituating effects of the environment. Therefore, to sustain student motivation, schools must pay careful attention to creating learning environments that promote questioning and creative exploration.

Students’ Perceptions of Curiosity & Creativity

Berkshire County middle school students answered the *My Voice*® survey questions about the condition of Curiosity & Creativity as follows:

<i>Curiosity & Creativity Questions</i>	<i>% in agreement</i>
I feel comfortable asking questions in class.	69%
My teachers present lessons in different ways.	77%
At school I am encouraged to be creative.	60%
My classes help me understand what is happening in my everyday life.	39%
I enjoy learning new things.	69%
I learn new things that are interesting to me at school.	62%
What I learn in school will benefit my future.	77%

Discussion

The condition of Curiosity & Creativity encourages students to experience the joy of exploring new ideas and, when asked about their current learning, a relatively high percentage (69%) of Berkshire County middle school students stated they enjoy learning new things; more females (73%) than males (66%) agreed with this statement. In contrast, however, just 62% said they learn new things that are interesting to them at school. There is clear potential here to foster students’ interest in learning—something most of them are eager to do--yet schools are not seizing this opportunity. The result is

approximately one third of Berkshire County middle school students do not find what they learn at school to be interesting---despite the fact that they say they like to learn new things.

Along similar lines, in order to foster Curiosity & Creativity educators must encourage student inquisitiveness. A relatively high percentage (69%) of Berkshire County middle school students agreed with the statement "I feel comfortable asking questions in class." This leaves approximately 30% of students, however, who are not comfortable asking questions. If students aren't comfortable asking questions, they are more likely to disconnect from material that is either especially interesting or challenging.

Inquisitiveness is also linked to students' opportunities to learn in multiple ways. Seventy-seven percent (77%) of students surveyed agreed with the statement "My teachers present lessons in different ways," while 60% agreed with the statement "At school I am encouraged to be creative." This percentage was lower than the national average. A relatively large number of Berkshire County students appear to be learning through a variety of teaching methods, yet only three out of five have the chance to be creative. Creativity is essential if students are to deeply connect with material they are learning. How can teachers *and* students express their creativity in the classroom?

Another key aspect of Curiosity & Creativity is relevance: to engage deeply with different subjects, students must see the relevance of studying new material. One of the weakest findings in this condition is that just 39% of Berkshire County students stated their classes help them understand what is happening in their everyday lives. This number decreased between sixth (46%) and eighth (31%) grades. For students to maintain an active interest in learning, they must see the value in it. They must be able to connect what they are studying to their world in some tangible way that leads them to ask questions and seek answers. If we do not make learning relevant, we are failing our students no matter how many new ideas they are exposed to in a given school year.

Interestingly, 77% of students surveyed agreed with the statement "What I learn in school will benefit my future," though this percentage decreased between sixth (84%) and eighth (72%) grade. What does it mean that Berkshire County middle school students do not see school as relevant to their current lives, but do think it is meaningful for their future? How can this gap be narrowed to ensure learning is relevant in the present?

Four out of seven questions were lower for eighth graders than sixth, suggesting that the condition of Curiosity & Creativity weakens as students move through the grades. Fewer eighth graders said they have the chance to be creative, learn new things, or see their learning as connected to their future. Similarly, fewer eighth graders reported that their classes help them understand what is happening in their everyday life. These decreases need to be examined in more detail.

Questions for Reflection

1. How can more Berkshire County students become comfortable asking questions in class?

2. How can students’ enjoyment of learning new things be realized at school? How can teachers connect the curriculum to students’ interests?
3. In what ways can classroom material be connected to students’ everyday lives?
4. In general, opportunities for students to be creative decrease as students move through the grades. How can schools offer students more chances to be creative?
5. How can Curiosity & Creativity be maintained as students move from sixth to eighth grade?

Condition 6. Spirit of Adventure

The condition of Spirit of Adventure is characterized by students’ ability to take on positive, healthy challenges at school and home, with family and friends. Students experience the Spirit of Adventure when they tackle something new without the fear of failure or success. When schools promote healthy decision making and healthy risk taking, their students become more confident and resilient. Students with the Spirit of Adventure see life as full of opportunities worth exploring for their own sake.

Students’ Perceptions of Spirit of Adventure

Berkshire County middle school students answered the *My Voice*® survey questions about the condition of Spirit of Adventure as follows:

<i>Spirit of Adventure Questions</i>	<i>% in agreement</i>
I am afraid my friends won’t like me if I do well in school.	4%
I push myself to do better academically.	74%
Students are supportive of each other.	40%
I am afraid to try something if I think I may fail.	21%
Teachers help me learn from my mistakes.	62%
Teachers think I can be successful.	75%
I am excited to tell my friends when I get good grades.	57%

Discussion

The condition of Spirit of Adventure is about students trying new things. It is about students moving from their comfort zone to their challenge zone. Students face two common obstacles when they do so: the fear of success and the fear of failure. Seventy-four percent (74%) of Berkshire County middle school students surveyed said they push themselves to do better academically; fewer males (70%) than females (78%) agreed with this statement. These results are relatively strong, but they also reveal that one-quarter of Berkshire County middle school students do *not* push themselves academically. This may be due, in part, to a fear of failure: 21% of the students reported they are afraid to try something if they think they may fail.

These results tell a complicated story about Berkshire County students’ Spirit of Adventure. On the one hand, many students have a healthy attitude toward academic challenges and are willing to push themselves to succeed. A good number, however, are less confident, due to either fear of failure or fear of success. If students are not willing to challenge themselves—academically, socially, personally—they will not learn and

grow as individuals. It must be as safe for students to have a Spirit of Adventure and *not* succeed as it is for them *to* succeed when they take a healthy risk.

Another key aspect of Spirit of Adventure is whether students feel supported when they want to try new things. Support can come in many forms, including teachers and other students. Sixty-two percent (62%) of Berkshire County middle school students believe teachers help them learn from their mistakes. This percentage drops between sixth (71%) and eighth (57%) grade. Seventy-five percent (75%) said teachers think they can be successful. Berkshire County teachers are doing a relatively good job of letting students know they believe they can succeed. However, students who try something new, and fail, need more sustained support so they do not give up.

Peers fared less well in the survey data: 40% of the students surveyed stated students are supportive of each other; this percentage decreases between sixth (46%) and eighth (33%) grades. Fifty-seven percent (57%) reported they are excited to tell their friends when they get good grades, with fewer males (51%) than females (63%) agreeing. This percentage also dropped between sixth (61%) and eighth (53%) grade.

For some students, having a Spirit of Adventure means potentially threatening their social network—their sense of Belonging—and is therefore a powerful deterrent to success. While just 4% of students surveyed agreed with the statement “I am afraid my friends won’t like me if I do well in school,” the fact that so few students surveyed are excited to tell their friends when they get good grades (43%) warrants attention. Schools must explore how students can be encouraged to support each other’s healthy risk taking so all students embrace new ideas and challenges throughout their education. The differences between male and female responses to these questions should also be examined.

Questions for Reflection

1. How do Berkshire County schools support all students’ willingness to challenge themselves academically?
2. How do Berkshire County schools make it safe for students to fail or succeed?
3. Fear of success is related to the condition of Belonging—succeeding for some students means leaving behind a group of peers they feel close to. How can Berkshire County middle schools make it “cool” to succeed so that students don’t risk losing friends when they achieve academically?
4. How can teachers more effectively support students’ healthy risk taking?
5. How can schools encourage students to support one another in reaching their goals and dreams?

Condition 7. Leadership & Responsibility

The condition of Leadership & Responsibility means students are able to express their ideas and are willing to accept consequences for their actions. It cultivates accountability for the classroom environment and school community. Schools which promote this condition teach and expect their students to be good decision makers. They provide legitimate decision-making opportunities, seek student input, and expect students

to be accountable for their actions and words. Students are trusted to make the right decisions and are recognized for doing so.

Students’ Perceptions of Leadership & Responsibility

Berkshire County middle school students answered the *My Voice*® survey questions about the condition of Leadership & Responsibility as follows:

<i>Leadership & Responsibility Questions</i>	<i>% in agreement</i>
Student council represents all students at school.	31%
I see myself as a leader.	50%
Other students see me as a leader.	28%
Teachers encourage students to make decisions.	63%
I think about others’ feelings when I make decisions.	65%
I am a good decision maker.	59%
I know the goals my school is working on this year.	37%

Discussion

The condition of Leadership & Responsibility is twofold: students must develop strong decision-making skills and have real leadership opportunities. Only then can they be truly responsible leaders who make a difference in their communities. When asked about decision making, 65% of middle school students surveyed reported they think about others’ feelings when they make decisions. Fewer males (56%) than females (71%) agreed with this statement and the numbers fell between sixth (69%) and eighth (60%) grade. Fifty-nine percent (59%) said they are good decision makers. These percentages reveal that just 3 out of 5 Berkshire County middle school students see themselves as good decision makers, a finding that should be discussed in more depth as schools aim to promote this condition.

The findings in this condition also reveal that although half (50%) of middle school students see themselves as leaders, this self-perception does not necessarily translate into leadership opportunities and actions: only 28% of students surveyed believe *other students* see them as leaders. For the condition of Leadership & Responsibility to thrive, middle school students cannot just think of themselves as leaders--they must learn to be leaders in their communities, beginning with their school. Yet only 63% of students stated teachers encourage them to make decisions and this percentage decreases between sixth (69%) and eighth (60%) grades.

Though only half of students say teachers encourage them to make decisions, leadership opportunities in classrooms might be a good starting point for school-wide efforts to foster the condition of Leadership & Responsibility. Such initiatives may improve the findings that just 37% of the students say they are aware of the goals their school community is working on and only 31% of the students say student council is representative of the student body. These numbers are low and deserve reflection. Being invested in the school community is one way students can engage with the teaching and

learning environment. Yet opportunities to do so need to be more widely available and clear to students in all grades.

Questions for Reflection

1. What real decisions are students allowed to make in Berkshire County middle schools? How can more decision-making opportunities be created—with students being held accountable for their choices?
2. What real leadership opportunities are available in Berkshire County middle schools?
3. What types of discussions do schools hold about decision making and leadership? How do students learn about good decision making?
4. How can students become more involved in school initiatives—via student council and other venues—so that school goals are communicated, and made important, to the entire school community?
5. How can teachers promote good decision making in their classrooms?

Condition 8. Confidence to Take Action

Confidence to Take Action is the extent to which students believe in themselves. It encourages them to dream about their future while being motivated to set goals in the present. This condition is what educators strive for; all other conditions must be established and supported for students to attain this level of aspiration. Confidence to Take Action is characterized by a positive and healthy outlook on life and by looking inward rather than outward for approval. Schools can help build their students' Confidence to Take Action by providing support, celebrating diversity, and encouraging independent thinking.

Students' Perceptions of Confidence to Take Action

Berkshire County middle school students answered the My Voice® survey questions about the condition of Confidence to Take Action as follows:

<i>Confidence to Take Action Questions</i>	<i>% in agreement</i>
I believe I can be successful.	91%
I believe I can make a difference in this world.	55%
Teachers expect me to be successful.	80%
Going to college is important to my future.	87%
I work hard to reach my goals.	81%
I am excited about my future.	77%
I think it is important to set high goals.	75%
School is preparing me well for my future.	67%

Discussion

The condition of Confidence to Take Action is the pinnacle of the 8 Condition framework and also the goal of all educational ventures. The first part of the condition involves students having enough belief in themselves that they can set goals for the future. When

asked questions about goal-setting, 75% of middle school students surveyed reported they think it is important to set high goals. This percent decreased from sixth (81%) to eighth (71%) grades. These are strong findings in keeping with the national average.

The second part of Confidence to Take Action is about students taking steps in the present to reach the goals they set. Eighty-one percent (81%) of Berkshire County students surveyed said they work hard to reach their goals. The majority of Berkshire County middle school students appear to know it is important both to set high goals *and* work hard to reach them. Nonetheless, a quarter of the students do not see setting high goals as important. How can schools reach the one out of every four students who don't have the Confidence to Take Action?

The ability to set and reach for goals is directly connected to a positive view of one's future. Ninety-one percent (91%) of middle school students surveyed agreed with the statement "I believe I can be successful." In contrast, 80% of students believed teachers expect them to be successful. Seventy-seven percent (77%) said they are excited about their future, while just 55% agreed with the statement "I believe I can make a difference in this world." While nine out of ten students think they can be successful, 36% fewer believe they can make a difference in the world. Though in keeping with national averages, this dramatic drop should be studied in more depth.

Finally, when asked about the connection between school and their future, 87% of Berkshire County middle school students surveyed agreed with the statement "Going to college is important for my future. In contrast, just 67% said their current schooling is preparing them well for the future. How can educators reconcile this disconnect?

Four out of seven questions in this condition decreased as students moved from sixth the eighth grade. More students in sixth grade said they set high goals and work toward them. More sixth graders also report they think school is preparing them well for the future and that teachers expect them to be successful. The decrease between the grades is critical to examine in more detail, especially as it paves the way for the condition of Confidence to Take Action, and student aspirations more generally, in grades 9-12.

Questions for Reflection

1. How do middle schools foster students' belief not only in their ability to succeed, but in their ability to be engaged citizens who contribute to the world around them?
2. Why do so few middle school students see their present schooling as relevant, in particular when compared to the higher percentage that see going to college as relevant?
3. What does this tell us about students' understanding of the steps it takes to reach the goal of attending college
4. How can the Confidence to Take Action be sustained, even developed, as students move through the grades?

The Role of Parents

Berkshire County middle school students answered the *My Voice*® survey questions about the role parents play as follows:

<i>Role of Parents Questions</i>	<i>% in agreement</i>
My parents care about my education	96%
My parents like my school	65%
My parents think going to college is important	91%
My parents feel comfortable talking to my teachers	70%
Teachers let my parents know what I do well	46%
I would like my parents to attend more school events	25%

Parents play a critical role in supporting student success and 96% of the students surveyed think their parents care about their education. A similarly high percentage (91%) state that their parents think going to college is important. These percentages drop when students are asked if their parents like their school (65%) and whether their parents feel comfortable talking with their teachers (70%). Just 46% of the students say their teachers let their parents know what they do well in school, and only 25% state they would like their parents to attend more school events. Several of these percentages decrease between sixth and eighth grade. Answers to the statements “Teachers let my parents know what I do well” and “I would like my parents to attend more school events” were lower than the national average.

The high number of students who believe their parents support their current and future educational goals suggests that parents are an important resource for fostering student aspirations. Unfortunately, this resource appears to be overlooked as fewer students perceive that their parents’ relationship with their school and teachers is strong. The fact that so few students think that their teachers share positive information with their parents is particularly concerning since this is a key line of communication about student accomplishments of all sorts. How can teachers, who know better than anyone the types of academic successes students have, share and celebrate these accomplishments with parents so that all students feel recognized?

Questions for Reflection

1. How can schools encourage parent involvement?
2. How can teachers and parents communicate more effectively?
3. What would encourage students to invite their parents to school events?
4. How can teachers and school administrators tap into this wealth of positive support for student learning?
5. How can changes between sixth and eighth grade be understood?

Conclusion

The *My Voice*© Berkshire County Middle school Report for the academic year 2006-2007 reveals both positive and negative findings around each of the 8 Conditions that Make a Difference®. Overall, Berkshire County middle school data is similar to national

findings for grades 6-8, and there are relatively few gender differences. While the County should be proud of their accomplishments, there is also much work to be done to improve even the most positive of these findings. Of particular concern is the overall decrease in positive findings between sixth and eighth grades. These changes must be explored in more depth and with some urgency—within the County’s middle schools and in connection with the County’s high schools where those trends may play out.

The 8 Conditions that support student engagement—*Belonging, Heroes, Sense of Accomplishment, Fun & Excitement, Curiosity & Creativity, Spirit of Adventure, Leadership & Responsibility, and Confidence to Take Action*—need to be in place if schools are to foster students’ ability to set and reach their goals. Yet, as the survey findings reveal, these conditions are neither fully nor deeply integrated into our nation’s schools. If schools are to be places where teaching and learning thrive, this must change. Listening to the voices of students is the first step.

As educators dedicated to positive reform in today’s schools, it is our responsibility to explore in-depth the *My Voice*© data so that we can fully understand and appreciate how students perceive their learning environments. In doing so, we will gain insight into students’ fears, frustrations, hopes and dreams. Only then can we take the next steps toward our goal of improving teaching and learning environments so that all schools promote students’ self-worth, active engagement in the learning process, and a sense of purpose for all students.

APPENDIX A

My Voice© Student Aspirations Survey Questions & Berkshire Grades 6-8 Results Academic Year 2006-2007

Condition	Survey Statement	Total % in Agreement
<i>Belonging</i>	School is a welcoming and friendly place.	63%
<i>Belonging</i>	I feel accepted for who I am at school.	76%
<i>Belonging</i>	I have difficulty fitting in at school.	13%
<i>Belonging</i>	Teachers care about my problems and feelings.	52%
<i>Belonging</i>	I am proud of my school.	43%
<i>Belonging</i>	I feel comfortable going to the cafeteria for lunch.	84%
<i>Belonging</i>	I think bullying is a problem in my school.	40%
<i>Heroes</i>	Students respect teachers.	40%
<i>Heroes</i>	I have a teacher who is a positive role model for me.	62%
<i>Heroes</i>	Teachers care about me as an individual.	52%
<i>Heroes</i>	Teachers care if I am absent from school.	47%
<i>Heroes</i>	If I have a problem, I have a teacher with whom I can talk.	48%
<i>Heroes</i>	Teachers respect students.	62%
<i>Heroes</i>	Students respect each other.	32%
<i>Sense of Accomplishment</i>	Tests are an important part of my education.	73%
<i>Sense of Accomplishment</i>	Teachers recognize students who are kind and helpful.	74%
<i>Sense of Accomplishment</i>	I have never been recognized for something positive at school.	18%
<i>Sense of Accomplishment</i>	I give up when schoolwork is difficult.	17%
<i>Sense of Accomplishment</i>	Teachers recognize me when I try my best.	63%
<i>Sense of Accomplishment</i>	I put forth my best effort at school.	71%
<i>Sense of Accomplishment</i>	Getting good grades is important to me.	85%
<i>Fun & Excitement</i>	I enjoy being at school.	44%
<i>Fun & Excitement</i>	Teachers enjoy working with students.	63%
<i>Fun & Excitement</i>	Teachers make school an exciting place to learn.	34%
<i>Fun & Excitement</i>	School is boring.	51%
<i>Fun & Excitement</i>	I enjoy participating in my classes.	54%
<i>Fun & Excitement</i>	Teachers have fun at school.	43%
<i>Fun & Excitement</i>	Learning can be fun.	58%
<i>Curiosity & Creativity</i>	I feel comfortable asking questions in class.	69%
<i>Curiosity & Creativity</i>	My teachers present lessons in different ways.	77%
<i>Curiosity & Creativity</i>	At school I am encouraged to be creative.	60%
<i>Curiosity & Creativity</i>	My classes help me understand what is happening in my everyday life.	39%
<i>Curiosity & Creativity</i>	I enjoy learning new things.	69%
<i>Curiosity & Creativity</i>	I learn new things that are interesting to me at school.	62%
<i>Curiosity & Creativity</i>	What I learn in school will benefit my future.	77%
<i>Spirit of Adventure</i>	I am afraid my friends won't like me if I do well in school.	4%
<i>Spirit of Adventure</i>	I push myself to do better academically.	74%
<i>Spirit of Adventure</i>	Students are supportive of each other.	40%
<i>Spirit of Adventure</i>	I am afraid to try something if I think I may fail.	21%
<i>Spirit of Adventure</i>	Teachers help me learn from my mistakes.	62%
<i>Spirit of Adventure</i>	Teachers think I can be successful.	75%
<i>Spirit of Adventure</i>	I am excited to tell my friends when I get good grades.	57%
<i>Leadership & Responsibility</i>	Student council represents all students at school.	31%
<i>Leadership & Responsibility</i>	I see myself as a leader.	50%
<i>Leadership & Responsibility</i>	Other students see me as a leader.	28%
<i>Leadership & Responsibility</i>	Teachers encourage students to make decisions.	63%
<i>Leadership & Responsibility</i>	I think about others' feelings when I make decisions.	65%
<i>Leadership & Responsibility</i>	I am a good decision maker.	59%
<i>Leadership & Responsibility</i>	I know the goals my school is working on this year.	37%
<i>Confidence to Take Action</i>	I believe I can be successful.	91%
<i>Confidence to Take Action</i>	I believe I can make a difference in this world.	55%

<i>Confidence to Take Action</i>	Teachers expect me to be successful.	80%
<i>Confidence to Take Action</i>	Going to college is important to my future.	87%
<i>Confidence to Take Action</i>	I work hard to reach my goals.	81%
<i>Confidence to Take Action</i>	I am excited about my future.	77%
<i>Confidence to Take Action</i>	I think it is important to set high goals.	75%
<i>Confidence to Take Action</i>	School is preparing me well for my future.	67%
<i>The Role of Parents</i>	My parents care about my education	96%
<i>The Role of Parents</i>	My parents like my school	65%
<i>The Role of Parents</i>	My parents think going to college is important	91%
<i>The Role of Parents</i>	My parents feel comfortable talking to my teachers	70%
<i>The Role of Parents</i>	Teachers let me parents know what I do well	46%
<i>The Role of Parents</i>	I would like my parents to attend more school events	25%

APPENDIX B

Differences 7% or greater between Berkshire County 6-8 and National 6-8 Data

	% Berkshire County in agreement	% National Data in agreement
I am proud of my school (<i>Belonging</i>)	43%	52%
Students respect teachers (<i>Heroes</i>)	40%	49%
I put forth my best effort at school (<i>Sense of Accomplishment</i>)	71%	78%
School is boring (<i>Fun & Excitement</i>)	51%	42%
At school I am encouraged to be creative (<i>Curiosity & Creativity</i>)	60%	67%
Student council represents all students at school (<i>L & R</i>)	31%	39%
Teachers let my parents know what I do well (<i>Role of Parents</i>)	46%	57%
I would like my parents to attend more school events. (<i>Role of Parents</i>)	25%	53%

APPENDIX C

Differences 7% or greater between males and females in grades 6-8

Question (<i>Condition</i>)	% Males in agreement	% Females in agreement
I enjoy being at school (<i>Fun & Excitement</i>)	38%	50%
School is boring (<i>Fun & Excitement</i>)	57%	44%
Learning can be fun (<i>Fun & Excitement</i>)	54%	63%
I enjoy learning new things (<i>Curiosity & Creativity</i>)	66%	73%
I push myself to do better academically (<i>Spirit of Adventure</i>)	70%	78%
I am excited to tell my friends when I get good grades (<i>Spirit of Adventure</i>)	51%	63%
I think about others' feelings when I make decisions (<i>Leadership & Responsibility</i>)	59%	71%

APPENDIX D

Differences 7% or greater between grade 6 and grade 8 data

Question (<i>Condition</i>)	% Grade 6 in agreement	% Grade 8 in agreement
School is a welcoming and friendly place. (<i>Belonging</i>)	65%	58%
Teachers care about my problems and feelings. (<i>Belonging</i>)	60%	48%
I am proud of my school. (<i>Belonging</i>)	51%	33%
Students respect teachers. (<i>Heroes</i>)	49%	28%
I have a teacher who is a positive role model for me. (<i>Heroes</i>)	65%	57%
Teachers care if I am absent from school. (<i>Heroes</i>)	52%	43%
If I have a problem, I have a teacher with whom I can talk. (<i>Heroes</i>)	52%	45%
Teachers respect students. (<i>Heroes</i>)	69%	58%
Students respect each other. (<i>Heroes</i>)	34%	25%
Tests are an important part of my education. (<i>Sense of Accomplishment</i>)	83%	67%
Teachers recognize students who are kind and helpful. (<i>Sense of Accomplishment</i>)	78%	71%
I give up when schoolwork is difficult. (<i>Sense of Accomplishment</i>)	12%	19%
Teachers recognize me when I try my best. (<i>Sense of Accomplishment</i>)	66%	59%
I put forth my best efforts at school. (<i>Sense of Accomplishment</i>)	78%	67%
Getting good grades is important to me. (<i>Sense of Accomplishment</i>)	91%	80%
Teachers enjoy working with students. (<i>Fun & Excitement</i>)	69%	60%
Teachers make school an exciting place to learn. (<i>Fun & Excitement</i>)	41%	31%
I enjoy participating in my classes. (<i>Fun & Excitement</i>)	61%	48%
Learning can be fun. (<i>Fun & Excitement</i>)	61%	53%
At school I am encouraged to be creative. (<i>Curiosity & Creativity</i>)	67%	57%
My classes help me understand what is happening in my everyday life. (<i>Curiosity & Creativity</i>)	46%	31%
I learn new things that are interesting to me at school. (<i>Curiosity & Creativity</i>)	67%	58%
What I learn in school will benefit my future. (<i>Curiosity & Creativity</i>)	84%	72%
Students are supportive of each other. (<i>Spirit of Adventure</i>)	46%	33%
Teachers help me learn from my mistakes. (<i>Spirit of Adventure</i>)	71%	57%
I am excited to tell my friends when I get good grades. (<i>Spirit of Adventure</i>)	61%	53%
Teachers encourage students to make decisions. (<i>L & R</i>)	69%	60%
I think about others' feelings when I make decisions. (<i>L & R</i>)	69%	60%
Teachers expect me to be successful (<i>Confidence to Take Action</i>)	84%	75%
I work hard to reach my goals (<i>Confidence to Take Action</i>)	86%	77%
I think it is important to set high goals. (<i>Confidence to Take Action</i>)	81%	71%
School is preparing me well for my future (<i>Confidence to Take Action</i>)	75%	61%
My parents like my school. (<i>Role of Parents</i>)	70%	59%
Teachers let my parents know what I do well. (<i>Role of Parents</i>)	56%	39%
I would like my parents to attend more school events. (<i>Role of Parents</i>)	32%	20%

APPENDIX E

Differences 7% or greater between grades 6-8 and grades 9-12 data

Question (Condition)	% 6-8 in agreement	% 9-12 in agreement
Teachers care about my problems and feelings (<i>Belonging</i>)	52%	38%
I feel comfortable going to the cafeteria for lunch (<i>Belonging</i>)	84%	77%
Students respect teachers (<i>Heroes</i>)	40%	30%
Teachers care about me as an individual (<i>Heroes</i>)	52%	44%
Teachers respect students (<i>Heroes</i>)	62%	48%
Tests are an important part of my education (<i>Sense of Accomplishment</i>)	73%	57%
Teachers recognize me when I try my best (<i>Sense of Accomplishment</i>)	63%	56%
I put forth my best effort at school (<i>Sense of Accomplishment</i>)	71%	58%
Getting good grades is important to me (<i>Sense of Accomplishment</i>)	85%	78%
Teachers enjoy working with students (<i>Fun & Excitement</i>)	63%	51%
Teachers make school an exciting place to learn (<i>Fun & Excitement</i>)	34%	21%
School is boring (<i>Fun & Excitement</i>)	51%	58%
I enjoy participating in my classes (<i>Fun & Excitement</i>)	54%	47%
Teachers have fun at school (<i>Fun & Excitement</i>)	43%	31%
My teachers present lessons in different ways (<i>Curiosity & Creativity</i>)	77%	68%
At school I am encouraged to be creative (<i>Curiosity & Creativity</i>)	60%	48%
My classes help me understand what is happening in my everyday life (<i>Curiosity & Creativity</i>)	39%	28%
I learn new things that are interesting to me at school (<i>C & C</i>)	62%	54%
What I learn in school will benefit my future (<i>Curiosity & Creativity</i>)	77%	67%
Teachers help me learn from my mistakes (<i>Spirit of Adventure</i>)	62%	48%
I am excited to tell my friends when I get good grades (<i>SoA</i>)	57%	48%
Student council represents all students at school (<i>L& R</i>)	31%	22%
Teachers encourage students to make decisions (<i>L& R</i>)	63%	56%
I know the goals my school is working on this year (<i>L& R</i>)	37%	29%
Teachers expect me to be successful (<i>Confidence to Take Action</i>)	80%	73%
I work hard to reach my goals (<i>Confidence to Take Action</i>)	81%	74%
School is preparing me well for my future (<i>Confidence to Take Action</i>)	67%	55%
My parents feel comfortable talking to my teachers (<i>Role of Parents</i>)	70%	62%
Teachers let me parents know what I do well (<i>Role of Parents</i>)	46%	31%