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Thursday
Nov 2011

The student voice – our survey, part 1

Posted by grantwiggins in General

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I am a big fan of student surveys. How can we achieve educational goals without the student's perspective? We cannot. Decades ago, as a young teacher, I learned a great strategy from my colleague Duane. Every Friday he handed out 5 x 7 index cards and asked: on one side, state what worked for you this week. On the other side, state what didn't work and why. Fantastic ongoing feedback – very different than those clunky end of course evaluations (in which any thoughtful student cynically thinks: sure, ask me when it's *over*). And the issue of what "worked" is far more revealing than what you "liked."

I bring this up because the new college study of student engagement came out today. Over the years the National Study of Student engagement (NSSE) and the companion one for high school (HSSSE) have been useful in giving voice to the learner's experience. Alas, both surveys are hampered by their brevity and their exclusive multiple-choice nature. (both are promising changes for next year). And this year there is an additional oddity: the college report doesn't note the amount of boredom students report, something that was a hallmark of the study over the years. Is this an oversight in the summary, i.e. is the question still being asked but not reported out this year? Or, have they stopped asking? I don't know, but it is a worrisome omission, in my view.

So, I thought it would be instructive for readers to see the results from our study of student academic experience, conducted for the past year. I designed the survey to overcome some of the deficiencies of the aforementioned surveys, especially in terms of student voice. In ours, students had many opportunities to write about their experiences. I also wanted to target specific pedagogical issues related specifically to *Understanding by Design* and leading-edge pedagogy more generally.

The results you see below are based on over 7300 student responses from middle and high school students nationally. Of note is that 93% of students wrote answers for every written-response question – a very high rate – suggesting how pent up the student's voice is in education. We were also able to ensure a high rate of return from each school: unlike traditional sampling surveys, in most cases our results reflect more than 60% of the school population. (In a few cases we had over 95% of the students from a single school).

A cautionary note, however, about the overall sample: the results do not reflect a "normal" national sample. All the responses came from schools with which we either had a past or working relationship; or with schools whose educators heard about the survey in workshops and asked to participate. As a result, the sample skews toward schools doing some amount of reform work, toward suburban rather than urban, and has no schools represented from the Pacific time zone. However, the results are consistent with Goodlad's findings in *A Place Called School* and with past results from the HSSSE. And I think you'll agree when you see the results below that they are highly credible on their face. So, the data presents staff with wonderful feedback about how students view their academic experience, especially the written responses to their best and worst experiences in class.

Beyond basic data about themselves and their schools we asked students questions such as the following: What is you most favorite and least favorite subject, and why? How bored are you in school? How often are various "best practices" occurring in your daily experience? How hard is school in general? What was the best activity/task/project you had in the last year? How do you learn best? What hurts your learning? If you could give your teachers one piece of advice to improve learning and school, what would it be? (Readers interested in seeing the full survey can download it here: AE Student Survey 2011. If you are interested in giving the survey out, contact me.

Email (required)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Grant Wiggins is the co-author of *Understanding by Design* and the author of *Educative Assessment* and numerous articles on education. He is the President of Authentic Education in Hopewell NJ. You can read more about him and his work at the AE site (click here)

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USEFUL SITES

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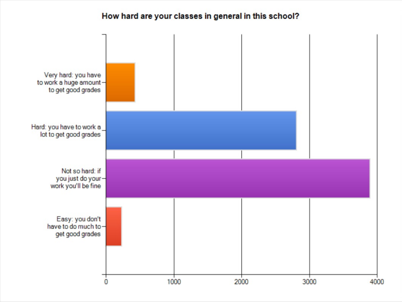
The results

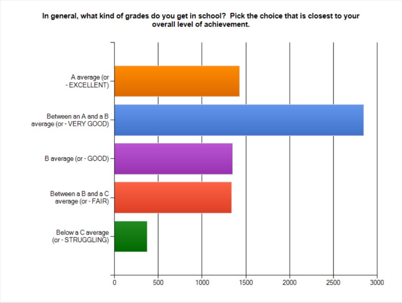
The following graphs provide the basic demographic data (as self-reported by students).

How hard is school?

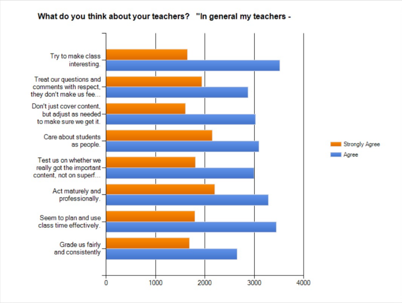


The graph is very different for private school students: 2/3 report it is hard.

Here is how students describe their performance level:



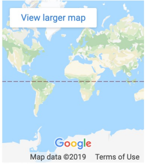
Here is how they think of their teachers overall – very positive (only tiny percentages disagree):



Here are their most favorite subject areas – and I'll bet many readers are surprised by the top choice:

- Washington Post Education Page

AUTHENTIC EDUCATION



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- Sorry! Didn't realize that Grant's twitter account is the one active on my phone. -Denise, Grant's wife 1 year ago
- Me, too. 1 year ago
- Yes. Grant is gone, suddenly and unexpectedly. We are bereft. 4 years ago
- Grant Wiggins, of brilliant mind and dearest heart, died yesterday. The world has lost a true champion of learning.Carry on the work.-Denise 4 years ago
- A poster child for Common Core wapo.st/1RabJpc A blunt defense of C Core in OK by a conservative WaPo writer: 4 years ago

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  The Scholastic survey also finds that knowledge helps: Parents who know about "summer slide" make more efforts to help their child keep reading.
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- History Instruction Indicted: Too Much Memorization, Too Little Meaning
  Students in U.S. classrooms are startingly ignorant of American history, but it's not because their teachers have failed them. It's because the curriculum in most schools focuses on memorizing "irrelevant, boring" names and dates, a new study finds.
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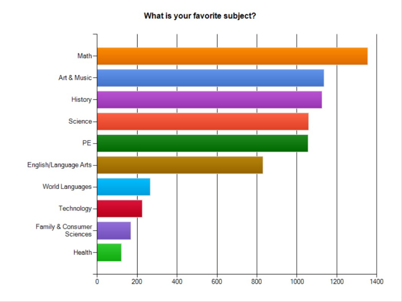
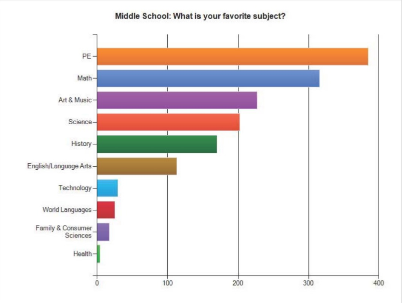
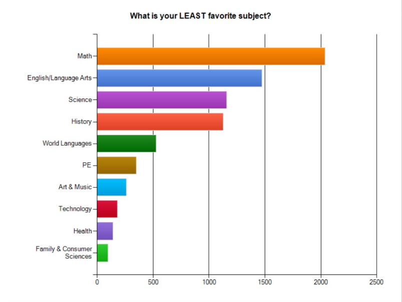


Note: in Middle School, the pattern is different, but not surprising. Indeed, it matches what Goodlad found:

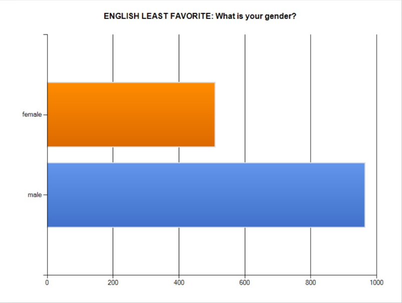


Here are all students' least favorite subject areas:



Note, again: math is bi-modal. However, English is arguably worse off: not many people's favorite and it is near the top of least favorite.

As you might imagine, the English gender split is true to hunch:



The gender breakdown on math is true to form but the data may surprise you:

Jon Marcus

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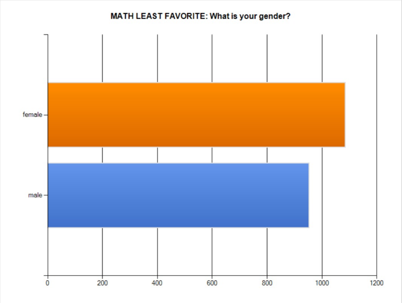
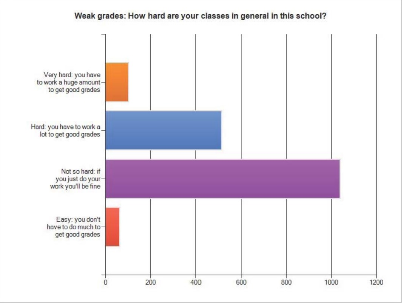
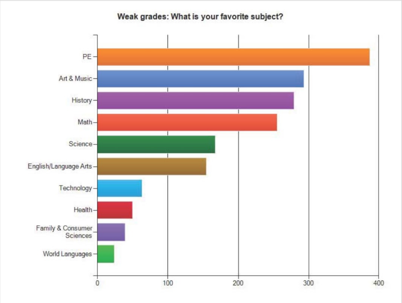
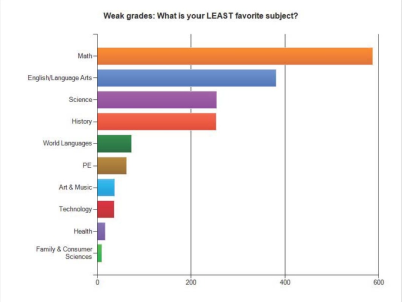


What about students who don’t get good grades? Their patterns are a bit different. Surprising, perhaps to many, is their perception of school difficulty:

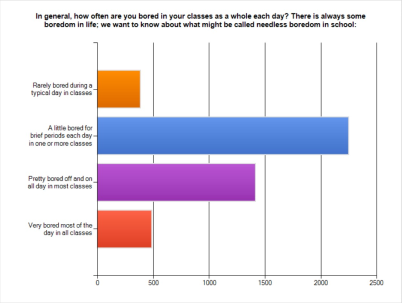


Here are their most and least favorite courses:

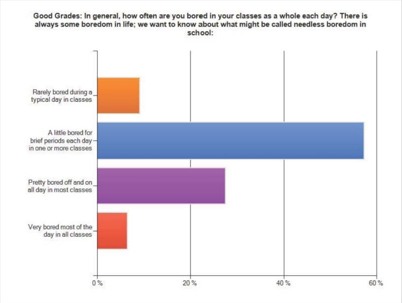




Overall, here is how bored all students report being:

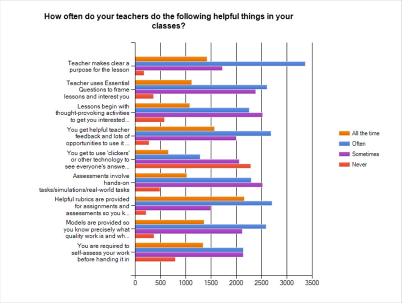


And what about the better students? How bored are they?



I think that needless boredom remains a critical issue in secondary school. Frankly, I am often bored in the classes I visit; why wouldn't it be true for kids? Teachers simply have to stop resisting the basic fact: a bored person will not learn. It is nonsense to say that boredom is a *necessary* part of school. (I'll have more to say on this after we review student comments about the most interesting work they have experienced in my next post).

Here is how often various "best practices" occur in all students' experience:



The interesting fact here is that English class scores highly as a place where these practices occur! Thus, it is the work itself that students complain about, not the teacher or the instruction, in making English a least favorite course. (More on this in my next posts).

Though little in the survey should shock an observant and empathetic educator, there were some interesting surprises in the data, once we filter it by gender, by the grades people get, by math and English being their least favorite course, etc.

For example, as noted, students who put English least report that they dislike it much more because they are uninterested in the work, not because it is too hard or because they dislike their teacher. When math is their least favorite, the pattern is different: they dislike it more because it is too difficult and makes them feel dumb. And in much larger numbers than in English they don't just dislike math more than the other subjects they "really hate it." Yet, math was chosen by far more students than English as their *favorite* course! So, math is bi-modal: love it or hate it; no in between.

In my next post, I'll let the students speak: we'll see in their own words why they like or hate the subject, and what the best learning experiences have been for them. It is profoundly revealing.

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