

USING THE MY VOICE™ SURVEY AS A TOOL TO IMPROVE STUDENT ASPIRATIONS

ABSTRACT

Policy makers have worked diligently pushing an agenda of higher standards, improved student performance, and increased accountability to raise academic achievement in schools. There have been minimal improvements but not across the board. In an effort to raise academic standards, we have lost sight of another equally important goal of schooling: to raise student aspirations. While academic achievement is important, it is only one measure of success. Assessing whether or not students are *motivated* to succeed and achieve their personal best is equally important. Why are some high school students more motivated to set and pursue high goals than others? How are students who say they are goal oriented and driven experiencing school differently than their less motivated peers?

QISA research has found that schools that raise student aspirations are doing more than teaching subject matter—they are teaching the whole child. The very best high schools in this country are ensuring that students have self-worth, are actively engaged in their learning, and have a real sense of purpose. Based on a 2007-2008 My Voice™ study of over 140,000 students nationwide, this paper highlights a significant correlation between students who believe setting and achieving high goals is important and a school experience that promotes self-worth, active engagement, and a sense of purpose.

INTRODUCTION

The [My Voice survey](#) is a 69 item instrument that measures conditions that support [self-worth, active engagement, and purpose](#) in schools. The Quaglia Institute for Student Aspirations has identified eight conditions that enable students to strive for, and fulfill, all they are capable of academically, personally, and socially. Based on more than two decades of research, these conditions foster student aspirations and allow students to thrive in the school setting. The [8 Conditions that Make a Difference®](#) are:

- **Belonging** - the belief that a student is a valued member of a community, while still allowing each student to remain unique.
- **Heroes** - the everyday people in students' lives who inspire them to excel and to make positive changes in attitudes and lifestyles.
- **Sense of Accomplishment** - recognizing a student's effort, perseverance, and citizenship—along with academic achievement—as signs of student success.
- **Fun & Excitement** - students being actively engaged and emotionally involved in their schoolwork.
- **Curiosity & Creativity** - fostering a student's inquisitiveness, eagerness, and natural desire to learn new and interesting things.
- **Spirit of Adventure** - students' ability to take on positive, healthy challenges at school and home, with family and friends.
- **Leadership & Responsibility** - nurturing students' capacity to express their ideas and their willingness to accept consequences for their actions.

- **Confidence to Take Action** - students having the confidence to set goals and take the steps necessary to reach those goals.

These 8 Conditions form a framework for whole school reform. Schools that undertake Aspirations operationalize and embody the 8 Conditions in diverse ways. There is no single formula or prescription for implementation. Nor is there a single measure of success. Schools that take action to improve the 8 Conditions set various goals for themselves. Some have included: reducing tardies and absences, providing students with greater opportunities for leadership, creating more meaningful relationships between students and teachers, increasing post-secondary attendance, increasing the number of students taking advanced courses, improving state test scores, and reducing discipline referrals of all kinds, from detention to expulsion.

ASPIRATIONS AND ACHIEVEMENT

QISA defines aspirations as *the ability to dream about the future while being inspired in the present to reach those dreams*. An overriding objective of schools, at least as stated in the vision and mission statements of many schools, is improving the aspirations of its students. Yet those working in schools know that a student having aspirations is a symptom—an effect—of a number of underlying causes.

When schools nurture the self-worth of all students, when schools actively engage students in their lessons and in the life of the school, when schools help students develop a sense of purpose, students become inspired to set goals for themselves and have the confidence to work hard to achieve those goals. For many students, this includes performing to the best of their ability academically as they strive to become college and work ready.

METHODOLOGY

Of the 69 indicators on the My Voice survey, two of them, when combined, provide an operational definition of Aspirations as articulated above: “I think it is important to set high goals” and “I work hard to reach my goals.” We looked at the national aggregate of high school students who took the survey during the 2007-2008 school year (n=140,273) and compared those students who agreed with both statements to those who did not agree with either statement. In other words, we are comparing students who have aspirations with those who do not.

FINDINGS

There is a high degree of correlation between the two indicators. Of the students who agree that setting high goals is important, 90% also agree that they work hard to reach their goals. Conversely, of the students who agree that they work hard to reach their goals, 86% also agree that it is important to set high goals. By comparing those students who have aspirations to those who do not, we will have a clear picture of how these two groups of students experience school differently. With that clarity, we can decide how to improve schools in order to promote aspirations, and ultimately academic achievement, for all students.

SELF-WORTH

Self-worth occurs when students know they are valued members of the school community, have a person in their lives they can trust and learn from, and believe they have the ability to achieve—academically, personally, and socially. To increase their participation in the learning process, and so improve achievement, students must experience a sense of BELONGING by feeling that they are part of the school community while being appreciated and celebrated for their uniqueness. They must have a HERO, someone they can look up to, learn from, and respect. Finally, students must feel a SENSE OF ACCOMPLISHMENT by being recognized as much for effort, perseverance, and citizenship as they are for high grades and test scores. Students with self-worth are more likely to persevere through difficult tasks and take steps to achieve academically.

SELF-WORTH	I think it is important to set high goals AND I work hard to reach my goals.	
	Total in Agreement	Total did not agree
School is a welcoming and friendly place.	68%	39%
I feel accepted for who I am at school.	83%	54%
Teachers care about my problems and feelings.	46%	19%
I am proud of my school.	56%	20%
I have a teacher who is a positive role model for me.	72%	42%
Teachers care about me as an individual.	54%	23%
Teachers care if I am absent from school.	49%	24%
If I have a problem, I have a teacher with whom I can talk.	56%	24%
Teachers respect students.	58%	25%
Tests are an important part of my education.	73%	41%
Teachers recognize students who are kind and helpful.	75%	46%
I give up when schoolwork is difficult.	14%	34%
Teachers recognize me when I try my best.	65%	26%
I put forth my best effort at school.	83%	17%
Getting good grades is important to me.	95%	39%

In these charts, we see dramatic differences of 30% between students who say they set and work toward goals and those who do not. Students who have aspirations have more positive experiences in school of being accepted, respected, and recognized. They are twice as likely to view their teachers positively. Beyond having better peer and adult relationships at school, goal-setting students also recognize the value of tests, good grades, and persevering when tasks are difficult. In fact, 95% of students who have aspirations say that getting good grades is important to them, indicating a high degree of correlation between aspirations and having an academic mindset. Eighty-three percent (83%) of students who agree that goals are important and something to work towards also agree that they put forth their best effort at school, as compared to 17% of their peers who did not agree that goal setting and hard work are important.

Clearly there is a correlation between relationships, recognition, resilience, and students having aspirations. Our approach to assessment and accountability has ignored or obscured this connection for far too long. Any effective teacher feels this connection every time a student responds with increased attention to the use of her name instead of “dear”, every time a student athlete does well on a quiz following that teacher’s attendance at a game, and every time a student gives greater effort in a class that began with five minutes of *genuine* checking in. The bottom line in the data above is that students who have high aspirations do so because they are grounded in experiences of self-worth.

ACTIVE ENGAGEMENT

Active Engagement occurs when students and teachers are involved in the learning process as full partners. The passion and enthusiasm of teachers can infect students with a love of learning. The “achievement gap” will close when the “participation gap” lessens as a result of students experiencing FUN & EXCITEMENT in their learning environment. Students who are engaged in their learning also experience relevance in what they are learning through CURIOSITY & CREATIVITY. Finally, engaged students have a SPIRIT OF ADVENTURE that emboldens them to try new things, regardless of success or failure. With active engagement, learning—and therefore achievement in learning—becomes important in and of itself.

ACTIVE ENGAGEMENT	I think it is important to set high goals AND I work hard to reach my goals.	
	Total in Agreement	Total did not agree
I enjoy being at school.	56%	24%
Teachers enjoy working with students.	60%	30%
Teachers make school an exciting place to learn.	33%	12%
I enjoy participating in my classes.	63%	21%
Teachers have fun at school.	42%	20%
Learning can be fun.	75%	30%
At school I am encouraged to be creative.	62%	28%
My classes help me understand what is happening in my everyday life.	43%	16%
I enjoy learning new things.	87%	39%
I learn new things that are interesting to me at school.	74%	29%
What I learn in school will benefit my future.	85%	34%
I push myself to do better academically.	89%	30%
Students are supportive of each other.	42%	19%
Teachers help me learn from my mistakes.	62%	22%
Teachers think I can be successful.	80%	34%
I am excited to tell my friends when I get good grades.	64%	25%

Each indicator in the chart above reveals that the number of students with aspirations who are engaged in their classes is double that of their peers. Many more enjoy school, their classes, and learning. More report that their teachers are engaging, help when they make mistakes, and have high expectations of them. Relevance in both the present (“My classes help me understand what is happening in my everyday life”) and the future (“What I learn in school will benefit my future”) are also more likely in those students with aspirations. Finally, we see once again a high correlation between aspirations and academics—89% of students who have aspirations push themselves to do better academically as compared to 30% of their peers.

PURPOSE

When students take authorship for who they want to become by being confident, responsible members of their community, they have purpose. A sense of purpose involves developing students’ LEADERSHIP & RESPONSIBILITY by encouraging decision making and requiring accountability. When opportunities for genuine decision making are available, students feel a greater connection to school. When students find purpose in their lives, they have the CONFIDENCE TO TAKE ACTION in order to secure a meaningful, productive, and rewarding future.

PURPOSE	I think it is important to set high goals AND I work hard to reach my goals.	
	Total in Agreement	Total did not agree
I see myself as a leader.	70%	32%
Other students see me as a leader.	42%	17%
I think about others’ feelings when I make decisions.	76%	34%
I am a good decision maker.	76%	26%
I know the goals my school is working on this year.	42%	12%
I believe I can be successful.	97%	66%
I believe I can make a difference in this world.	75%	32%
Teachers expect me to be successful.	84%	47%
Going to college is important for my future.	94%	51%
I am excited about my future.	90%	32%
School is preparing me well for my future.	74%	24%

High correlations between students who have high aspirations and those who believe they can be successful (97%) and are excited about their future (90%) are to be expected. Aspiring students see themselves as leaders, believe their peers see them as leaders, and believe they are good decision makers at more than double the rate of their counterparts. The number of goal-oriented students who believe school is preparing them well for their future is triple that of their peers who do not believe in the importance of setting goals. Is it any wonder, then, that among students who do not have aspirations, only one in three of them (32%) is excited about their future?

CONCLUSION

Raising students' aspirations is not one more goal for schools to attain in an already overly long list of objectives. The truth of the matter is that inspiring students to reach their dreams and improving student achievement are mutually reinforcing. By ensuring that students in our schools have self-worth, are actively engaged in their learning, and have a sense of purpose, we are motivating students to set goals for themselves, inspiring them to work hard to reach those goals, and giving them a context in which they can be successful academically.

No Child Left Behind, in effect, asks schools to make improving academic test scores their top priority and to work diligently toward that goal. This combination of test score goal-setting and score-raising effort is known as Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). While the goal of making AYP is laudable and should be high on the list of school goals, it is also an overly narrow one. By linking funding to the goal of making AYP, the federal government has persuaded states, in turn, to adopt AYP as a goal. As a result, districts, and therefore principals, and therefore many teachers, have focused on AYP as their sole end. But not many students share this goal. And they are the ones taking the tests. This disconnect is the very reason that schools cannot improve academic achievement by focusing solely on academics.

Students' goals in school are much broader and varied than those expressed in AYP. Unlike the adults working with them, many students do not care at all if their school makes AYP or not. Even the most academic among them are more interested in test scores for personal reasons than institutional ones. Yet making AYP has become the nearly single-minded focus of all the adults working with students. This report should be a wake-up call for educators to:

- learn what their students' goals are
- help their students set high goals for themselves
- inspire their students to work hard to reach *their* goals
- help students see the connection between academic effort and the fulfillment of their dreams

Schools, districts, state governments, and indeed the national government need to ask whether solely pushing an academic agenda will result in all students reaching their fullest potential. One way to attain improved goal setting and effort, as supported by this study, is to improve feelings of self-worth, active engagement, and a sense of purpose. One obvious way to close the "achievement gap" is to first close the "participation gap". We need to connect all students to their experience of school, not just those for whom school "works".

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 *their* goal is to learn trigonometry or a trade, get good grades or go to college, students want to be successful. Too often, however, students do not reach their goals and fullest potential because the conditions that inspire and support them are not in place. The findings in this study lend statistical support to what educators have known anecdotally for decades: students who experience school as a place where they are valued, engaged, and purposeful have higher aspirations and, as a result, do better academically. This is neither complicated nor naïve. In fact, it is common sense. It is time to make it common practice as well.