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COLLEGE OF EDUCATION & HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

Selected News Releases

Survey Reflects Maine Students Optimistic and Ambitious, but Feeling Effects of National Educational and Social Concerns

ORONO, Maine -- Maine students are optimistic, think hard work is essential to success and view their parents as strong, positive influences in their lives, according to preliminary results from a University of Maine survey of more than 20,000 sixth through 12th graders representing 111 schools and every county in the state. The early data also suggest that student perceptions of their schools, teachers, peers and social experiences, are less positive, and there is an increasing disconnection between parents and schools as students advance in grade.

Students recognize the value of education, but the majority report being bored in school and not seeing the relevance of their courses to everyday life. Overall, Maine students are self-confident, ambitious and view their parents as good role models. Sixty-five percent of the students report living with both parents, 20 percent with one parent, and 10 percent alternate between parents.

The students tend to be quite critical of their peers, teachers and schools, and the data reflect the disturbing national trend toward lack of respect and empathy for others, says Walter McIntire, director of UMaine's Center for Research and Evaluation, which is analyzing the survey, "Students Speak: My Education and My Future."

The survey is designed as a diagnostic tool to help schools assess the conditions, behaviors and attitudes that affect student aspirations and the total learning environment from the student perspective.

The early numbers reflect national educational reform challenges, but also social concerns and consequences that are beyond the scope or ability of schools and that require broad community, state and federal resources and interventions, according to McIntire.

"We must be as willing to commit resources to ensure the affective, as well as the academic outcomes of students," he says.

While the majority of Maine students feel safe and supported, their responses suggest that they are experiencing some conditions and consequences stemming from an achievement-driven society perceived as becoming less civil and caring, more tolerant of disruptive and disrespectful behavior and less accountable for the common good and needs of others. Boys seem particularly vulnerable in most categories examined in the survey.

While 60 percent of students report feeling safe at school, 41 percent say they have been threatened verbally or physically by other students, and 35 percent report that other students have said things to hurt or insult them. Forty-six percent say they often have difficulty learning because of other

students disrupting the class, and only half think that teachers handle disruptive students effectively.

Only 67 percent of students (the majority male) say they are bothered when others are insulted or hurt verbally. Student perceptions of respect go in all directions. Only 36 percent say students show respect for each other; 34 percent say students show respect for teachers; and 61 percent say teachers respect students. Nearly 63 percent say they do no community or volunteer work, but over 31 percent of seniors report doing one to two hours of community service per week.

The free, voluntary survey represents the first major phase of the Maine Aspirations Benchmarking Initiative, which has the potential of tapping the perspective of every sixth through 12th grader in Maine public schools. The unprecedented research project is funded by Webber Energy Fuels, directed by the University of Maine/Maine Principals' Association Research Partnership and is being spearheaded by the Center for Research and Evaluation and the National Center for Student Aspirations, both located within UMaine's College of Education and Human Development.

Since the first of the year, nearly 250 schools throughout Maine have requested the survey and will receive individual reports to use in responsive, student-centered reform efforts. McIntire estimates that by the end of this year, up to 70,000 Maine students will have taken the survey, generating the state's largest, most comprehensive data base of students' views on their education, aspirations and futures, and the strengths and weaknesses of elements of Maine public education.

The message for parents and educators in Maine and nationally is immediate and imperative, according to Russell Quaglia, director of the National Center for Student Aspirations. "By a large margin, students tell us that their parents are the Number 1 influence on their future, and schools have the second greatest impact. Yet only about half the students say their parents like their school or even know what's going on there," he says. "The intent of the survey is not to place blame or make comparisons, but to put kids' views on the table and make informed responses."

McIntire cautions that the early responses are weighted toward middle school students as it has been easier for smaller K-6 or K-8 schools to administer and quickly return the survey. While the overall summative data might slightly change as more high school data arrive and in-depth analyses are done, the current figures provide a wealth of information, particularly about the views and experiences of students in the developmentally crucial middle school years.

The survey reflects that sixth graders are overall more optimistic, less critical and more excited about school than older students. School configuration seems to be a contributing factor. McIntire points out that sixth graders in a K-6 school, as the oldest and most experienced, may be more confident and feel more supported by teachers than seventh or ninth graders entering a new school as the youngest and least savvy students.

Younger students are also more confident that they can find success in their home state. Only 15 percent of sixth graders indicate that they need to leave Maine to be successful in life, but that number increases in each grade, with over 35 percent of seniors reporting their best chance for success lies outside the state.

The survey also holds the potential for a series of studies on the differing perceptions, motivation and attitudes of boys and girls. The early figures indicate that girls of all ages tend to be more optimistic, more self-confident, more engaged in school, more aware of the need for post-secondary education, do more homework, read more for pleasure and are more empathetic than boys.

In addition, the survey provides important information for the implementation of Maine's Learning Results and for the shaping of policy to address issues of equity, according to College of Education and Human Development Dean Robert Cobb. While the new state standards measure student achievement, the aspirations survey assesses motivation to achieve and looks at some principles yet to be addressed in the content standards such as career development, he explains.

"Irrespective of what standardized measures tell us about cognitive development of students, these results are showing a student body in Maine that views effort, not just ability, as important to success in the future," says Cobb. "Knowing what students are telling us about their daily school experiences and the effect of education can help all of us set priorities and formulate strategies for improving teaching, learning and the school environment," he says. "The key will be what individual schools do with the data generated from their own students."

More information about the Maine Aspirations Benchmarking Initiative is available from the Center for Research and Evaluation, (207) 581-2493.

Examples of Responses from the Maine Aspirations Benchmarking Initiative Survey, "Students Speak: My Education and My Future"

University of Maine College of Education and Human Development researchers are widely recognized as leaders in the field of student aspirations research and interventions. Their research includes the identification of some core conditions that should be present and

practiced in schools to inspire and help all students reach their potential. These conditions, or school climate factors are: belonging; heroes or role models; sense of accomplishment; fun and excitement; spirit of adventure; curiosity and creativity; leadership and responsibility; and confidence to take action. The following data reflect perspectives of more than 20,000 sixth through 12th graders, representing 111 Maine public schools.

Conditions in School that Foster Aspirations

- 47 percent report that teachers value their opinions, and 75 percent say teachers expect them to succeed, but only 45 percent say teachers care about their problems and feelings.
- Only 48 percent say they are proud of their school. The highest positive views are from sixth graders.
- 84 percent report a strong, caring relationship with at least one adult; 62 percent report having a teacher who is a role model.
- 88 percent believe they can always improve, and 79 percent put forth the necessary effort to reach a goal, but 68 percent say their teachers don't tell them they are doing a good job.

- Nearly 60 percent of students say they are usually bored in school, ranging from 49 percent of sixth graders to 63 percent of seniors.
- 74 percent say they are eager to learn new things, but only 52 percent think teachers support them when they try something new.
- 64 percent seek solutions to complex problems, but only 30 percent perceive teachers as allowing them to explore topics they find interesting.
- 80 percent accept responsibility for their actions.
- 88 percent believe that anyone can succeed if they work hard enough, and 81 percent are confident in their ability to do well.

How Students Spend their Time

- Nearly 20 percent spend 11 or more hours per week watching television or playing video games; just 3 percent spend equivalent time reading for pleasure, although 45 percent read for pleasure one to two hours per week.
- All students report doing some homework, with the peak being 25 percent spending one to four hours per week on school assignments.
- Over 20 percent report no recreational computer use, which could suggest the issue of access due to socio-economic circumstances. Boys spend more than twice the time girls do in recreational computer use.
- Over 43 percent of high school seniors and 33 percent of juniors report working more than 11 hours per week.
- Over 20 percent report spending three to four hours a week in sports or hobbies; a similar percentage spend the same amount of time hanging out with friends.

Student Perceptions of Self and Future

- 75 percent are optimistic about the future; 62 percent say they make sacrifices today to benefit their future.
- 85 percent believe what they learn in school will benefit their future, but only 48 percent say their courses are relevant to their everyday life.
- 66 percent of juniors and 68 percent of seniors think they need to go to college to get a good job; 11-12 percent in both classes are unsure.
- 26 percent say they need to move out of the state to be successful, 15 percent of sixth graders and over 35 percent of juniors and seniors

- 82 percent have high goals and expectations for themselves.

Student Perceptions of Parents' Role in their Education

- 78 percent, both males and females, report their parents are positive role models; 93 percent say their parents care about their success in school, expect them to succeed and think that going to college is important
- 42 percent say their parents and teachers talk to each other about their school work; the percentage declines steadily from grade 6 to 12.
- 53 percent say their parents know what goes on at their school; only 51 percent think their parents like their school.

Social Influences in Shaping Student Plans for the Future

- When asked about strong influences on their immediate future, 70 percent identified their families, followed by schools. Only 15 percent report that the media and 14 percent that the church are influential in shaping their plans for the future.

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