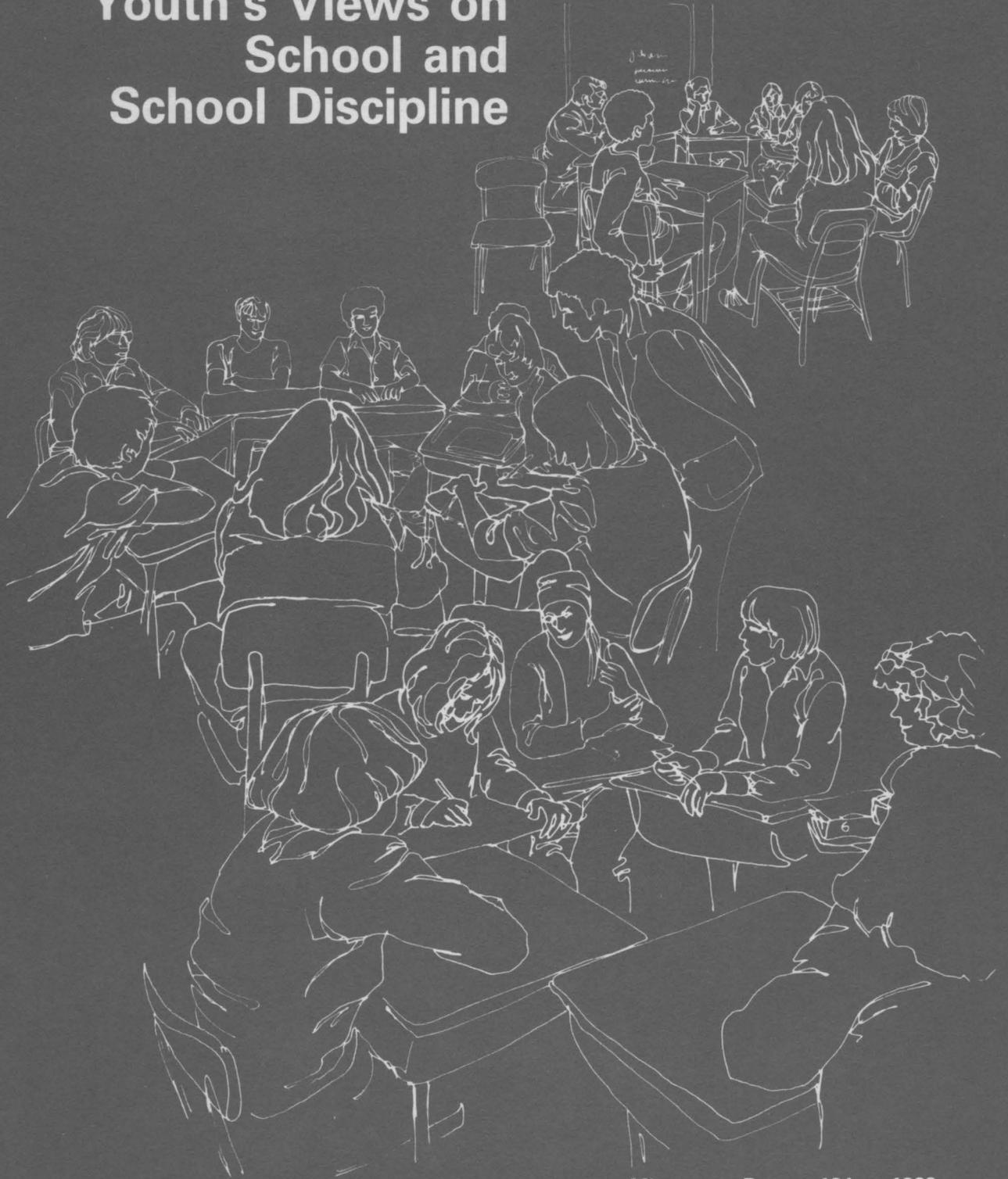


# MINNESOTA YOUTH POLL: Youth's Views on School and School Discipline



Minnesota Report 184 — 1983  
Agricultural Experiment Station  
University of Minnesota

AD-MR-2155

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank the young people and teachers who donated their time to participate in the Minnesota Youth Poll.

The authors would also like to credit the following individuals for the photographs used in this text:

David S. Strickler, Strix Pix (photos on pages 13, 17, 24); James L. Shaffer (photos on pages 4, 7, 8, 18); Les Myers (photo on page 19); B.J. Skoglund Photos (photo on page 15).

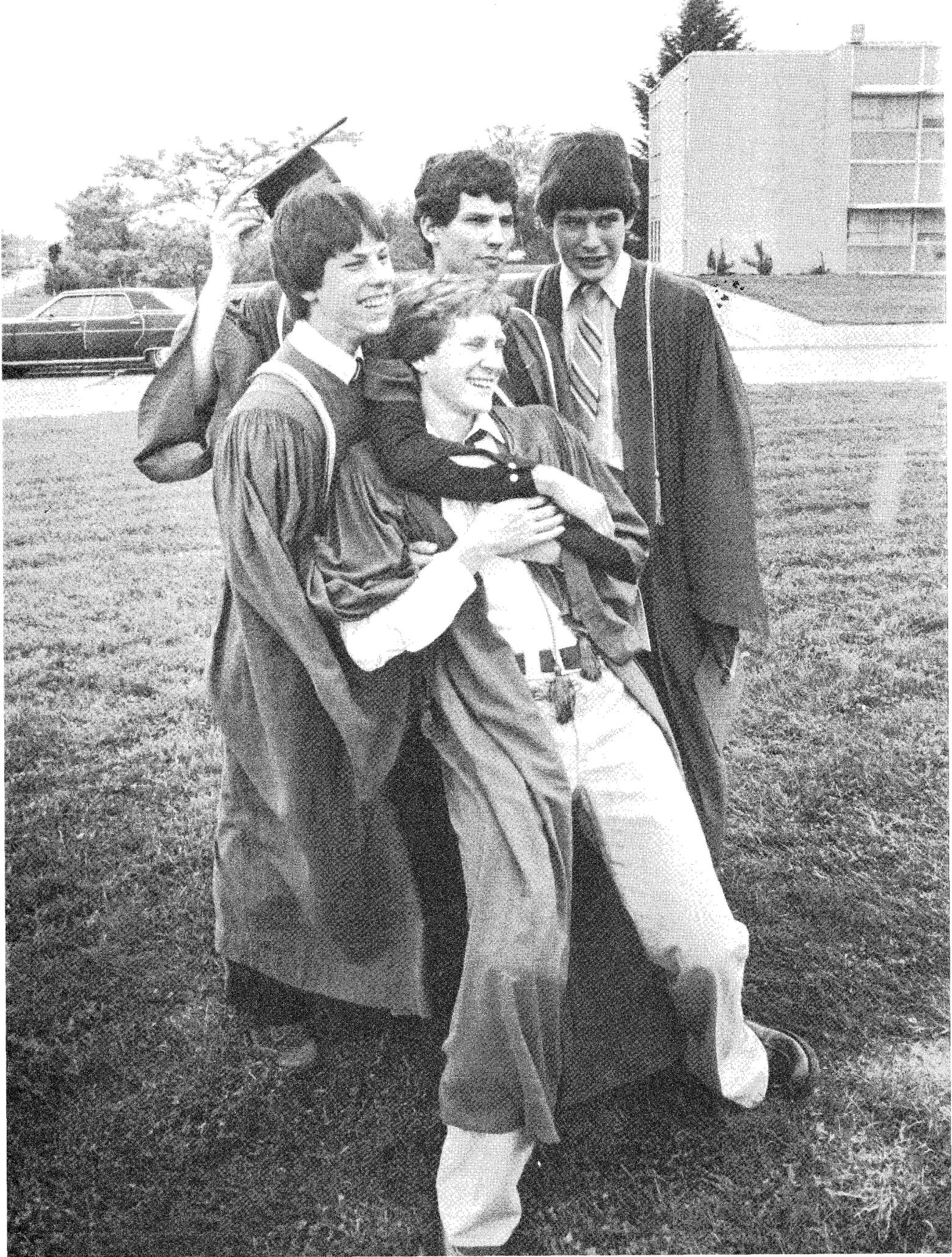
## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction .....	5
Section I—Purpose and Climate of School	
Does Good Education = Good Job? .....	6
A Report Card on Minnesota Schools ....	8
Parental Views on Education Quality .....	9
Compulsory Education Laws.....	11
Day-to-Day Reality of Schools.....	13
Relations Between Students and Teachers .	15
What Students Like About School .....	17
What Students Dislike About School .....	18
What Students Learn .....	19
What's Not Important .....	20
Section II—School Discipline and Rules	
Student Views on School Discipline .....	21
Punishment for Violating School Rules ..	25
Section III—Summary	
Purpose and Climate of School .....	29
School Discipline and Rules.....	30
Conclusions and Implications .....	30
References .....	32
Appendix A.....	33

# MINNESOTA YOUTH POLL: Youth's Views on School and School Discipline

by  
Diane Hedin  
Paula Simon  
Michael Robin

Center For Youth Development and Research



# INTRODUCTION

In this issue of the Minnesota Youth Poll, teenagers around the state discuss their opinions and experiences with school. Our goal is to provide an in-depth look, from the adolescent's point of view, at an institution which has a pervasive and profound effect on their day-to-day lives and their futures. A wide range of school issues are explored, and these include the goals and purposes of education, overall quality of their schools, student-teacher relationships, compulsory education, discipline and order, and school rules.

This study was prompted by several factors. First, the purposes of the Minnesota Youth Poll are: (1) to give Minnesota teenagers a voice to express their concerns to adults who provide services and make decisions affecting their lives, and (2) to expand factual and theoretical understanding of youth by learning how they perceive and understand issues significant to them. The school—its climate, program, and purpose—is clearly such an issue.

Second, the public debate on the quality and purpose of secondary schools is primarily a debate between and among adults. Public schools are one of the few human service organizations in which consumer participation is not encouraged. The involvement of the “consumers” of education—the students—in assessment of and policy making in schools has been sporadic, and in the past decade, has declined significantly. Yet it is hard to imagine how thoughtful and worthwhile reform can take place without the input of students. It is our hope that this Youth Poll can have a role in bringing young people into the policy discussions about the future of the secondary school.

Third, in previous Youth Polls such as Friendship, and Delinquency, teenage respondents have demonstrated that they have complex and sophisticated knowledge about issues which are part of their everyday lives. Indeed, on topics of high saliency to them, teenagers are thoughtful theorists and philosophers, whose ideas can provide valuable insight to those who seek to better understand and work with adolescents. By the nature of their involvement and the length of their tenure, teenagers are “experts” on schools. We would anticipate that this expertise may lead to new insights into how to better understand and organize schooling for adolescents.

This poll is divided into two parts—the first covers purpose and climate of schools, and the second focuses on discipline and school rules. Appendix A contains the specific questions on each of these topics.

## METHOD

Approximately 850 Minnesota high school students (14 to 18 years old) in 143 discussion groups from inner city, urban, suburban, and rural schools participated in this study. All but

two (Blake and Duluth Cathedral) were public schools. In addition, students in several treatment centers for delinquent and emotionally disturbed youth participated.

The schools and programs which participated were as follows: Worthington High School, Lincoln High School in Thief River Falls, Apollo High School in St. Cloud, Lindberg and Eisenhower High Schools in Hopkins, Osseo High School, Coon Rapids High School, Duluth Cathedral High School, Marshall High School in Rochester, Blake School in Minneapolis, Harding High School in St. Paul; and Southwest, Southeast Free School, South, and Washburn in the Minneapolis School System. Finally, the Minneapolis Diversion Program, the Area Learning Center in St. Cloud, and the Fairview Hospital Adolescent Unit also were involved.

In the Minnesota Youth Poll, the opinions and ideas of the students are obtained in the following way. In each school location, the questionnaire is administered in a required subject matter course—English or social studies. This allows us to tap the opinions of students representing a wide range of abilities and interests in each school. The students are asked to sit in small, self-selected groups of four to seven people. One member of the group acts as both the discussion leader and recorder. He or she reads the question, which are constructed so that they will elicit discussion, explanation, and elaboration, and then writes down as much of the discussion that ensues as possible.

The group questionnaires are analyzed using qualitative methods. This entails separating the questionnaires by the respondents' area of residence (i.e., urban, rural, suburban). Answers to each question are then analyzed for recurring themes and variations. This poll, in contrast to more traditional opinion polls, focuses on the meanings and assumptions young people use to understand their world. Occasionally, students are asked to poll members of their group on a specific issue and then report the number of students who agree or disagree with a proposition. Only in those cases are data reported as exact percentages.

The Minnesota Youth Poll method was designed to capture and preserve the richness and complexity of the adolescent experience. Therefore, readers will seldom find tables of numbers and percentages of “yes” and “no” responses as they would in polls using standard empirical survey research techniques. More typically, the information is treated as themes or pictures in an attempt to retain both the “music and lyrics” of what the young people have said.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Details on the philosophy and methodology of the Minnesota Youth Poll are available in *The Center Quarterly Focus*, “The Minnesota Youth Poll” by Diane Hedin and Howard Wolfe, Spring 1979. Copies may be obtained by contacting the Center for Youth Development and Research, 386 McNeal Hall, 1985 Buford Avenue, St. Paul, MN 55108. (612) 376-7624.

# PURPOSE AND CLIMATE OF SCHOOL

## Section I:

---

*“There are so many people going to college—who’d hire an uneducated person over an educated one?”*

---

### DOES GOOD EDUCATION = GOOD JOB?

The Youth Poll respondents were in overwhelming agreement (about 75 percent) with the statement, “To get a good job, get a good education.” One student summed up these sentiments and also highlighted the assumption that playing by the rules of the “school game” would automatically lead to success in the job market.

“I believe a good education leads to a good job. If it doesn’t, I’m wasting my time.”

To some, a good education meant a high school diploma, but the majority interpreted it as a college degree. Almost no one defined a “good education” in terms of the quality of the learning enterprise, the quantity of knowledge and skills gained, or growth in students’ intellectual or psychological maturity. “A good job” was defined as one which paid well or was personally satisfying. Respondents argued that a good education was necessary for a good job for the following four reasons:

1) Forty-four percent of the groups cited that without specific skills and knowledge, merely finding or maintaining employment was difficult:

“Because nobody wants to hire a dumb sucker.”

“Without a good education you couldn’t do difficult good jobs plus you wouldn’t get good jobs in the first place.”

“It’s kind of hard to get a good job when you don’t know anything.”

2) Twenty-five percent of the groups indicated that a person was not upwardly mobile in the labor market without education:

“Because without a good education you’ll be digging ditches in Africa.”

“I think it’s definitely true; otherwise, you’ll be carrying garbage all your life.”

“Without an education and training you will remain a dirtball.”

Students argued that the intense competition for a limited number of jobs makes the person with more years of schooling a more marketable commodity:

“There are so many people going to college—who’d hire an uneducated person over an educated one?”

“Lots of people have degrees and they’d get a job over you, no one wants an ignorant worker.”

“It is true because of the competition in the world for good paying jobs.”



“Yes, because the competition is just incredible.”

3) A few groups went beyond the simplistic notion that one was automatically more employable with more years of education, and talked about the benefits derived from schooling. These were seen primarily as increasing levels of responsibility and maturity:

“Because education teaches you responsibility as well as knowledge.”

“College isn’t just classes; it’s a place to grow up and learn about life firsthand.”

4) A handful of groups expressed qualified agreement, but cautioned that education was not a guarantee for getting a good job:

“On the most part yes, but it doesn’t guarantee a job. You must be ambitious.”

“It could go either way because some people who go to college can’t find jobs and some people who don’t go to college can end up with a good job or being a millionaire.”

“True for the chance, but doesn’t mean you will get a good job in society today.”

Approximately 25 percent of the respondents disagreed with the proposition that to get a good job you must get a good education, and gave the following reasons for their position:

1) Of those who disagreed, about one-fourth were pessimistic about finding a job even after completing their education:

“Not necessarily, you can’t apply all college majors to jobs. You can get out of high school and get a job at IBM.”

“False, once you receive your education, you can’t find a job.”

2) Another 25 percent expressed the idea that school was not necessarily the place people gain the skills needed on the job:

“No, because you could develop a skill that could benefit you immensely and you didn’t learn it in school but rather you picked up bits and pieces during your life.”

“No, not always, because some people have certain skills that can’t be or weren’t taught in a school.”

3) About one-third of those who disagreed with the proposition said that finding a job was based on luck, chance, or connections, and not necessarily on skill, knowledge, or credentials:

“No, it depends on who you know, what’s available, etc.”

“No, because you may be lucky and know the right people.”

“No, people who get good jobs get them from parents.”

“No, it’s not what you know, it’s who you know.”

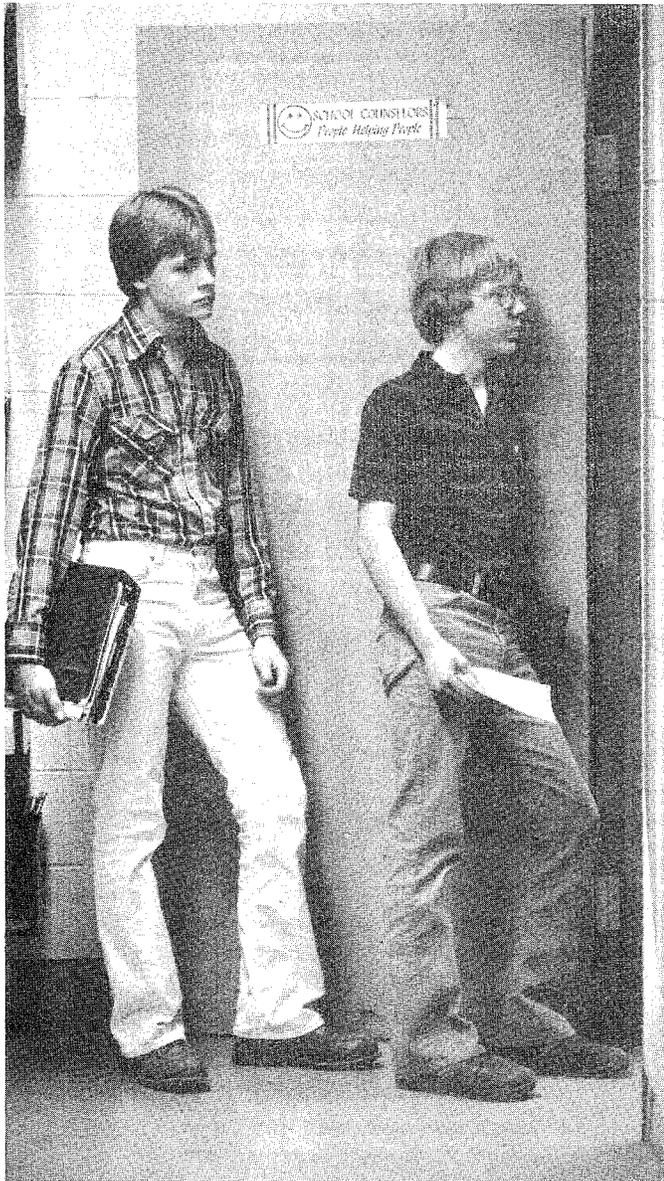
---

*“College isn’t just classes; it’s a place to grow up and learn about life firsthand.”*

---

4) Some suggested that it was necessary to examine the definition of what constituted a “good job.” They argued that if a good job was defined as one that brought personal satisfaction, then the formula was incorrect. If it, however, meant that a good job was the same as a good salary, it may be more valid:

“I don’t think it’s necessarily true. Because if you think of a ‘good job’ as one you are happy at, you might not need a good education. But if a good job is one that makes a lot of money, then you do need the education.”



## A REPORT CARD ON MINNESOTA SCHOOLS

In the previous discussion, students discussed a good education primarily in terms of credentials, with a good education being synonymous with a diploma. We wanted to learn more about their perceptions of the quality of the education they were receiving. Since students are familiar with the A-F grading system as an approximate gauge of excellence, we asked them to use this technique for evaluating their own school and to explain their choice. Students awarded their schools the following grades: A = 10%, B = 33%, C = 33%, D = 10% = 10%.

The criteria employed to assign grades is of particular interest. The relationships between staff and students was the key consideration, followed by the curriculum, which included the variety and choice of classes as well as the quality of classes themselves. Next came school facilities—the physical plant, heating, maintenance—followed by school rules and discipline, and then by the quality of the school administration. The amount of scheduled vs. discretionary time and extracurricular activities also came under scrutiny from a small number of groups. The choice of an A grade was based on a range of criteria, but a common theme was that the relationships between students and teachers were characterized by empathy and respect. Students also took into account how their school compared to others:

“Compared to other schools, gave school an A because of modular scheduling, relaxed atmosphere, facilities, etc.”

“A-, it offers a lot of different courses. It has remedial and advanced classes. The teachers seemed concerned about students.”

“A+, kids and teachers decide together, it's pretty democratic.”

“A+. They help you a lot more than public schools.”

“Teachers, A, they can relate to us and understand how we feel most of the time. Open campus, A, gives us more freedom; class choices, A-.”

Students who gave their schools an overall grade of B also mentioned a variety of assets, but in some cases they cited liabilities, too. The criticisms tended to focus on the quality of staff-student interactions and negative attitudes about school on the part of both students and teachers.

“B—We like the mod system, they treat the students as non-adults too many times, we should be looked at as adults in more situations, a lot of classes to choose from, one can make of their education what they want.”

“B—They try—we hate school but we still are halfway dedicated.”

“Academically B+ because there are lots of college bound classes that the school offers. Excitement-wise we give it a D- because everyone including the teachers are sick of school and are bored.”

“B maybe B+ pretty good system. Lot of selection in classes, good teachers, potential. Good school building, good sports, and music programs. Good speech programs.”

“B+, B, B, C, B. They have a hard job and do their best, freedom of subject choice, better than others worse than some, not enough guidance.”

*“A+, kids and teachers decide together, it's pretty democratic.”*

*“C, because the teachers do a mediocre job sometimes and don't seem to care about what happens to you anyway.”*

*“F. You really don't learn anything. You could go home and learn more at home than at school.”*

“B+ for grade because they give people the choice to choose what they want, but it is under good supervision, a new school (10 years old), a ‘unique’ structure and atmosphere.”

“B to B+, we have a wide variety of classes to choose from. We also have an open campus. Lots of activities such as clubs and sports. Our sports and clubs often excel. We’ve had state winning teams.”

C is considered average, and about one-third of our respondents placed their school in that category—not terrible but not wonderful either. Some argued that C was a fair grade in that their schools did not make any exceptional efforts to merit a higher grade.

“C, average because there is nothing exciting about it.”

“C, because the teachers do a mediocre job sometimes and don’t seem to care about what happens to you anyway.”

“We decided on a C-. Our school is about average, but it has a lot of bad rules.”

“C, too much freedom, let you get away with a lot. Teachers don’t know how to teach anymore.”

“C, because of the ununderstanding teachers, always cold in the winter and hot in the summer.”

“C, the classes are pretty good but the school conditions are bad (scattered classrooms).”

“C, average system is pretty good but policies need a lot of work (disciplinary policies).”

The rationale for giving a school a D was not clear, nor did any of the groups elaborate on their decisions. Much clearer were the reasons for giving a school an F, which can be summarized as seeing their school totally lacking in relevance and purpose:

“F because of sad rules and some jerk-off teachers. We are not prepared adequately for the ‘real world’ just for a repeat of Kindergarten. Building poor, not enough room.”

“F. You really don’t learn anything. You could go home and learn more at home than at school.”

“F. School just sucks, no matter what way you look at it; it’s like jail. We have no freedom and no time to do what we like.”

### Regional Differences

When the responses were analyzed by region, we found that rural students were most satisfied with their schools while suburban students were least satisfied. Table 1 below shows these results. In this analysis, grades A and B were considered above average, a grade of C was average, and D and F were below average. Sixty-five percent of rural respondents rated their school above average, while only 37 percent of suburban students gave their school an A or B. Half of the urban youth, on the other hand, thought their schools were doing above-average work, but were more likely to grade their school as below average than were the other two groups.

**Table 1:** Grade assigned to school by geographic location.

	Urban	Suburban	Rural	All
Above Average (A or B)	50%	37%	65%	44%
Average (C)	28%	44%	26%	35%
Below Average (D or F)	22%	19%	9%	21%

What do these grades tell us generally about the level of satisfaction that Minnesota high school students have with their schools? First, there are regional differences which were explained above. Second, we would have to have a clearer idea of the expectations that young Minnesotans have for their schools to be able to confidently judge their success. For example, approximately three-fourths of the respondents ranked their school average (35 percent) or above (44 percent). This could be interpreted to mean that the overwhelming majority thought schools were doing at least an adequate job. But reading the data another way, less than half (44 percent) of the students thought they were attending schools that could be considered “good” or “excellent.” In a state which has long prided itself on the high quality of its schools, this report card from its students doesn’t appear to be a terribly strong endorsement.

### PARENTAL VIEWS ON EDUCATIONAL QUALITY

While the majority of the students indicate that the schools are doing C or better work, what do their parents think about the quality of secondary education? We asked the Youth Poll participants what *they* thought their parents’ views were through the following question:

“Do your parents feel you are getting a good education? Why or why not?”

About 65 percent of the students said that their parents do think they are getting a good education. This is a slightly more positive assessment than that of the students. If from the previous section we consider only grades A and B as indicating a “good education,” only 43 percent of students would rate the schools as “good.”

---

*“Yes, because they feel that if they can’t understand it then we must be learning.”*

---

Parental opinion, according to the students, is based first on the school’s general reputation, and second, on whether their child earns good grades.

“Yes, grades that you bring home, results of district test, the general way you act.”

“Yes, because we bring home good grades. The classes we take are academic, not easy like arts, cooking, etc.”

“Yes, because of grades, comparisons to other schools.”

“Yes, because you do well on college entry tests, etc.”

A small number of students (5 groups) thought that their parents were satisfied because it was as good or better than their own education.

“Yes, because they feel that if they can’t understand it then we must be learning.”

“Yes, they think we are getting a better one than they did; we do different things.”

“They think we do. It’s not as hard as they think it is. They think we are getting the same education they did.”

The majority of private school students who participated in the poll said that both they and their parents felt they were getting a good, if not better, education than students in public school. They argued that unless this were the case, their parents would not be paying for their schooling. The following comments reflect the notion that for private school students a good education is equated with its cost.

“Yes, because they’re paying lots of money and they should get their money’s worth.”

“Yes, because our parents don’t pay that much to get a lousy education.”

“Yes, because private schools are harder than public schools, and the teachers give individual attention.”

A little over one-third of the respondents reported that their parents think they are being poorly educated. One theme was that their parents perceive that the total school system is of poor quality, and thus, their children could not be receiving a good education from any part of it. A few groups were able to be more specific about their parents’ criticisms, which included lack of rigor, discipline, and challenge. One group summed up their parents’ attitudes by saying, “They don’t feel our education program is worth talking about.”

Students indicated that their parents’ most common criticism was that their children have *too much freedom* and are not spending enough time in school.

“No, not in school enough time, not enough emphasis on academics.”

“No, they think we have too much freedom. The teachers don’t teach as well as they used to.”

“No, too much free time.”

“No, our parents think the school is too easy and gives students too much time to get in trouble.”

---

*“No, school doesn’t teach you anything anymore. Not enough attention from teachers. Not as strict as they were. You only get as good an education as you want. You have to work for it.”*

---

Parents were thought to be critical of the curriculum, because it was *not sufficiently academically rigorous*:

“No, not with my easy classes.”

“Majority says no—too many sluff classes.”

“No, because he doesn’t think the classes that are offered are really worth taking. No, because you can’t get the classes you want.”

“Some no because the main classes (reading, writing, math) aren’t required, and we can take other “sluff” classes just to get enough credits to graduate.”

“No, no, no, no—because of dumb classes, we need better required classes.”

*Teachers*, according to a few of our respondents, are the source of the problem. Respondents thought that their parents perceived a decline in the competence of the teaching staff to impart knowledge, keep order, and show genuine interest in the students:

“No, teachers are trying to get rid of us.”

“No, cause they feel that the new way they teach us isn’t as good as it used to be.”

“No, they don’t think the teachers are teaching the right things.”

“No, school doesn’t teach you anything anymore. Not enough attention from teachers. Not as strict as they were. You only get as good an education as you want. You have to work for it.”

A handful of students mentioned the *atmosphere* of the school as a key factor in their parents’ low opinion:

“No, because they think this place is full of drugs. Because everyone but maybe two people smoke.”

“No, because they think it is just for trouble makers and drug atticks (sic).”

Finally, a small number of students indicated that their parents think that they are getting a good education, but that their judgments are based on surface impressions and not factual information. Some seemed pleased that their parents were so ill-informed and had no intention of changing that situation.

“As far as we know, yes. But what they don’t know won’t hurt them.”

“Yes, but they don’t really know what’s going on—all they ask is if I made it there.”

The question posed: “Do your parents feel you are getting a good education? Why or why not?” requires the student to assume the role of their parent and answer from the parents’ point of view. Can adolescents really understand and articulate their parents’ perceptions? While it is not possible to answer this question in a definitive way, given this set of data (to do this would require asking the parents the same question and comparing the responses), we can compare the criteria the students used for grading their school with those they imagined their parents would use in judging whether their child was receiving a good education. If these factors were precisely the same in both cases, it would probably mean the students were not assuming the role of the parents, but merely using their own opinions and claiming they were their parents’ ideas.

But we found that students judged the excellence of the school in different ways than they assumed their parents would. For example, the students’ key criteria was a relationship between students and staff characterized by trust and respect, next was a high quality and varied curriculum, followed by a good physical plant, rules characterized by fairness and democratic principles, free time in the schedule, and a variety of extracurricular activities. In contrast, students said their parents assessed the quality of the school by its record of academic excellence, strict discipline, and minimal freedom and choice; by the number of competent, dedicated teachers, and by the absence of drugs and violence.

The students’ guesses about their parents’ views are very similar to the list of problems given by adult respondents in the Newsweek Poll conducted by The Gallup Organization in March, 1981 (Williams, et al, 1981). While the Newsweek Poll is a national opinion poll and surveys a random sample of adults

(who are not necessarily parents), it seems reasonable to assume that the responses of the Minnesota Youth Poll's participants' parents would not differ in radical ways. Therefore, we would conclude that our respondents do have a fairly accurate understanding of their parents' view of their schools and that these differ in significant ways from their own.

---

*“They don’t have much involvement in school, and I wouldn’t want them to. Schools for the kids not for the parents.”*

---

### Parental Involvement in Secondary Schools

Students were asked whether their parents have much involvement in their school and the overwhelming majority of students said that they had *none*. This finding lends support to the claim that their parents' opinions about the schools and education, and particularly about problems of discipline and violence, are based on neither fact nor experience. We followed up this question by asking students: “Would you like them to have more or less involvement?” Only about one-fifth of the students polled indicated that they would like more active parents. While the type of involvement was not generally specified, a few groups would like their parents to improve the overall quality of the program, and to lend support and encouragement to their child:

“Our parents don’t do that much with the school. I would like to see more involvement. If they got involved, you could see that they really care about what’s going on.”

“More, they should be involved and concerned about our education. Do things to improve it.”

“I would like my parents to be more involved to help stick up for me, to defend me.”

Approximately half said that their parents had little or no participation in school activities and the students preferred this state of affairs. For some, parental involvement would mean a crossing of turf because, to many students, school is considered the territory of the young. For others, it would mean parents were “checking up” or watching over them.

“No, none at all, they shouldn’t have to check up on you.”

“No, we really don’t feel it is necessary for our parents to get involved in school activities. Us students are the ones here to learn, and get away from our parents once in awhile.”

“They don’t have much involvement in school, and I wouldn’t want them to. Schools for the kids not for the parents.”

“No. Less because our parents are too old fashioned, and we don’t want to be around with all of our friends there.”

“No, kind of. About the same. If they had more, they might change things drastically.”

“I would like my parents less involved—all they do is yell at me.”

A small number of groups said that opportunities for parental participation are limited and that its need diminishes as students grow older:

“No, I don’t care if they have any involvement in school. It really doesn’t matter to me because they used to when I was in grade school and they were active while all my brothers and sisters were in school. I don’t expect them to have much involvement now because they’ve already put in their time.”

“Parents go to sports events, about the only thing they can do.”

Only a handful of students said that their parents were active in school affairs, and of those, half indicated that they would prefer their parents having less involvement. This was particularly true for students in treatment facilities and special schools:

“Yes, but I get in more trouble that way.”

“They have a lot of involvement because of the trouble I’ve been in, but I don’t like it, I’m always getting ragged on.”

These comments suggest that high school students see their schools as *their* territory; a place very separated from the world of their family. They viewed increased parental involvement with alarm since such participation symbolizes to them that they really are not as mature or independent as they wish to be. Only in those cases where the young want the protection of their parents against the school staff is more involvement supported. But overall, high school students want their parents to remain ignorant about and isolated from their schools.

### COMPULSORY EDUCATION LAWS

One way to assess the level of importance that youth attach to schooling is to find out whether they think that they should be compelled to attend; and we did this through the following question:

“Should there be laws forcing those under 16 to be in school? Should this age limit be raised or lowered? To what age? Why?”

---

*“Those under 16 can’t really realize how what they do will affect them the rest of their life.”*

---

From the wide support (73 percent) for compulsory education laws, it would appear that young people think that earning a diploma is so crucial that they favor requiring people to do what is good for them. They argued that these laws were needed to guarantee at least a minimal possibility for life success:

“An education is important and it would be better to have kids in school learning than being on the streets causing trouble.”

“There should be laws—at least they get some education and get a little responsibility.”

“You should be required to finish high school because you won’t get a job without at least a high school diploma.”

“People should be required to have a high school education, can’t make it in this world without one.”

“They should be prepared for life . . . (at least a little).”

Some suggested that these laws were necessary because many of their peers are immature and unable to make responsible decisions about their lives, particularly decisions which relate to the future.

“Those under 16 can’t really realize how what they do will affect them the rest of their life.”

“Those under 16 don’t have the responsibility to make their own decisions.”

“People under 16 don’t know totally what’s going on.”

“Under 16, they don’t really know enough yet, but at 16 they are old enough to make a decision.”

“Because you can’t make up your own mind very good till you are about 16 or older.”

A surprising 34 percent even suggested that the age limit be raised to 17 or 18, because this would almost guarantee that everyone would obtain a high school diploma.

“Age should be raised. Education is important. Some kids won’t get a high school diploma just because they failed one class. A lot of people that drop out can’t read or write, it doesn’t help the economy. If age wasn’t so young, kids wouldn’t be so tempted to drop out.”

“Raised to 17 or 18, that way they should make it at least to 11th or 12th grade, and that could be enough education to survive in the outer world.”

“Raised to 17, when you’re 16 all you have left is two years and when you’re 17 all you have left is 1 year. So it encourages people to stay for that one last year.”

“Should be to 18 so everyone has a high school diploma for later job opportunities.”

“The limit should be raised to 18. Although there are exceptions, many students don’t know to what extent dropping out of school at age 16 will do to the rest of their lives.”

---

*“People that are forced to go to school may not learn anything anyway.”*

---

The idea that a right or privilege should be delayed was surprising. In past youth polls, respondents have almost always taken the contrary position and urged that restrictions on their age groups be reduced. For example, they argued that teenagers should be able to seek confidential health care at any age

(Hedin, Resnick, and Blum, 1980) and that the minimum age for smoking, drinking, and working be decreased. Only on the issue of voting did a minority argue for increasing the age to 21 (Conrad, Hedin, and Simon, 1981). That one-third of the respondents urge that the age at which youth can leave school be raised strikes us as an even more significant departure than does raising the voting age. Voting does not have the pervasive effect on the day-to-day lives of adolescents as does the law that requires youth attend school until 16. That youth will accept such control and even suggest further control, is a dramatic statement about the significance they attach to completing high school.

The majority of those who took the position that the age for compulsory school attendance should be raised were high school seniors, which means they themselves were 17 or 18 years old. It may be that the older teenager has limited respect for the capacity of those younger than himself to make wise decisions about their future. We found a similar reaction regarding use of alcohol, where older teenagers charged that those younger than themselves were irresponsible in their drinking habits while they themselves were not (Hedin, Wolfe, and Baizerman, 1976). Perhaps human beings at every stage of development, having typically experienced difficulty and disappointment in navigating that phase, assume the next group will as well.

Approximately 27 percent asserted that compulsory education laws should be abolished for the following reasons. First, teenagers were mature enough to make their own decisions, or at least should have the power to decide what is in their best interest:

“It is their life, they should be able to do anything they want with it.”

“Laws should be abolished, we should all have free choice.”

“You should get through elementary school, then it’s your decision.”

“Should have the option to drop out of school after kindergarten.”

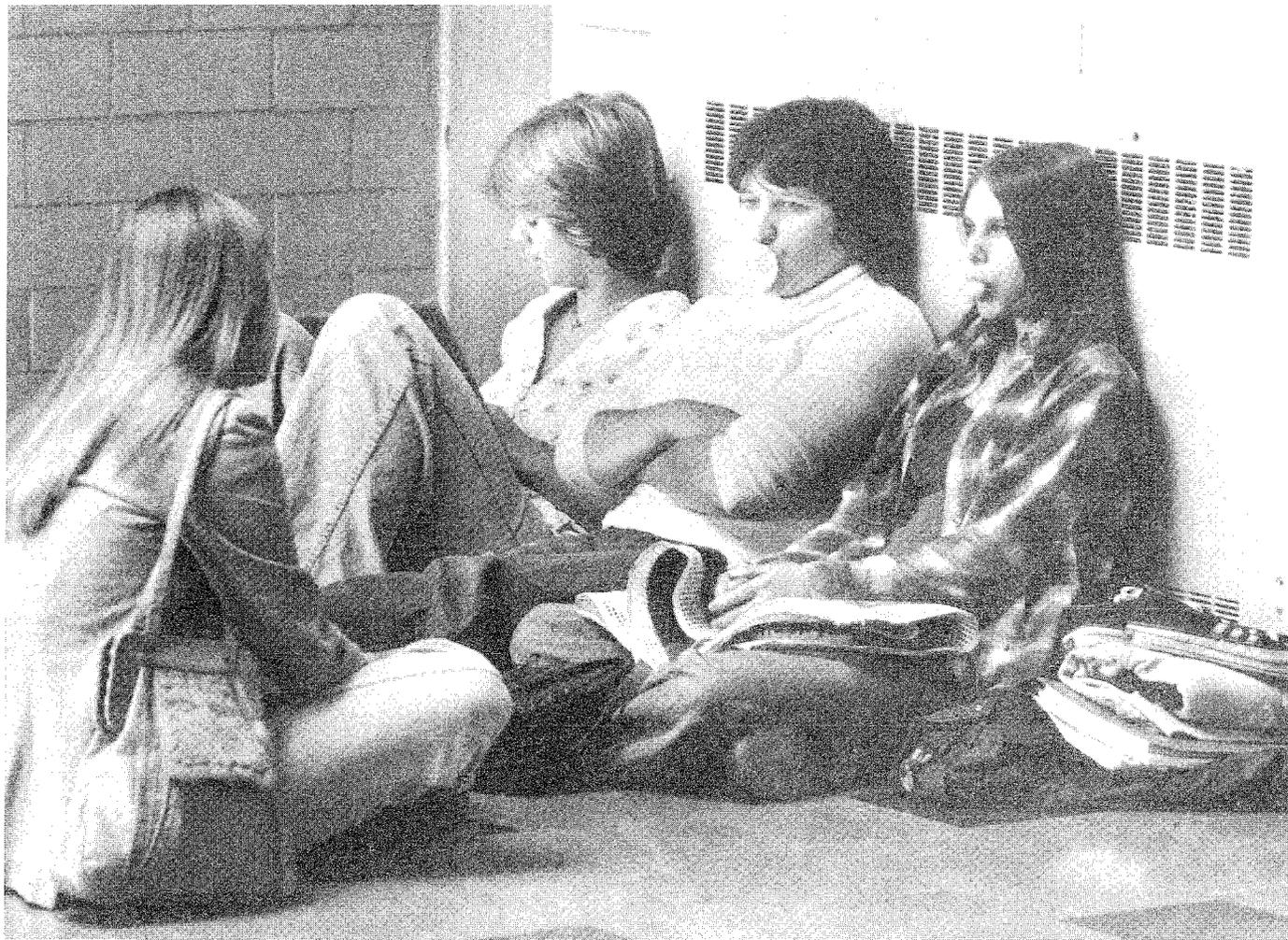
Second, they argued that the laws are ineffective in that people cannot be compelled to learn and, in fact, cannot even be forced to attend school regularly:

“People that are forced to go to school may not learn anything anyway.”

“Shouldn’t have no age limit if they want to drop out they will.”

“If you don’t want to go to school, you’re not going to go.”

It appears that support for compulsory education is determined by the extent to which a young person perceives the restrictions imposed by these laws as enhancing the individual’s and community’s interests. Those youth who see a high school diploma as a very basic requirement for life success argue for maintaining the current law and even for raising the age limit. It also seems that those who favor these laws have a view of human nature (or at least during the adolescent years) in which people do not always act in their self-interest. Those who argue for the abolishment of these laws focus almost totally on the short-term consequences, such as decreased freedom and choice, and pay little attention to future implications of dropping out of school.



## DAY-TO-DAY REALITY OF SCHOOL

While nearly all the respondents perceive their high school education as crucially important for the future, they characterized the day-to-day reality of going to school in much the opposite way. We asked students to offer words which describe their typical school day. Overall, their free-associations reveal a daily routine of boredom and lethargy. The responses were analyzed initially by looking only at the first word recorded and categorizing them positive, negative, or neutral.

Only 7 percent of the groups listed a positive word first (e.g., exhilarating, interesting, fun). Approximately 15 percent could be considered neutral (“fills the day,” “better than sitting home and eating”), while the remaining 78 percent were negative. Reviewing the complete list of words, nearly 500 total, the results show a slightly more favorable picture of school. Approximately one-third of the words were either positive or neutral. However, they were often buried in long lists of negative words or begrudgingly mentioned as afterthoughts.

The following comments capture their vehement distaste: “Boring, that’s about it, God, is it boring!”

“Boring, restless, tiresome, puts ya to sleep, tedious, monotonous, pain in the neck.”

“Tedious, cold, busy, boring, waste of time, headache, organized, disorganized.”

“Boring, monotonous, dull, disgusting, plain old sickening, any word in the book!”

---

*“Boring, restless, tiresome, puts ya to sleep, tedious, monotonous, pain in the neck.”*

---

“Boring. Sucks. Oh, God! I feel like I’m wasting away. I want to go home. Procrastinate. (At end of day) I made it. I haven’t learned a thing. I can’t wait to graduate. Oh, no, the same thing tomorrow. I’m hungry, I’m tired, my mind is deteriorating. I learned more in elementary school.”

“Boring, spaced out, daydreaming, boring, stoned, doodling, hungry, tired, bored, can’t wait to get out of school, boring, no fun, trying to learn.”

A few were able to intersperse their negative feelings with some more positive—or at least neutral—remarks:

“Joyous, hysterical, smelly, eye contact, sleep, depressing, exciting, fun, creative, it’s a blast, culturally stimulating, sometimes interesting.”

“Boring, shit! Sometimes fun, sexciting, dissecting sharks, guys, wimps, gross food, halls crowded, 9th graders running around driving us insane. We’re all crazy! We don’t need no education like we get here. Celebration at graduation.”

“Busy, boring, and long, interesting, time-consuming.”

---

*“More interesting classes. Cut down on textbook work. More field trips. More discussions, less lecture. Classes outside when warm, shorter classes, more guest speakers.”*

---

“Long, boring, monotonous, pressure, dreadful, different, unique, exciting, interesting.”

“The same, boring, average, repetitious, better than sitting home and eating, I suppose.”

Only a handful of groups generated lists which were positive in overall connotation:

“Exciting, stimulating, relaxing.”

“Short, different, humorous, communicating, learning, pressure.”

### **Suggestions for Improving Schools**

Since students have such strong criticisms of day-to-day life in school, we assumed that they would have some suggestions for improving the quality of their schools and their education. We asked students:

“What could be done to make schools more interesting?”

Responses focused on *non-curricular issues* such as school rules, hours, quality of school lunch, amount of free time, and extracurricular opportunities. Approximately 60 percent of the groups offered long lists of changes oriented to making daily life more pleasant and less regimented. Some offered thoughtful suggestions to give students more control over their lives and education:

“We’d have an open campus policy where students could leave the school grounds during his free time. Perhaps the students could check in and out as he/she leaves and returns to school. We feel it would help alleviate skipping out and other irresponsible actions by kids wishing to leave the campus. It would show the responsibility of all grade levels about use of free time—in preparation for college. Unwise decisions on how to efficiently use time now in high school are less serious than in college. Mistakes now could help us learn for the future.”

“Things would be a lot more open. For instance, open campus. Things would probably get out of control unless you had a responsible committee in charge. Students would be happier with school if they had rules they liked. For instance, if we had our choice we would get rid of the smoking in the school bathrooms.”

Others focused more on shortening the time spent in the classroom:

“Four-day week, less hours, longer lunch periods, no social studies, more electives.”

“One free hour, pop machine, longer lunch hour, more time between classes. The problem is no one wants to be in class. Get as less class time as you can.”

“More trips, make it shorter hours, more breaks, less bitching from other teachers, no in-school suspension or out, have no narks—rednecks.”

More entertainment and diversion were recommended:

“Having an 8-foot T.V. in E.S.S. room, a nice big stereo, topless belly dancers, put in a cig machine.”

“Music, movies, more faculty-student games, dance class in building.”

“More girls! Student lounges! Music over the P.A.—more guys!”

“More dances, more school spirit.”

“Let students bring music and cards while there having there free time.”

About one-third of the respondents thought school could be improved by upgrading the *academic teaching program*. Two major strategies were suggested—better teacher selection and more active, varied teaching methods. In regard to quality of the teaching staff, students stressed that younger teachers as well as those who are truly engaged in and excited about their work would make school more interesting:

“Seniority in teachers is the problem. Keep the good teachers, don’t fire the young ones because they haven’t been here as long. Older doesn’t mean better.”

“Teachers generally interested in the subjects and students.”

“Teachers who are happy with what they are teaching, field trips, dance, more school spirit.”

“We should have younger age bracket for teachers. We need teachers who think in somewhat the same way we do.”

“Better, more interesting teachers, better teaching techniques, newer material.”

“*More interesting teachers!* (Teachers that enjoy their job)”

Teaching methods also came under scrutiny, and more student participation in classroom activities was advocated:

“Less lecturing, more liberal points of views from teachers, evaluation of classes.”

“More group discussions instead of straight lectures, more guest speakers.”

“More interesting classes. Cut down on textbook work. More field trips. More discussions, less lecture. Classes outside when warm, shorter classes, more guest speakers.”

“Better teaching methods, better curriculum, better looking teachers, more talking in classes, interaction.”

“Teachers not so serious, tell stories instead of facts—stories with facts in the story, take more classes, have more classes and activities to choose from.”

“Less homework, more imaginative and creative work.”

A small group of students felt that school, no matter what changes are instituted, would always be at best, only a tolerable experience:

“Well, the females in this group think nothing can be done to make school more interesting. They claim school is the way it is, decent, and you have to endure it.”

“No matter what, it will still be school, it will never be looked forward to.”

## RELATIONS BETWEEN STUDENT AND TEACHERS

To elicit information about desirable relationships between the student and teacher, students were asked the following questions:

1) "How should teachers treat students in school? How is it now?"

2) "How should students treat teachers in school? How is it now?"

These questions were answered with seriousness and care, indicating that the students were especially concerned about this issue.

### Teachers' Treatment of Students

The responses were rather evenly divided between those who felt reasonably satisfied with the attitudes and behaviors of their teachers and those who felt mistreated in that they were regarded as inferiors, as children who deserved and received little respect. Even those who had a favorable impression of student-teacher relationships often added a qualifier as to the type of students who received good treatment:

---

*"As adults with chances for individual development. Should be more of an equal relationship. Now the teacher dominates over the students."*

---

"We are being treated nice by some decent teachers when we're seniors."

"For the most part, teachers treat students well, but a few don't respect kids (just teach for the money)."

"If you are smarter, you are more of a pet. And if you're in sports, you're favored over the ones who are not."

Those who said that teachers did not treat them well argued that this behavior was based on stereotypes of teenagers rather than responding to individual human beings:

"Very stereotyped toward the typical teenagers."

"Now it is like they don't care about you. Some teachers take out their frustrations. Treat all kids like the really bad ones."

"Now everything students do wrong is counted against them. Told to act as adults, but not treated like one."

"Now, as duds until proven otherwise."

"Now they don't give you a chance to change and they don't always believe you."

Some expressed great anger and frustration:

"Now, teachers embarrass students in front of class, teachers hit students in my parochial school."

"Like shit—no help—out to get you—out to give F's. Treat you like a kid."

"We still have some Hitlers in this school."

When asked specifically how teachers should treat students, the most common answer was that students want to be treated with respect as individuals, and as adults.

"WITH RESPECT AND LIKE ADULTS"



“They should treat them as someone they respect not just someone they are in charge of. Not act like babysitters. They don’t make us feel as though we’re ready for the outside world. They don’t always give us a fair chance to express our feelings without being criticized.”

“As adults with chances for individual development. Should be more of an equal relationship. Now the teacher dominates over the students.”

“Respect and consideration for our feelings and understand our problems. WE are at a *sensitive* age.”

“As equals not as uneducated little creepoes because we don’t know as much as they do. Not expect too much out of us. Now it’s just the opposite of what we just wrote.”

“Teachers should treat students as people! At the present time teachers seem to think they (themselves) are Gods.”

“As humans with respect, as allies—sometimes teachers treat students as big hassles or as lower beings.”

“They should treat the students like people, and not like someone they have to teach.”

“With more respect, as equals. They are here to serve (help) us not us to serve them. They should realize that school isn’t the only thing we have to do. Some teachers don’t care enough to help.”

“Teachers should take time, explain things, be patient with kids, treat all kids equally.”

“Some teachers expect too much from the students. They should take each student for what he/she is and not what they should be.”

How do students think they ought to treat their teachers? There were two major themes expressed: 1) with the respect due their age and position, and 2) in the same manner they treat you. Respect was the word most frequently used by students to characterize the proper conduct and attitude toward teachers. Some students seemed to have an understanding that the teacher’s job was a difficult one and empathized with their teachers:

“As individuals who are worthy of respect for trying to pound knowledge into our craniums.”

“With some respect. Act like you’re eager to learn or at least look like you are. It would help them.”

“With respect, understand how they feel and putting them in their position.”

“With respect as elders, with interest also.”

“With the deep respect that should be held for all of those older folks.”

“With respect—with the understanding that they are trying to teach you. Now they are treated with disrespect.”

The other frequently expressed idea was that students should treat teachers in the same way teachers treat students. There were clearly two divergent notions here—one was the Golden Rule and the other was a retaliatory, threatening posture. The older students were more likely to invoke the Golden Rule, i.e., that they should treat teachers in the way that they would like to be treated themselves:

“With due respect as persons, friends if wanted. Don’t assume the teacher is an evil machine at the head of the class.”

“We should give teachers a chance.”

---

*“The same way they treat us. We should look up to them and have respect for them. If they treat us like two-year olds, they shouldn’t expect to be looked up to.”*

---

“Treat with respect, find good qualities, not just bad.”

“With respect and how we would like to be treated. Be easy on the new teachers and subs.”

“We should give teachers more credit than we do now. The teachers are just doing their jobs and students should realize that.”

The younger students, on the other hand, seemed to be saying that they should treat the teacher as “they have done unto you.” The following comments give the flavor of this point of view:

“The same way they treat us. If they treat us fair, we would treat them fair.”

“The same way they treat us. We should look up to them and have respect for them. If they treat us like two-year olds, they shouldn’t expect to be looked up to.”

“The same way they treat us. If they’re pricks, we are pricks too. We can’t do nothing about it.”

“As fairly as they treat you.”

“We should show them more respect and in turn they should show us more respect. Some teachers are good at this, others don’t know what respect means.”

“Respect where respect is deserved.”

To make sure that there was no mistake about what they considered to be the proper relationship between student and teacher, one group added the following comment about their philosophy of retaliation:

“If teachers would treat us nicely and like adults, we would treat teachers the same way. With respect, etc. A famous saying: An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. That’s our philosophy for these questions, about teachers treating us and students treating teachers.”

The responses indicate that the majority think that teachers *should* be treated in a respectful way because of their role and status, with the remaining students either advocating an instrumental relationship; e.g., “You scratch my back, I’ll scratch yours,” or one based on Kant’s categorical imperative, which says that one should act as if the rule behind your actions were to become the rule for everyone.

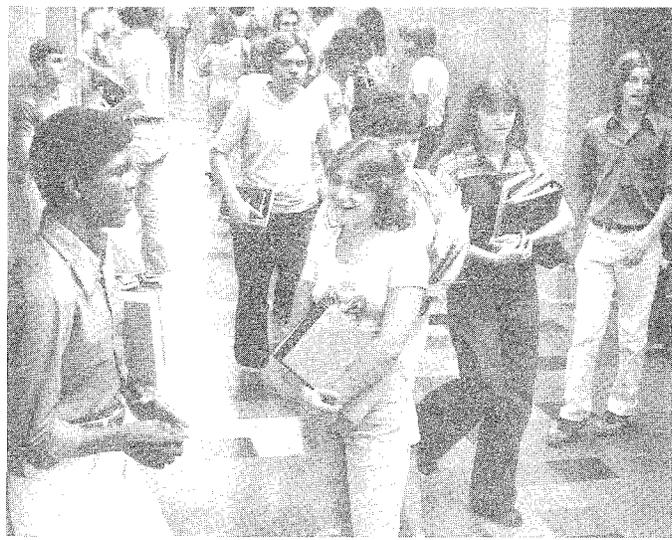
These ideas are the students’ picture of the ideal relationship between students and teachers. We also asked students how teachers are *currently* treated. About half said teachers were, on the whole, treated quite well; while the other half said they received little respect from students. It appeared that certain teachers were the target rather than there being a generalized negative response to all teachers:

“It depends on the teacher, some we treat very kindly, others we treat as a welcome mat.”

“Depends on the teachers, sometimes good, sometimes teachers are treated like they are just something to make fun of, etc.”

“Here at Southeast Free School we generally treat them as friends—once in a while for certain teachers (and students), students tend to treat them as enemies.”

What seems to emerge from these data is a wish for a more equitable, just, and empathetic relationship between student and teacher. This ideal state of affairs, according to the respondents, seems far from being realized. Another general theme was that the students had higher expectations for adults in their school than they did for their own behavior. For example, the students argued that teachers should treat them with unconditional regard and empathy. None of the respondents suggested that teachers should withhold respect and justice if it were not forthcoming from the young people. Some of the students did, however, assert that teachers had to prove their worthiness before they received kind and equitable treatment. It appears that young people assume that the professional educator has a greater obligation than does the student to behave in ways that promote positive relationships.



---

*“We like going to school to see our friends.”*

---

## WHAT STUDENTS LIKE ABOUT SCHOOL

Social and personal skills (e.g., getting along with people; becoming independent and responsible; developing self-control, etc.), according to Youth Poll respondents, are the key benefits of their school experience. It appears that what students view as most important is also what they like best about going to school. In response to the question, “What do you like about going to school?”, the overwhelming majority said that the opportunity to be with their friends was the most enjoyable part of the school day. This response was twice as frequent as any other. Typical comments included:

“Meet people, get information on upcoming events (parties).”

“All of our friends are here.”

“We like going to school to see our friends.”

“Most of us enjoy school so we can see our friends.”

Beyond seeing old friends, meeting new people was an attraction particularly for suburban students:

“The chance to meet new friends.”

“You get a chance to socialize and meet new faces.”

“Meeting different people and learning from them.”

While most students simply said that they like seeing their friends, about 10 percent specifically mentioned that they like being with boy or girl friends, or pursuing relationships with the opposite sex:

“The guys.”

“The women.”

“Watching the girls.”

“Seeing boys.”

“Learn about sex.”

“The guys like to come to see the girls.”

Though far less prominent than the theme of socializing, almost half did note that the school provided learning opportunities, which they appreciated:

“A chance to expand your knowledge in areas of interest.”

“Opportunities to learn.”

“I like learning something new every day.”

There were some students who noted specific classes that they liked such as art, history, gym, math, and biology. Lunch (but, as one group noted, ‘but not the food’), extracurricular activities and sports were also enjoyable for students.

About one-fifth of the respondents indicated that school was the least of several other evils, such as being at home or being bored:

“Gets you out of the house.”

“Gets you away from your parents.”

“Nothing to do at home.”

“It’s an escape from the rest of the crummy world.”

“Place to go because of boredom.”

“Nothing else to do because everyone else is going to school.”

“Going to school gives us something to do, it keeps us out of trouble.”

A handful of students liked school because of the quality of the teaching staff:

“Most of the teachers are very helpful if you have a problem.”

“The staff are more like friends than teachers.”

“I like the way they teach, listen and respect your opinion.”

“Talking to some of the teachers.”

“Teachers are great, real easy-going.”

Another small number of students specifically like school because it is preparing them for the future. This theme stands in sharp contrast to the previous ones in its orientation to the future. Some typical comments on the school’s role in smoothing the transition to adulthood include:

“Increases knowledge to be applied later in life.”

“Prepares you for the future.”

“You get an education so you can go somewhere in the world. Going to school gives us a chance to learn about our



career choices. It gives us some knowledge for what we plan to do later.”

About 10 percent of the groups said that they like “nothing” about school; however, only about half of those gave this as their only response. More often, the initial response would be ‘nothing’, but they would begrudgingly add a few items:

“Nothing, lunch, the guys, the people, because of psychology class, prepare for college.”

“Nothing (jokingly), all of our friends are here, nothing else to do. Gets sickening sitting here, but it gets sickening sitting at home.”

#### WHAT STUDENTS DISLIKE ABOUT SCHOOL

While some students said they disliked the whole idea of going to school, most others had fairly specific complaints about their school experiences. The most frequent one was that school began too early:

“We don’t like getting up so early.”

“We don’t like walking in the cold to get to school.”

In addition to getting up too early, about one-fifth of the students had other concerns related to the use of time, such as:

“Hours I’m there—too many.”

“School year is too long.”

“Getting out of school too late.”

“Not enough time between classes.”

“Not enough breaks.”

“Not enough lunch time.”

“Classes are too long.”

“There’s too much free time.”

The majority of student dislikes, however, were related to the classroom experience itself. About half perceived their teachers

as too strict, demanding, and insensitive. What they disliked were:

“The attitudes of some of the teachers.”

“Teachers that upset students.”

“Teachers don’t give enough help or take time to explain things.”

“The teachers make us feel inferior to them.”

“Bad teachers.”

“Teachers who don’t know how to teach.”

“Poor teacher/student relationships.”

---

*“Teachers don’t give enough help or take time to explain things.”*

---

Students also had a number of specific complaints about their overall classroom experience, including boring, monotonous classes, and lack of course options:

“Class, because it’s boring—sometimes you get easy work when you can do harder.”

“Lack of classes, should have more choice.”

“School is boring.”

“Some of the classes have too many kids in them.”

Others voiced a concern not so much over the coursework itself, but the great stress placed on grades and doing well:

“There is too much emphasis on grades.”

“Sometimes you get pressured and hurried.”

“Pressure on tests.”

“Too much pressure to do well.”

Too many rules and restrictions symbolized to them that they were regarded as immature:

“Have to have passes in hall.”

“The authority—they expect too much, they’re like policemen.”

“Unfairness of discipline-smoking rules. Because there is no smoking room we get in trouble for smoking in the bathroom.”

“We hate seating arrangements.”

“Too many people telling you what to do.”

“Rules that are just for children.”

“Getting accused for doing things that you never did.”

“The absolute power of teachers.”

“The feeling of limitation.”

In contrast, a few students charged that there was insufficient teacher control:

“There is a lack of control in the lunchroom.”

“Kids on drugs who control classrooms.”

“Lack of classroom discipline.”

Many students also expressed discomfort about peer relationships and especially cliques:

“Too much social pressure from other groups.”

“I hate the cliques.”

And, of course, there were a few students who disliked “having to do stupid polls to satisfy the educator.” Generally, students’ dislikes centered on relationships between teachers and themselves. They sought more respect and autonomy; they wanted more interesting classes. What students enjoyed most about school was being with and socializing with other teenagers. Their responses to these questions on likes and dislikes indicate a minimal appreciation of their own responsibility in making schools better. They seem to be asking teachers and school administrators to provide a more entertaining, more engaging fare.

## WHAT STUDENTS LEARN

Students were asked to assess how well the school helps prepare them for adulthood and for their current status as adolescents. The questions posed were: “What are the most important things you learn in school?”

“What kinds of things are you learning in school which you think will help you in later life?”

“What things are you learning in school that help you now, as a teenager?”

By far the most frequent response was that the school is most effective in promoting personal and social development. The most important learnings gained are *social skills* (such as getting along with people, working in groups, fulfilling one’s obligation to the school and community) and *personal skills* (such as becoming independent and responsible, learning to use free-time wisely, gaining self-control, and decision-making). Evident from their discussions is that young people do not equate learning with what is taught in the formal curriculum.

The following quotes reflect our respondents’ ideas about what they are currently learning about themselves and their social relationships:

“Learn how to be responsible, gain maturity, learn to

---

*“Learn how to grow as a human being, mentally, psychologically. The things you will carry on into your job.”*

---

interact with people.”

“The most important things we learn in school are making friends, how to get along with and communicate with others.”

“How to live life in the world of today. Friendship, getting along with other people, respect, learning about other people and yourself, self-control, how to be controversial, general education. Politics, learning about different cultures.”

“How to live, self-responsibility, how to be assertive.”

“How people act, how to get along in society, what is expected of you, what it’s like to be considered a good person (morals of society).”

“Responsibilities, finding your true feelings, able to relate to others and finding more than you thought you had.”

The majority viewed these insights and skills as having relevance to the future as well as the present.

“Learn how to grow as a human being, mentally, psychologically. The things you will carry on into your job.”

“Background for college and occupational choice, responsibility, good sportsmanship, working as a group.”

“The most important things we learned in school were how to make friends and get along with people, how to set goals and reach them, planning for the future.”

“The most important things we learn in school are how to get along with people, how to understand people in other cultures, and how to prepare for college and the future.”



Courses in sex, drugs, and driver's education were considered useful now, while they were teenagers, but were hardly mentioned as being important to them as adults. Yet, these curricular issues are conceived as having crucial importance in the lives of adults. Young people, however, seem to not see that sexuality, substance use, and automobile accidents affect adults as well as young people!

Basic skills were thought to be very important (after social and personal development) for helping them to lead successful lives as adults:

"Basics—or things that go for or toward your jobs."

"Reading, writing and math, career activities."

"The basic things that will help you after school."

"Most economic things such as accounting and consumer information. You will need this later in life."

"Income taxes, sex education, writing, BASIC math skills, BASIC grammar, business law, consumer information."

"Math classes that teach a certain kind of reasoning. Science which answers basic questions of biology and motion."

"English will help in your future job. Each class should help you later depending upon what your job is."

However, the students rated the utility of basic skills as very low right now. Again, this is a puzzling finding in that one might expect that having basic skills would be essential to succeed in high school course work, at minimum. Also, basic skills would seem to be helpful in doing the kinds of jobs teenagers have, as cashiers, as nursing home attendants, etc. Again, the connection between basic academic skills and their current functioning skills alludes teenagers.

---

*"Learning lists of stuff that you memorize and forget the next day."*

---

#### WHAT'S NOT IMPORTANT

We asked students what were the least important things they learned in school. Information and skills which they believe cannot be used in the future or applied to problems of everyday living right now were the leading answers:

"Geometry, algebra, old English like Shakespeare poems, things that won't benefit you later in life."

"Things we are forced to take but will never use."

"Things we don't need to learn, things that don't have anything to do with what we are going to do in our future."

"Classes that concern things that have happened thousands of years ago when we should be learning to handle the future."

"The classes we won't need outside of school like algebra, history, grammar."

"Facts, figures, and formulas that can't be applied to future life."

"Receiving a lot of materials (geometry) that you will

probably never use again."

"Transformational grammar—anything that won't help with day to day living—math, chemistry, physics."

"Least important: learning things that may not help you in the future."

Physical education was most frequently listed as the least important course in the curriculum. Creative and fine arts, science and history were also thought to have limited future value, and as such were among those classes listed most frequently as "unimportant."

A few groups mentioned that memorizing facts, dates, and names was of little value or importance.

"Learning lists of stuff that you memorize and forget the next day."

"Learning facts and dates that we'll never remember."

A handful of students said they learned negative behaviors and attitudes in school, which they would just as soon avoid:

"Gossip, what parties are where."

"Fall into a bad peer group, drugs, trouble."

"The least important things I learn at school are to skip and be bad."

On a more optimistic note, there were those rare individuals who couldn't think of anything that wasn't important:

"Everything to us is important in school."

"We can't think of anything that isn't important."

"We all feel that there isn't much that is unimportant in school."

"I think that most everything that school teaches you, you will need sooner or later in your life."

Generally, the students took a pragmatic view of what is worth learning, with knowledge, skills, and attitudes related to earning a living and coping with personal and social relationships being high on their list. We were surprised by some of their responses. For example, even though personal health and fitness has become an American obsession, physical education courses were thought to be the least important courses offered. It may be that teenagers do not see the relationship between playing basketball or broom hockey and doing sit-ups as a way to attain "high level wellness". Or it may be that teenagers are typically so healthy that they are not concerned about learning how to enhance their physical health and fitness.

Students also distinguished between practical and abstract knowledge, with content emphasizing principles and generalizations viewed as less important. For example, while they deemed basic arithmetic important, advanced algebra and trigonometry were considered unimportant. In English, literature and grammar were viewed with disinterest, while basic reading and writing skills were thought to be essential. It appears that most students perceive that the work they will do will require rather basic, low-level knowledge and skills. They seem to not have a way to understand how theories and abstractions derived from literature, mathematics, science, history, sociology, psychology, etc., may enhance their effectiveness in a career or their personal lives. It may be that secondary schools have failed in their obligation to help students apply theories to real problems.

Section II:

# SCHOOL DISCIPLINE AND RULES

---

*“Lack of enthusiasm is one of the biggest problems. Discipline is also a problem but teachers have a very hard time getting students interested in studying.”*

---

## STUDENT VIEWS ON SCHOOL DISCIPLINE

Much attention has been given to the problem of discipline in public schools. Since 1968 when the Gallup Polls on Public School began, lack of discipline and order has topped the list of major problems in schools for 12 of the 13 years. Yet the Gallup Polls include only adults in this yearly study. We wondered whether teenagers were equally concerned about discipline and asked the following question:

“Most adults think the biggest problem in schools is the lack of discipline and order. What do you think? If discipline isn’t the biggest problem, what is?”

The initial reaction from some respondents was frustration with the idea that adults were assessing the problems of schools without being directly involved in them:

“How are adults supposed to know. We are the ones forced to be here everyday and we see what is going on. Adults can’t say—they don’t know.”

“No, adults don’t try to understand kids so how can they say what the problem really is.”

Approximately two-thirds of the students said that lack of discipline and order was not as pervasive a problem as adults think it is. It is interesting that the adults who have first-hand experience with schools—teachers and school administrators—agree with our respondents. In 1980, *Phi Delta Kappan* surveyed its readers, professional educators, asking them questions similar to those in the Gallup Poll. Professional educators were twice as likely to say school financing was a more serious problem than discipline (Elam and Gough, 1980). This study corroborates the opinions of high school students about school discipline, that is, the closer one gets to the schools, the less likely one is to see discipline as *the* overriding issue.

If lack of discipline isn’t the major problem facing schools, what do students think is? Again, the theme of boredom and disinterest appears. The lack of genuine engagement and excitement about learning on the part of both teachers and students was a dominant concern. Students commented on their own contribution to these problems:

“The students who don’t care about the future and don’t respect students who want to learn.”

“Kids just really don’t care.”

“Lack of motivation.”

“Lack of enthusiasm is one of the biggest problems. Discipline is also a problem but teachers have a very hard

time getting students interested in studying.”

“Kids’ lack of respect.”

“Biggest problem is students’ attitudes toward school.”

Teachers were also indicted for being incompetent, unprepared, self-interested, and most of all, uncaring:

“Not enough understanding, about one-fourth really care, the rest collect their paychecks.”

“Lack of discipline is not the biggest problem, lack of interest in teachers is.”

“Teachers that don’t care.”

“Communication—If teachers would try to communicate on kids’ level. Too much pressure—don’t let kids learn at own rate. Unprepared teachers, give more attention to smart kids.”

Some traced the low level of student’s commitment to school to their parents’ influence:

“The problem is lack of discipline on the parent’s part, not teachers.”

“Number one problem is parents, they don’t care. Attitude. The school is doing a good job at discipline.”

“It’s not always discipline, just a bad outlook on school which you get from your parents.”

“Well, if parent doesn’t care, kid might not care.”

“No, its the parents and kids problem.”

Drugs and alcohol use and abuse was viewed as the next largest problem in schools and was cited most frequently by urban youth.

“Drugs is more of a problem because it has too much influence over their lives and peer pressure.”

“We don’t lack discipline and order. Its a totalitarian rule here. The main problem is drug and alcohol abuse. Every person is directly or indirectly affected by drug and alcohol abuse.”

About one-third of the respondents agreed with the contention that discipline is the biggest problem in schools today. Discipline problems were thought to be, in part, rule related. Rules are not, according to some students, consistently or fairly enforced. It is interesting to note that students said that disorder and poor discipline were as likely to be caused by overly rigid and strict rules as by too lenient regulations. Examples of those who blamed discipline problems on the laxness of the rules include:

“I think its true. Sometimes it’s the teacher’s fault because if she lets it go the kids keep picking at her.”

“I agree teachers are not aggressive towards troublemakers.”

“We think this is true. Discipline should be enforced so that everyone gets a good education. We think the rules are too easy. The rules we think are too easy are the enforcing of drinking and smoking on school premises.”

On the other hand, an equally large proportion warned that “getting tough” had serious limitations:

“The discipline should be there but there seems to be so much emphasis on it that it sometimes becomes overrated.”

Even some of the respondents who did view discipline as the biggest problem in school thought the source of it was a lack of commitment to education and schooling. This is almost an

identical argument to the one given above by people who say discipline isn’t *the* issue:

“Yes, because people are forced to come and some don’t want to be here.”

“Yes, its the biggest problem due to lack of interest and being forced to go to school.”

“Self discipline is the biggest problem. Getting the kids to behave and go to classes...”

### School Rules

The nature and enforcement of school rules were cited by some students as a key to unraveling the complex issue of school discipline. How satisfied are students with their school’s regulations? More than half of the students polled said the rules were appropriate—neither too strict nor too lenient. Satisfaction was particularly high in urban schools and may account, in part, for their contending that discipline is not the biggest problem in their schools.

“They’re all right. It balances out in the differences between the over and under punishments.”

“Ours are about right if they are followed.”

“About right, maybe a little too hard but you can’t have everything.”

About one-fourth argued that their school rules are too strict. Rules related to attendance (including skipping, unexcused absences and tardiness) were considered too stringent. Those governing leaving school grounds and smoking were also criticized.

“Too strict: being at school at exactly 8:00 a.m., smoking rules, no irrelevant or inappropriate discussion in class, can’t drive motorized bikes to school, no gum chewing or eating candy.”

“Too strict—if you’re even a second late they won’t let you in—if you skip too many classes, you’re out.”

“Most are too strict, some are all right. Too strict: They shouldn’t kick you out of school for being gone so many days as long as you are still passing. Too easy: can be gone pretty many days and not get kicked out if you play your cards right.”

Interestingly, those categories which were deemed too strict were the same ones criticized for being too lenient. Attendance issues, again, led the list of “too easy” rules, followed by leaving campus and smoking rules.

“Too easy—allows for truancy and dissipation.”

“Too easy—people who skip are not punished enough. Open campus people abuse it by skipping.”

“Too easy, we can get by with too much.”

“To easy but we’re not complaining.”

### Changing School Policy: The Student’s View

Consistent with the previous discussion, students called for changes in attendance and smoking policies in response to the question, “If there were two rules you could change, what would they be?” Creating an open campus and changes in punishment for breaking rules were also desired. The changes advocated were in the direction of liberalizing existing rules; e.g., allowing more unexcused absences and tardy excuses, rather than radically altering current policies.

The majority said that smoking *should be* allowed in schools and smoking lounges should be available for students who choose to smoke. Protecting the rights of nonsmokers was a strong concern. One of the most frequent complaints was that most of the smoking now occurs in the bathrooms, which annoys many nonsmokers.

"Smoking allowed in designated area. There would be less fires and probably less vandalism."

"An area set aside for smoking, to give nonsmokers rights too."

"Have a smoking room to get the smokers out of the johns."

"A student lounge if they have it for the teachers why not for the students."

About one-fourth of the respondents felt that students should be allowed to smoke anywhere and at anytime in school. A number of students felt that restrictions would not be effective in controlling smoking and not worth enforcing.

"Those who wanted would smoke anytime."

"Let them do what they want to do."

"Smoke anywhere, anyhow or anytime."

"Smokers would want smoking everywhere, and nonsmokers wouldn't want it anywhere, or only in designated areas."

---

*"Smoking allowed in designated area. There would be less fires and probably less vandalism."*

---

Those concerned about the health of American teenagers will be disappointed to learn that only a handful of students wanted smoking banned altogether in the schools for health reasons:

"A rule about smoking not allowing any smoking on school premises. Smoking makes alot of people sick."

"Not allowing it in school at all, it affects so many people when one person smokes."

"There should be no smoking in school by anyone and that includes teachers, punishable by expulsion."

Students did offer a variety of other solutions to the smoking issue, including an outdoor smoking area, providing a special smoking break for students, allowing students over a certain age smoking privileges and allowing smoking in the hallway between classes and in the lunchroom at lunch.

### Truancy

Students discussed the issue of truancy from the standpoint of what contributes to a person's decision to intentionally not attend school. They were asked: "Why do some youth decide to skip classes?" The respondents clearly saw the problem as one of student disaffection with the classroom, rather than the focus of the problem being the truant's character or personality. All through their discussion, distinctions were made between those who skipped individual classes from time to time and those who were regularly truant a large part of the school day.



The majority argued that students decide to skip classes because they found them boring. The words "boring", "monotonous", and "too long" were used over and over again.

"Some school classes are so damn boring."

"Because they get tired of it."

"Time goes by so slow."

"A lot of times we know that there will be no harm in missing a class because there is nothing important going on."

"Because they are boring. People who do not like being bored."

"Because they have no interest in the classes."

The unrelenting critique that school is boring leads one to wonder why so many students are not able to involve themselves emotionally or intellectually in their education. The explanations offered by respondents can be classified according to whether: 1) the school was held accountable because of poor teaching; 2) students are at fault because they put forth too little effort; or 3) the outside world of excitement and stimulation was too strong a magnet. About one-third of the respondents said that *uncaring, incompetent teaching* underlies truancy problems:

"We don't like the way the teachers treat us."

"They dislike the teacher."

"Don't get along with teachers."

"Attitudes of the teachers towards the students."

"Conflict with teachers."

"To make the teacher mad."

"Can't get positive strokes, so they try for the negative."

When the cause of truancy was said to be the *poor quality of course offerings*, almost no detail was provided as to what they meant by "uninteresting" or "boring" classes nor did they seem to have any positive alternatives in mind. Typical responses about the quality of classes included:

"Because of poor teachers and methods used to teach."

"I hate classes."

"I just don't feel like going."

"Uninteresting classes."

Nearly one-fifth of the respondents implied that truancy should not be viewed as a monolithic problem affecting all courses, but rather as a response to *dissatisfaction with specific teachers* and their inadequate capacity to motivate and understand their students:

---

*“A lot of times we know that there will be no harm in missing a class because there is nothing important going on.”*

---

“The particular class bores them, conflict with the teacher.”

“Because you hate that teacher, the kids in it or the class.”

“Kids skip because they don’t find their teacher or the class worth your while.”

Approximately one-third of the students said that *lack of student effort and preparation* led to truancy. Students skipped classes when they were unprepared for tests, had not completed assignments or were behind in their work:

“Because you didn’t do your assignment.”

“Their failing.”

“Forgot to study for test.”

“Homework ain’t done.”

“Afraid you’re so far behind you don’t want to deal with teacher.”

They apparently felt that they would be penalized for showing up unprepared, so they stayed away from class, which likely perpetuated their difficulties in keeping up with their work.

Another reason that students miss classes had to do with their own lethargy, laziness, or being tired:

“Tired, don’t want to fall asleep in class in 1st or 6th hour.”

“Would rather sleep, too tired from the night before.”

“Sometimes I go home to sleep before basketball practice.”

Finally the remaining one-third of the respondents said skipping school was due simply to “having better things to do”, and that the *world outside the school served as a magnet* to attract the student. In many cases, this meant socializing with friends and looking for excitement:

“We had better things to do. Get high or drunk, go out to eat.”

“Take a break from your day. Run errands.”

“We were looking for a good time.”

“We like to go out and party or eat.”

“Makes the day go faster.”

“More fun than class.”

“Something exciting to do—its a challenge.”

“Rather be with friends.”

Peer pressure was cited a number of times as leading to truancy.

“Because you want to be with the crowd to be cool.”

“To gain respect from friends.”

“Because their friends are skipping.”

“To be cool.”

“Other people encourage them.”

Another and more disturbing cause for truancy fell outside the three major categories described above. For some, school has apparently no meaning:



“Kids skip because they don’t find their teachers or classes worthwhile.”

“Not worth the time.”

“We have different priorities.”

“School is not important.”

“Don’t get nothing out of school.”

This finding is similar to that of a group of teachers who said that many contemporary high school students no longer view school as their primary concern. These three hundred veteran teachers observed that school is not as central to the lives of teenagers as it once was and that a job, not school, is the first priority for some of them (Hedin and Conrad, 1980).

#### School Drop-outs

Dropping out of school remains a significant national problem—15 to 25 percent of all teenagers do not finish high school. In Minnesota, the rates are considerably lower. In the 1979-1980 school year, for example, statewide data reflected a 4.28 percent drop-out rate. The drop-out rate in urban areas (Minneapolis, St. Paul, and Duluth) is considerably higher at approximately 15 percent. Twin Cities suburban areas have the second highest rate at about 7 percent (CETA-Educational Linkage Unit, 1981). While the literature on school drop-outs is vast, little is known about what teenagers think causes the

problem. It should be noted, however, that the respondents were all in school at the time of the survey and were reporting *their* opinions of why others drop out of school.

The most frequent reason cited was that some youth *cannot cope with the pressure* of going to school. This was especially true for suburban youth. For those who elaborated about the nature of this pressure, such factors as parental desire for their child's success, keen competition for high grades, and the sense that one was too far behind to ever catch up were cited:

- "The work's too hard."
- "Feel pressured by traditional schools."
- "Too much pressure for doing good and good grades."
- "Not getting good grades and flunking out."
- "Too many credits to make up."
- "Won't graduate on time."
- "Can't handle the work if you're too far behind."
- "*Its boring and they feel they don't learn anything new.*"

Difficulties in *getting along with teachers* was also a frequent reason:

- "They hate getting hassled by teachers."
- "They get hassled in school that they sometimes don't deserve."

"Poor classes and they don't like the teachers."

Despite the fact that most students accept the necessary connection between getting an education and getting a job, respondents argued that drop-outs do not personally understand or believe there is such a relationship:

- "They think they can find work without a diploma."
- "They drop out because they think they can get a job without a good education."
- "They feel that it is not important, they want to get on with their lives."
- "They are not getting anywhere in life staying in school."
- "They would rather make more money right now instead of when they're older."
- "They feel education is interfering with their life."
- "They want to make the big bucks too early."
- "They don't feel school helps them."

Rural youth indicated that students were most likely to leave school for financial reasons:

- "Parents are poor and have to drop-out to help out the family."
- "Girls might have to drop-out because they got pregnant and they need to support their child."
- "Jobs to support habits."
- "They have to work to support themselves."
- "Some have no choice, they need a job to support a family."
- "There's a financial need to quit."
- "Just too hard to have a job and go to school at the same time."

---

*"They feel that it is not important, they want to get on with their lives."*

---

#### PUNISHMENT FOR VIOLATING SCHOOL RULES

Students were asked to comment on the types of punishment appropriate for a range of school discipline and behavior problems. Based on these responses, vandalism was clearly considered to be the most serious problem and should be punished most severely. Skipping school and smoking, problems discussed extensively in the section on school rules, were thought to deserve only minor sanctions. When we asked students how they would handle different forms of misbehavior, many showed a willingness to selectively use detentions and suspension, which, as will be noted in the following section, they find ineffective.

For *fighting in school*, most, especially urban youth, advocated suspensions. Detention was also cited, but a sizable minority argued that the young people involved should talk over the problem, ideally with parents and counselors involved.



For *hitting a teacher*, students most often advocated suspension or expulsion. A considerable number qualified their statement with “it depends on who started it”, leading one to wonder how often students strike teachers in response to being struck.

For *smoking*, most advocated no punishment, and saw the “crime” as one created by unnecessary and unreasonable restrictions. A minority, however, were willing to suspend or detain those who violated smoking rules.

For *skipping classes*, students again choose lenient responses, ranging from no punishment to making up the work. A small minority did advocate suspension or detention.

For *vandalism*, however, students called for severe punishment. Most advocated either restitution, suspension, or calling the police. This reaction indicates that young people, similar to adults, are outraged by senseless destruction of school property.

---

*“Suspension isn’t effective because the kids don’t want to be in school in the first place. It would be just what they want, to go home and goof off.”*

---

### Suspension

In the past few years, there has been considerable debate about the effectiveness of detention and suspension as a means of controlling student misbehavior. Some see these as effective and in need of wider application. Others, for example, the Children’s Defense Fund, see suspensions as a questionable means of disciplining children, because it gives youth what many probably want—to be away from school.

The majority of respondents, about 60 percent, questioned the value of suspension in that it seemed less like a punishment than a reward in that it gave the guilty party a mini-vacation.

“Suspension just gives them free time that they want.”

“Most people want to get suspended—its like a vacation.”

“Suspension isn’t effective because kids want to get kicked out of school.”

“They’ll take the day off and sleep.”

“Kids go to hang out (not home) during suspension.”

“It just gives you a chance to do your homework. People just do it again.”

“Suspension isn’t effective because the kids don’t want to be in school in the first place. It would be just what they want, to go home and goof off.”

A small number said that “in-school” suspension was more effective because “it keeps the kids away from their friends and makes them feel awful.”

Others argued that since the consequences of being suspended are so ambiguous and contradictory, the person doesn’t necessarily learn anything from this punishment:

“Suspension doesn’t make you think what you did was wrong or exactly why.”

“You don’t learn with a punishment like that.”

“Maybe the kid needs help. They should investigate more.”

Others suggested that suspension doesn’t have the desired effect, not because of its relatively mild consequences, but because it provides resentment and a desire for retaliation:

“It makes them want to get back at the person who gave it to them.”

“It makes you rebellious; it’s a waste of time.”

“They just make students more upset and they might do something worse.”

The involvement of parents was viewed as an important factor in making suspensions more effective:

“Because it goes in your school record and parents are aware of it.”

“Suspensions good—my parents put me to work, and it taught me a good lesson.”

“Yes, they get in trouble with their parents and wouldn’t want to do it again.”

“It works if parents are involved and concerned, not if parents don’t care.”

“Yes, because parents get down on kids.”

“Suspension is just like a vacation unless parents are brought into it.”

Forty percent of the students, and particularly suburban youth, thought that suspension generally did have the desired effect. These youth argued that it did deprive them of something they valued: being at school. It also forces them to have extra homework because they have to make up what they missed.

“Because it gets boring sitting at home.”

“Because its teaching them a good lesson.”

“When suspended the student is made to pay for what he did wrong.”

“Then they have to make up the work.”

“It hurts your grade and you have to do the work anyway.”

“It makes kids stop and think.”

“It teaches kids the right way.”

“Because everyone hates it.”

It would appear that those students who place a high value on succeeding in school (e.g., are concerned about high grades, feel obligated to complete their homework; accept the “right way” to do things as prescribed by school personnel) are more likely to think that suspensions are effective. In this regard, these students may also share common norms about schools with the teachers and principals who make and enforce these rules. It would seem then that suspension works best with those youth who are most like their teachers in outlook and values.

---

*“Detention is effective—its boring.”*

---

## Detention

The few students who saw detention as effective attributed it to the fact that it took place in school. They felt that the time spent in the detention room deprived the young person of much desired freedom and forced them to consider their actions:

- “Its good because you don’t go home and sit around.”
- “Detention puts them in a spot.”
- “Detention is effective—its boring.”
- “Detention is good—keeps them here longer.”
- “Detention makes people think about what they’ve done.”

However, it was much more common for students to argue that detention had no useful function. Moreover, they charged that many students don’t even bother to “do their time.”

- “If students skip enough to get detained they really don’t care if they get detained or not.”
- “Detention is not reforming anyone.”
- “Detention is too childish—people make a big joke out of it.”
- “No one goes to detention.”
- “Detention is a waste of time.”

Underlying their attitudes towards detention and suspension was the larger theme that the school had no legitimate authority to punish them and students would simply do what they want anyway. As one student put it, “students will do it again.” One other student said it this way, “no punishment is effective in school.” However, when we asked students how they would handle different forms of misbehavior, many showed a willingness to selectively use detentions and suspensions, as well as a number of other means.

## Corporal Punishment

Perhaps no single area in school discipline is as controversial as the use of corporal punishment. Advocates of corporal punishment argue that student misbehavior is rooted in a lack of limit setting and that physical punishment prevents misbehavior. Others argue that hitting children exacerbates the child’s problems and that violence only begets violence. It should be noted that Minnesota right now does not have a specific state policy on corporal punishment; such decisions are left up to the local districts. A number of districts in Minnesota allow corporal punishment more often in junior high than in senior high schools.

Students in our study overwhelmingly rejected the idea that corporal punishment (hitting, paddling, shaking) is an appropriate response to student misbehavior. They adamantly opposed its use in schools.

Some implied that hitting students is an illegitimate use of teacher authority. Their main objection centered around the notion of reciprocity, that they had the right to be treated as they treated others. If they were not allowed to hit others, then that same protection should apply to them:

- “Teachers can do it and won’t catch hell but if students do it back they really catch it.”
- “We can’t hit back, if they’re going to give it out they should take it.”
- “Teachers have no right to push around students.”

The majority of students objected to corporal punishment on the grounds that it did not accomplish the goal of teaching

students inner control. It triggered more violence and anger, instead of leading to improved self-discipline:

- “Teachers could carry it a little too far and really physically hurt a student.”
- “It’s not right, everyone would walk around with black eyes, people would be scared to do anything because they’d be afraid of getting hit.”
- “People just become more resentful.”
- “It just makes students more angry.”
- “It only enforces the concept of using violence.”
- “It is too violent, there are better ways to punish a person.”
- “It can become out of hand. No one has that right.”
- “We are supposed to be cherished.”

---

*“That’s not for teachers to do, teachers teach, parents paddle.”*

---

Some respondents did not seem to be opposed to physical violence, per se, in that they promised retaliation if they were hit by a teacher.

- “Unless the teacher wants to be hit, paddled or shaken himself.”
- “There would be a lot of teachers in the hospital.”
- “If they hit us we are going to hit them back.”
- “The students will retaliate.”
- “It wouldn’t work in high schools, because the kids would beat the shit out of the teachers.”

While high school students rejected corporal discipline for themselves, there were a few students who said it would be acceptable for elementary or junior high school students. This attitude is perhaps rooted in the idea that hitting small children is “normal.” However, it is just this distinction that makes hitting an older adolescent so objectional because it symbolizes to the teenager that he or she is being treated like a child:

- “No, because we are not children or punching bags.”
- “In elementary school but not now.”
- “No, we’re not 2 years old.”
- “Maybe, but it should start young.”
- “It’s babyish.”
- “No, its not treating someone as an equal. It’s not the proper way of punishment for a teenager.”

A handful of respondents argued that corporal discipline was solely the prerogative of parents and should not be used by teachers:

- “That’s not for teachers to do, teachers teach, parents paddle.”
- “It should be done by parents they are the real boss.”
- “That right is reserved to parents.”
- “The teacher isn’t our guardian so they can’t hit us.”
- “We get enough of it at home.”

There was however, a small minority of youth who saw corporal discipline as acceptable. This viewpoint was slightly more common among urban youth, but only marginally so. Among these youths, corporal discipline was seen as a functional and effective method of controlling student misbehavior.

“Then kids wouldn’t do stuff.”

“It is sometimes the only way to handle students.”

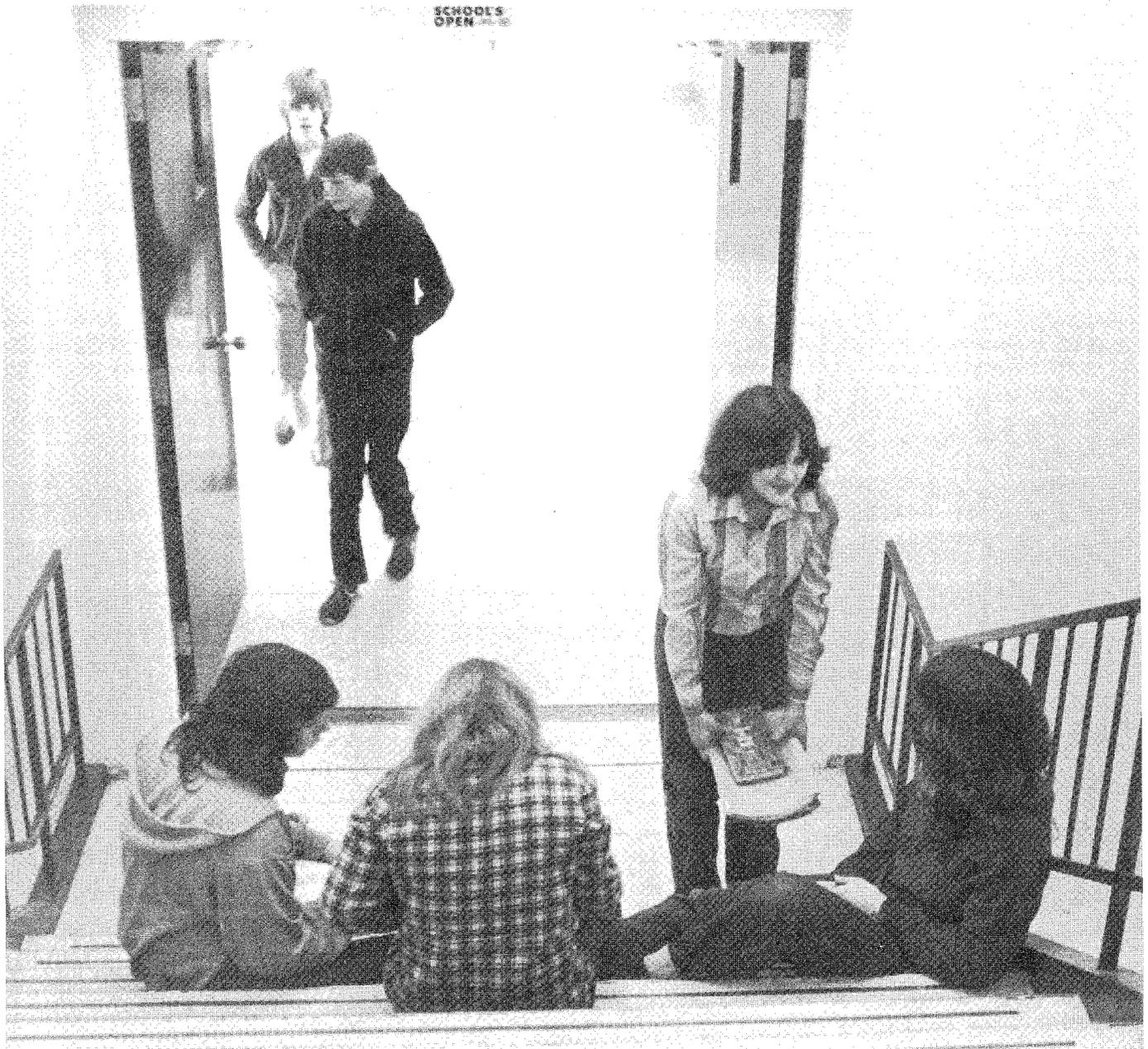
“Shaking is probably the best punishment for student misbehavior.”

“Because the student will be humiliated.”

“Depends on situation.”

“Only in extreme cases.”

Many respondents believed that there was a state law prohibiting a teacher from using physical force against a student, and claimed that corporal discipline was illegal or unconstitutional. This is clearly not the case. Nonetheless, most students felt that teachers lacked the moral authority to hit them. The great intensity of feeling generated by this question suggests that this is an issue of great concern to them.



## Section III:

# SUMMARY

### PURPOSE AND CLIMATE OF SCHOOL

1. Seventy-five percent of the students agreed that "to get a good job, get a good education". They offered four reasons for this: (1) without specific skills and knowledge, finding and maintaining employment is difficult, (2) without an education, upward mobility is restricted, (3) young people derive benefits such as increased responsibility and maturity from education, and (4) though not a guarantee, education increases possibilities and chances for employment. Those who disagreed with this argument also offered four explanations: (1) they expressed pessimism about locating a job, even with an education, (2) school is not necessarily the place people gain job skills, (3) finding a job is based on luck, chance, or connections, and (4) if a good job was defined in terms of personal satisfaction and not salary, then an education was not as necessary.

2. Students awarded their schools the following grades:  $A = 10\%$ ,  $B = 33\%$ ,  $C = 33\%$ ,  $D = 10\%$ , and  $F = 10\%$ . Sixty-five percent of the rural students assigned their schools above average ( $A$  or  $B$ ) grades, compared to 37 percent of the suburban and 50 percent of the urban students. In evaluating their schools, the key consideration students used was the relationships between students and staff, followed by curriculum, school facilities, school rules and discipline, quality of the administration, scheduling and extracurricular activities.  $A$  grades were most often assigned to schools with positive teacher-student relationships based on empathy and respect.  $F$  grades were given to schools seen to be totally lacking in relevance and purpose.

3. Sixty-five percent of the respondents said that their parents think they are getting a good education, based on the school's reputation and whether their children bring home good grades. For private school students, a good education was equated with cost in their parents' view. Approximately one-third of the students felt that their parents think they are being poorly educated. Some noted that their parents perceive the entire school system to be of poor quality. Among the most common parental criticisms are too much freedom and the lack of academic rigor. Students were able to differentiate between the criteria they use to judge their schools and their parent's criteria.

4. The majority of students reported that their parents had little or no involvement in their schools. The students expressed a preference for maintaining this limited role. The primary reason given was that the school is the young person's "territory" and should not be trespassed.

5. There was wide support (73 percent) for compulsory education laws, both because of the importance of a degree for future life success and because without such a law, many young people would make immature or irresponsible decisions about their lives. Over one-third of those who favored compulsory education laws argued that the age should be raised to 17 or 18 in order to guarantee that young people would complete school. Twenty-seven percent of those polled wanted the laws abolished and gave two reasons: (1) teens are mature enough to make decisions and (2) the laws are ineffective in maintaining school attendance.

6. We asked students to describe a typical school day, and only seven percent of the groups listed a positive word first in their responses. Fifteen per cent offered neutral words, while the remaining 78 percent were negative. Overall, their free associations reveal a daily routine of boredom and lethargy.

7. When asked about improving schools, the respondents focused on noncurricular issues, such as rules, hours, school lunches, free time and extracurricular activities. They desire to increase the amount of freedom they have and to make daily life less routine and more pleasant. About one-third of the students thought school could also be improved by upgrading the academic teaching program, including teachers and teaching methods.

8. Students were evenly divided between those who felt reasonably satisfied with the attitudes and behaviors of their teachers and those who felt mistreated. Students want teachers to treat them with respect, as individuals and as adults. Students should treat teachers with respect due to their age and position and in the same manner that teachers treat students.

9. What students like best about school is the opportunity to be with friends. Though far less prominent than the theme of socializing, about half mentioned that they like the opportunity to learn new knowledge and skills.

10. What students dislike most about school is the use of time, such as the school day starting too early and ending too late, too few breaks, too short a lunch period. Other dislikes included teachers that were too strict, demanding, and insensitive; boring and monotonous classes, lack of course options, and restrictive rules which symbolized to them that they were viewed as immature.

11. The most important things young people learn in school are social and personal skills. Courses in sex, drug, and driver's education are seen as immediately valuable, while basic skills were viewed as essential for the future but unimportant at the present time. According to our respondents, the least important things young people learn are skills and information which cannot be used in the future or applied to problems of everyday living now.

## SCHOOL DISCIPLINE AND RULES

1. Two-thirds of the students said that a lack of discipline and order was not as pervasive a problem as adults think it is. The major problem, according to many, is the boredom and disinterest demonstrated by teachers and students. This was followed by alcohol and drug use and abuse. The remaining one-third who agreed that discipline was the biggest problem suggested that it was related to inconsistent or unfairly enforced rules.

2. More than one-half of the students felt that their school rules were appropriate. Approximately one-fourth argued that their school rules, particularly those related to attendance, leaving the school grounds, and smoking, were too strict.

3. Students called for changes in attendance and smoking policies in the schools. They advocated liberalizing existing rules rather than radically altering or abolishing them. The majority thought that smoking should be allowed in designated areas in school.

4. The majority of young people thought that the student who skipped school was bored and disinterested in the classroom. About one-third of the students faulted uncaring, incompetent teachers for student's truancy. The rest said the blame should be placed on lack of student preparation or on the pull of the outside world of excitement and adventure.

5. The most frequently mentioned reason for students dropping out was that they cannot cope with the pressure of going to school. Difficulty getting along with teachers and little or no understanding of the relationship between getting an education and getting a job were other explanations.

6. Students were asked to give their suggestions for appropriate punishments for violating a range of school rules. Vandalism was considered by the students to be the most serious transgression, judging by the severity of the punishment. Skipping school and smoking were thought to deserve only minor sanctions. Selective use of detention and suspension were advocated by students.

7. About 60 percent of the youth poll respondents suggested that suspension was ineffective because it rewarded the student with time off, away from school, which is just what many students want. In-school suspension was considered somewhat more effective. Only a few students supported detention as a means of punishment. Most felt that it had no useful function and that most students do not even "do their time."

8. Students overwhelmingly objected to the use of corporal punishment as a response to student misbehavior. One objection centered on the idea that they had the right to be treated as they treated others; if they are not allowed to hit others, they should receive reciprocal treatment. The majority felt that corporal punishment triggered additional anger and violence instead of leading to improved self-discipline. A few students sanctioned its use for elementary and junior high school students, considering spanking an appropriate form of discipline for children.

## CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

A major theme emerging from the discussions was a request from adolescents to be treated in what we might call "developmentally-appropriate" ways. By this we mean that they want to be viewed as emerging adults, not grown-up children. The respondents, all 14 to 18 years of age, consistently expressed concern and sometimes deep resentment at the features of the school (role and relationships between students and teachers, rule-making and enforcing, reward structure) which told them that they were infantile and immature. Statements such as: "The principals and teachers treat us like 2-year olds;" "Hitting students makes you feel like a child or a punching bag;" or "Having to have a pass to go to the bathroom might be OK when you're in elementary school, but it is demeaning when you are 18;" are examples of this mismatch between their developmen-

tal level and the understanding that some educators have of adolescents.

Closely related to this demand to be regarded as more adult-like than childlike was their desire for a more participatory role in all aspects of the school. They asked for a greater voice in determining what courses were offered; what could be done to make classes more engaging; and how rules about student behavior should be enforced. Over and over again, they spoke about their wish to have more control over their lives and their education, and justified this in terms of needing to gain experience in being independent and responsible. The students seem to be suggesting that their input into governance of school was not only important in improving the overall functioning of the institution but also for its contribution to their own social development. It was self-evident to these young people that unless they participated in governing their school and themselves while in high school, they would be ill-prepared to manage their personal and community affairs as adults. These findings are significant given the limited amount of "consumer participation" in schools. Clearly students desire more involvement in school policy-making; and their relatively meager participation is not an adequate index of their interest.

The above discussion and, in fact, the entire poll reveal that students seem to be more strongly affected by the organization and structure of their schools than by the formal curriculum (the planned instructional and extracurricular activities). For example, the key criteria for their rating their schools (assigning them an *A* to *F* grade) were aspects of the "hidden curriculum", and in particular, the relationship between teachers and students and the level of apathy and boredom in the school. What students liked and disliked about school were also related to organizational and structural features. For example, being able to socialize with friends was viewed as the most enjoyable part of school and the time schedule and restrictive rules the least likable aspects. Marshall McLuhan's epigram that "the medium is the message", seemed particularly true for student life in secondary schools. Unfortunately, the intended message—learning the knowledge and skills of the formal curriculum—seemed to be drowned out by the medium.

The respondents did give some attention and thought to the academic offerings of their schools. Many saw their courses as dull, repetitive, and monotonous. The classes and content they thought were most valuable were those which emphasized information and skills which can be applied to problems of everyday living now and in the future. The adolescent respon-

dents emerge as strict pragmatists, who only want knowledge and skills which can be directly and immediately related to earning a living and coping with personal and social relationships. They are impatient with abstractions, theories, and principles because they believe such knowledge does not meet their criteria for "relevance."

Their critique of the secondary school curriculum indicates that many adolescents do not see the connection between their school studies and their own present and future needs. Part of the problem may be the mismatch between the adolescent's level of cognitive development and components of the secondary school curriculum. It appears that much of the academic course work in high school assumes that students are capable of abstract thinking, while most are still at concrete levels of functioning. What is needed is to design materials and methods that promote rather than assume higher levels of cognitive development. The good news is that this can be done, and there have been a series of programs in science (Renner and Lawson, 1979); Social Studies (Fenton, 1980) which have produced impressive growth in cognitive development.

Student boredom and disinterest in the secondary school curriculum is not only related to cognitive development. In this poll, students asserted that they saw little relationship between what they were learning in school and the world outside the classroom. This critique implies that the curriculum needs to be more oriented toward real needs, real problems, and real experiences of the students. Much work has been done in the past 10 years in the field of "experiential education," a catch-all phrase for the notion that real experience is at the heart of real learning. Recent studies of experience-based programs in schools around the country provide strong evidence for their success in promoting student interest in school and improving their intellectual, social and psychological development (Mosher, 1979, Hedin and Conrad, 1981, Sprinthall and Mosher, 1978). These studies indicate that adolescents can perform responsible, constructive roles as teachers, consultants, researchers, counselors, community service providers, historians, and authors and that such experiences both benefit the young people and the larger community. Such programs, however, require a basic change in the society's view of adolescents. Adults, both in and outside of school, would have to change their attitudes about the capacities and potentialities of teenagers. Experiential programs require an acknowledgment that adolescents are not merely grown-up children but emerging adults, the very plea that adolescents made throughout this poll.

## REFERENCES

- CETA-Education Linkage Unit and Office of Statewide CETA Coordination. *Secondary School Drop-Outs Executive Summary*. St. Paul: Minnesota Department of Economic Security, 1981.
- Conrad, D., and D. Hedin. *Experiential Education Evaluation Project: Executive Summary*. St. Paul: University of Minnesota, 1981.
- Conrad, D.; D. Hedin; and P. Simon. *Minnesota Youth Poll: Youth's Views on Politics and Public Issues*, Miscellaneous Report 178. University of Minnesota: Agricultural Experiment Station, 1981.
- Elam, S., and P. Gough. "Comparing Lay and Professional Opinion on Gallup Poll Questions." *Phi Delta Kappan*, Volume 62, No. 1 September 1980.
- Fenton, E. *Leading Dilemma Discussions*, Pittsburgh: Carnegie-Mellon University, 1980.
- Hedin, D., and D. Conrad. "Changes in Children and Youth over Two Decades: The Perceptions of Teachers." *Phi Delta Kappan*, Vol. 61, No. 10, June 1980.
- Hedin, D.; M. Resnick; and R. Blum. *Minnesota Youth Poll: Youth's Views on Health, Illness and Medical Care*. Miscellaneous Report 174. University of Minnesota: Agricultural Experiment Station, 1980.
- Hedin, D., and P. Simon. *Minnesota Youth Poll: Youth's Views on Leisure Time, Friendship and Youth Organizations*. Miscellaneous Report 176. University of Minnesota: Agricultural Experiment Station, 1980.
- Hedin, D.; H. Wolfe; and J. Arenson. *Minnesota Youth Poll: Youth's Views on Reputations and Delinquency*. Miscellaneous Report 170. University of Minnesota: Agricultural Experiment Station, 1980.
- Hedin, D.; H. Wolfe; and M. Baizerman. *Minnesota Youth Poll: Youth's Views on Alcohol*. St. Paul: Center for Youth Development and Research, 1976.
- Mosher, R., ed. *Adolescent's Development and Education: A Janus Knot*. Berkeley: McCutchan, 1979.
- Renner, J., and A. E. Lawson. "Promoting Intellectual Development through Science Teaching." Edited by R. Mosher. *Adolescents' Development and Education*, Berkeley: McCutchan, 1979.
- Sprinthall, N. A., and R. Mosher, eds. *Value Development as the Aim of Education*. Schenectady: Character Research Press, 1978.
- Williams, D. "Why Public Schools Fail." *Newsweek*, April 20, 1981.

# MINNESOTA YOUTH POLL

**Page 1:**

- 1) What do you like about going to school?
- 2) What do you dislike about going to school?
- 3) When you think about your typical day in school, what words best describe it?
- 4) Do you like school better now than when you were in elementary school? In what ways?
- 5) Suppose you could give your school a report card. What grades would you give and why?

**Page 2:**

- 1) What are the most important things you learn in school? The least important?
- 2) What kinds of things are you learning in school which you think will help you in later life?
- 3) What things are you learning in school that help you now, as a teenager?
- 4) What could be done to make schools more interesting?

**Page 3:**

- 1) How should teachers treat students in school? How is it now?
- 2) How should students treat teachers in school? How is it now?
- 3) You may have heard the TV ad "To get a good job, get a good education". Is this a true statement? Why or why not?
- 4) What are the two or three biggest discipline problems in your school?

**Page 4:**

- 1) Why do some youth decide to skip classes?
- 2) What types of people tend to skip classes?
- 3) Why do some youth decide to drop out of school?
- 4) What types to people tend to drop out?
- 5) Should there be laws forcing those under 16 to be in school? Should this age limit be raised or lowered? To what age? Why?

**Page 5:**

- 1) Most adults think the biggest problem in schools is the lack of discipline and order. What do you think? If discipline isn't the biggest problem, what is?
- 2) Do you think the rules in your school are too strict, too easy, or about right? List the rules that are too strict and too easy.
- 3) If there were two rules you could change, what would they be?
- 4) If students made rules on smoking, what would they be?

Page 6:

- 1) What kind of punishment should there be for
  - a) fighting
  - b) skipping school
  - c) smoking
  - d) vandalism
  - e) hitting a teacher
- 2) Are detention and suspension effective forms of punishment? Why or why not?
- 3) Should physical punishment such as hitting, paddling or shaking a student ever be allowed for student misbehavior? Why or why not?

Page 7:

- 1) Do your parents feel you are getting a good education? Why or why not?
- 2) Do your parents have much involvement in your school? Would you like them to have more or less?



