



Research on Middle School Renewal

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High Expectations for Every Student

Several anomalies exist regarding student expectations for their academic success. Students have higher expectations for their long-term success than they do for their near-term success. Students' perceptions of teachers' expectations for their success are lower than teachers' self-professed expectations for students.

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We should be reassured by the universal focus on high academic expectations for every student when we examine the underlying principles of NMSA's *This We Believe*, the National Forum's vision statement, Comprehensive School Reform (CSR) models, *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB), and so forth. This focus is so strong that we have even changed our language from high expectations for "all" students to "every" student for fear that the "all" might be equated with "most." This is not just an argument of semantics, but an intended commitment of advocacy for each and every student.

But how does this commitment translate into the day-to-day experiences of the classroom? Have we been able to establish a culture of high academic expectations for every student? Furthermore, do our students recognize and buy in to this culture? Our research suggests that not all of our students are convinced that a high expectation for every student includes *them*. In fact, only 58% of students believe that their teachers think that they can do better in school

next year. This is a concern to us because research demonstrates that students will modify their behavior to meet our expectations, which includes *lowering* their behavior to meet the views that are held for them (Kramer, 1992).

Not surprisingly, high expectations are linked to motivation. NMSA's *This We Believe* (2003) challenges teachers and students to hold high expectations for each other, with this mutually beneficial relationship resulting in motivating students to act upon high expectations. Researchers have linked high expectations for students with investment and support for them resulting in higher student achievement (Cooney & Bottoms, 2003).

With the current emphasis on student achievement scores as the most important indicator of student academic success, raising academic expectations seems like one simple solution to a complex problem. However, as you would suspect, simply raising expectations is not easy to actualize since miscommunications and conflicting expectations work to prevent students from realizing high expectations.

This article will examine the differing perceptions of academic expectations that students and teachers hold. It will also examine the effect of family income (as measured at the school level by percentage of students on free and reduced price lunch) on academic expectations. Finally, it will conclude with a set of recommendations for making the most of academic expectations in a quest to ensure success for every student.

Schools in the Study

The Center for Prevention Research and Development (CPRD) at the University of Illinois has been working with middle level schools throughout the country for more than a decade using a self-study process. The *School Improvement Self-Study* is a data collection system consisting of surveys completed by teachers, students, principals, and parents. It is intended to assist educators in their school improvement efforts by providing data concerning school characteristics, educational practices, and personal background and experiences in middle level schools (Jackson & Davis, 2000; Middle Start, 2001; National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades Reform, 2001). The Self-Study provides data to schools for needs assessment, goal setting, program planning, implementation, and data-based decision making for school improvement.

The data presented here are from a national sample of more than 135,000 students and almost 9,000 staff from 295 middle level schools across 15 states that participated in the Self-Study during the 2002-03 school year. The middle grades schools in this sample are a diverse geographical group located in large and small urban areas, suburban areas, and small town or rural communities. Overall, these schools had more than half (56%) of their students receiving a free or reduced price (F/R) lunch.

Analysis

This analysis of academic expectations is presented from the perspective of both students and teachers in response to a series of questions on the Self-Study. Students were asked about their personal expectations, as well as the academic expectations that they believe their parents and teachers hold for them. These questions focused on the perceived likelihood of both short-term (doing better in school next year; making the honor roll) and long-term (graduating

from high school; going to college) goals being accomplished.

Teachers were asked to what extent they agreed with a series of statements regarding the academic expectations they have for the students that they teach. The statements are these: (a) teachers have high expectations for student achievement; (b) teachers hold equally high expectations for student achievement regardless of a student's background; (c) teachers communicate high expectations for achievement to students; and (d) teachers recognize or reward students for meeting achievement expectations.

Student Self-Expectations

Research indicates that student self-expectations influence academic performance (Southern Regional Education Board, 2002). It is therefore encouraging that when we ask students about their futures, they are generally very optimistic about their long-term academic expectations. In particular, students are confident about graduating from high school, which is reassuring considering the fact that high school is now assumed to be a "minimum requirement" for entering the labor market (National Center for Education Statistics, 2001). Ninety-one percent are confident that they *will* graduate and 83% of students expect to go to college. Eccles, Vida, and

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Barber (2004) found that early adolescent years are essential for developing expectations for college, and for sixth graders in particular, they are a strong predictor for later college enrollment. As you can see, middle school students are anticipating academic success in the long run, but what about more immediate concerns?

Interestingly, student forecasts for short-term academic successes are not as optimistic. Only a little more than half of students (54%) expect to make the honor roll next year, which indicates that students do not see the connection between making the

Figure 1
A Comparison of Student and Student-Perceived Adult Expectations

Academic Expectations	Expectation of Success (% responding definitely or probably will)		
	Student	Parent	Teacher
Do better in school next year	67	75	58
Make the honor roll next year	54	61	50
Graduate from high school	91	90	78
Go to college	83	84	68

honor roll today, and going to college in four to six years. Furthermore, Eccles and associates (2004) found that although plans to attend college affect high school course work choices, many students do not chose appropriately. These concerns are why researchers and policymakers recommend that teachers (and counselors) work with students to create academic and exploratory career plans while still in middle school so that students can attend to the short-term requirements that make the long-term goals possible (Frome & Dunham, 2002). Although only 54% of students expect to make the honor roll next year, they responded more favorably when asked if they will do better next year in school. Two-thirds of students (67%) believe that they will be able to achieve this goal.

The data clearly show a difference in student views of long-term and short-term expectations. Students caught up in their day-to day struggles as learners, appear to view time as the great panacea that will eventually allow them to achieve their long-term goals without first attending to the short-term requirements that make the long-term goals possible. We find this disconnect between long-term and short-term goals to be a common trend that we have observed with varying samples over the years.

While student expectations are overall optimistic, how do they perceive the expectations that are placed upon them by the adult stakeholders in their lives? For most middle level students, the most influential adults in their lives are their parents and their teachers. The following two sections reflect the academic expectations that parents and teachers hold for students as the students, themselves, perceive these expectations.

Parent Expectations

In their review of the parent involvement literature, Thorkildsen and Stein (1998) found that parent expectations have a strong, positive relationship with higher student achievement and that this rela-

tionship is stronger than any other form of parent involvement. The good news then is that our students believe that their parents have high expectations for them! In fact, students view their parents' expectations as either mirroring, or surpassing their own expectations (Figure 1). As we have already seen, student long-term expectations are very high, and parents are thought to agree with these assessments. However, where parental expectations differ is in the short-term expectations which students perceive as being much higher than their own self expectations. For example, 67% of students believe that they will do better next year as compared to the 75% who believe that their parents expect them to do better.

These consistently high expectations from parents demonstrate the importance of continued parental involvement in their child's education. Unfortunately, by middle school, parents are less involved in their child's education, both at home and at school, where they no longer feel welcome, needed, or even able to contribute to their child's education (Epstein, 1987). Therefore, schools need to strive towards involving parents in their child's education since they are a valuable resource at a time when schools are short on resources. These methods of parent involvement should be developmentally appropriate for early adolescence.

Teacher Expectations

Both in this study sample and with varying samples over the years, we have noticed a common trend of students viewing their teachers' expectations of their academic success as being the lowest for every academic goal (Figure 1). For example, 83% of students expect to go to college, but only 68% believe that their teachers think that they will go to college. Student reports of their perceptions of parent and teacher expectations show that parent expectations are 11% to 17% higher than teachers' for each academic goal.

But these are the student-perceived expectations of teachers. What do teachers report are their academic expectations for students? This next section focuses on teacher evaluations of how the teachers on their team, or in their grade level, view the students that they teach.

In light of student perceptions, it might be surprising that the vast majority of teachers believe that

Figure 2
Staff Expectations: Overall and by School Lunch Status

Academic Expectations	Teacher Expectations of Students (% responding strongly agree or agree)			
	Overall Teachers	Schools with 0-39% F/R Lunch	Schools with 40-59% F/R Lunch	Schools with 60-100% F/R Lunch
High expectations for student achievement	91	94	91	88
Equally high expectations for student achievement regardless of a student's background	86	88	85	85
Communicate our high expectations for achievement to students	90	93	90	89
Recognize or reward students for meeting achievement expectations	90	91	89	88

they have high academic expectations for students (Figure 2). On average, 9 out of 10 teachers believe in general, that they have high expectations for student achievement (regardless of student background); that they communicate these high expectations; and that they recognize or reward students when they meet these expectations. The question, then, is why are students individually not hearing this message?

This merits follow-up with our teachers. One possibility is miscommunication. How are teachers communicating their expectations? As we have already mentioned, students will adjust their behavior to meet the expectations that their teachers have established for them. However, students are not just evaluating teacher expectations based on explicit, verbal communications, but a combination that also includes a myriad of implicit, non-verbal communications such as teacher attitude (NMSA, 2003) or the teacher's treatment of other students, which provide clues indicating the student's ranking in the classroom (Kramer, 1992). As you can see, expectations must, therefore, be clearly defined and communicated.

Effects of Family Income (Lunch Status)

Considering the current debate on how to close the achievement gap, or how to lower the high school attrition rate for at-risk students, we need to ask some tough questions regarding the affects of a child's background on his or her academic expectations. The final focus of this article will be to gauge the affects of socio-economic status, as measured by percentage of students in a school on free or reduced price lunches (lunch status), on students and their teachers.

The Self-Study asks students if they receive a free or reduced lunch so that we can disaggregate data by

lunch status to look at different cross-sections of our student population. For purposes of this discussion, we have collapsed the categories of free and reduced lunch (F/R) into one to serve as a comparison to our full paid lunch students. In terms of our sample, this amounts to relatively even categories of our student population, 53% and 47% respectively.

So, does a student's family income as determined by lunch status affect the expectations that students hold for themselves? What about how they view the expectations of their parents and teachers? The answer, in short, is that lunch status does seem to matter. Although reports of doing better in school next year were similar for both groups, the overall trend demonstrates that the full paid lunch students have higher expectations for themselves, and they assess parent and teacher expectations to be higher. This is evident when we look at student expectations of going to college as perceived by self, parent, and teacher (Figure 3). The difference between the full paid lunch students and the F/R lunch students in terms of going to college is approximately 10% for students, parents, and teacher expectations.

But what about the other half of this equation—teachers? We examined teacher reports of academic expectations by student lunch status by assigning categories to teachers based on the overall percent-

Figure 3
A Comparison of Student and Student-Perceived Adult Expectation of Going to College: Overall and by Lunch Status

Expectations of going to college	Expectation of Success (% responding definitely or probably will)		
	Overall	Full Paid Lunch	F/R Lunch
Student	83	88	80
Parent	84	90	80
Teacher	68	75	64

age of students receiving a (F/R) lunch at their school. There are three categories of free and reduced price lunch: 0-39%, 40-59%, and 60-100%.

The overall trend indicates that teachers at the most affluent schools (i.e., 0-39% F/R lunch) have the highest expectations (Figure 2). For example, 94% of teachers in the most affluent schools report that they have high expectations for student achievement compared with 88% for teachers at schools with the highest percentages of F/R lunch students. This trend is consistently four to six percentage points higher for the most affluent schools when we look at the percentage of teachers that *strongly agree* with each of the four statements surrounding academic expectations discussed earlier.

These student and teacher trends, while disturbing, are perhaps not unexpected as we know lunch status is a strong predictor of student performance on standardized achievement tests as well as high school dropout rates. While we cannot change the circumstances of our students' backgrounds, we can take a proactive stance on minimizing their affect on academic performance by raising academic expectations.

A Florida case study (Taylor & Reeves, 1993) has provided us with an example for how raising expectations for students at-risk can also raise academic performance. Students who were identified as at-risk for dropping out were placed on a high level interdisciplinary team emphasizing "critical and creative thinking and real-life application of learning" (Taylor & Reeves, 1993, p. 13). The results were overwhelmingly positive as students improved in grades, attendance, and attitude resulting in a lower dropout level when compared to a control group of similar students. With these positive tangibles in mind, the last section of this article will focus on recommendations for strengthening academic expectations.

Summary and Recommendations

There are two major findings, or points of concern, that we would like to emphasize. Both of these concerns focus on a disconnect of expectations. Therefore, we would like to offer some recommendations for a proactive approach in making academic expectations *positively* affect student academic performance.

Our first concern is the disconnect between student expectations of their long-term and short-term

successes. As we have seen, students are very optimistic regarding their long-term goals as 83% expect to go to college, yet only 54% expect to make the honor roll next year. The following recommendations are for teachers to provide students with the tools they need to connect their long-term ambitions with the need to invest their time and efforts today.

- **Counsel students on expectations and realities.** Teachers should model a process for setting expectations and be accessible to students throughout the process. Encourage middle level students to think about their future beyond school and how education will affect future employment. Provide a frame of reference for students, so that planning for their future seems relevant today.
- **Involve parents.** Teachers should provide parents with practical ways of communicating expectations to their child. Help parents to create a dialogue with their child on the necessity of an education in the "real" world. Help them to identify the different career paths that are available to their child. And most importantly, advise parents and students on the steps that are necessary to pursue these goals.

Our second concern is that despite teacher reports of high expectations for their students, the students themselves do not perceive that their teachers have high expectations for them. As we have seen, parent perceived expectations match students for long-term goals and exceed students for short-term goals. However, teacher perceived expectations are consistently lower for all goals. As we have seen, 83% of students expect to go to college and 84% believe that their parents think that they will go to college. In contrast, only 68% of students believe that their teachers think that they will go to college. The following recommendations are to help teachers close this gap of perceived expectations with their students.

- **Assess current expectations.** Teachers should first assess the way that they are currently setting expectations (individually or at the team or school level). Identify how these expectations should be set and make sure that they are consistent.
- **Raise expectations.** Teachers should raise their expectations for students *and* for themselves. Work to create a mutually beneficial relationship that motivates students and teachers to *act* upon

these high expectations. Ensure that high expectations do not become unreachable expectations.

- **Student specific expectations.** Teachers should assess student learning styles and personalities before formulating expectations. Identify the different paths to student success. Be flexible with time (since some paths may take longer) and teaching methods to provide students with the ability to fulfill expectations.
- **Communicate expectations.** Teachers should communicate their expectations to students *and* parents. Identify ways that expectations are being communicated and make sure that verbal communications match non-verbal communications. Regularly touch base with students and parents to check on and re-evaluate expectations.

Conclusion

We know that students will modify their behavior to meet the expectations that we hold for them. We also know that self, parent, and teacher expectations affect student academic performance. However, these data suggest that some of these expectations are disconnected from one another: long-term vs. short-term expectations of success for students; self and parent perceived expectations vs. teacher perceived expectations. Students and teachers need to work together to align these conflicting expectations.

Educators need to open a dialogue about how they set, communicate, and hold students responsible for meeting their expectations. This is a process, and for it to be successful, teachers must also involve and advise students in setting, communicating, and meeting their own expectations.

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