



***In Their Own Words:***  
**Students and Parents**  
**Weigh-in on Education in**  
**America**

*A White Paper on Student  
Motivation & Engagement*

Spring 2016

**YouGov**<sup>®</sup>



# Students Know that School Engagement and Motivation to Learn are Keys to Success—Yet these Fall Short in Schools across America

Education stakeholders, from parents to policy makers and from students to superintendents have strong thoughts and opinions on the factors that contribute to a high quality education. No doubt this list of factors is long and varied with people viewing the impact of each through a different lens. However, in all of our work analyzing the sentiments of educators, parents and students, one theme stands apart as being embraced by all stakeholders: student motivation is a key to success and is driven by a combination of internal and external dynamics. This paper shares student and parent views on kids’ engagement with school and offers *their* insight on what can be done to improve it.

We present these data without a great degree of interpretation for two key reasons. First, we believe in the power of the unfiltered voices of students and their parents. Second, we want to empower those of you in the education sector to use these data to support your efforts in creating products, services and programs that have a positive impact on America’s youth.

Data findings are based on our survey of 704 parents of 4<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> graders and their children. In short, the survey reveals that students and parents strongly believe that student motivation is a necessary ingredient to academic success, yet most students do not strongly identify themselves as being motivated to learn, wanting to learn or being interested in learning what is taught.

Kids offer several suggestions—many including the use of technology and all recommending better interaction between student, teacher and content—to help combat student disengagement.

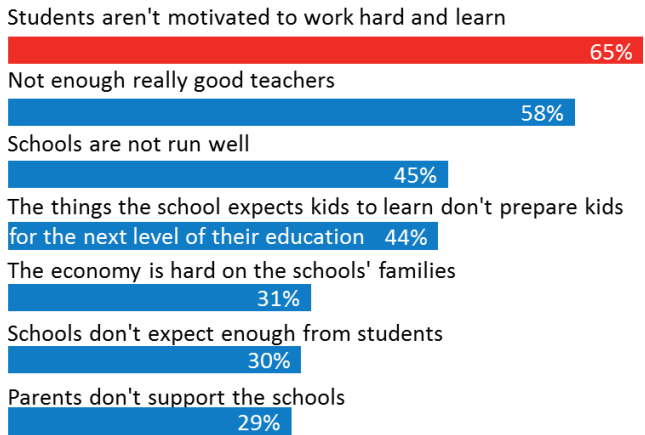
## Students say lack of student motivation is the top reason some schools underperform.

Two-thirds of students (65%) say that students not being motivated to work hard and learn is one of the top three reasons why some schools do much worse than others – more than say “not enough really good teachers (58%), or “schools are not run well” (45%), the next most frequently mentioned reasons. Lack of student motivation also falls in the top five reasons that parents name as to why schools underperform.

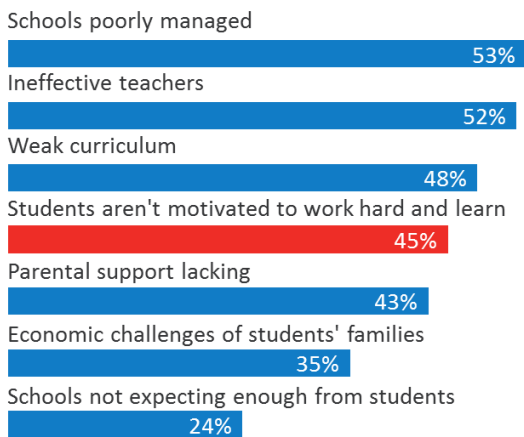
## Both students and parents view student motivation as critical, yet say it is lacking among the students in their schools.

### Top Three Reasons Schools Underperform

#### STUDENTS



#### PARENTS





Ninety three percent of students and 95% of parents say that students being “motivated to learn” is absolutely essential or very important to ensuring students receive a great education. Ninety-two percent of students and parents say the same of students coming to school wanting to learn what is being taught.

Yet fewer than half of parents say that “students are motivated to learn” or “students come to school wanting to learn what is being taught” describe their child’s school very well (45% and 46%, respectively).

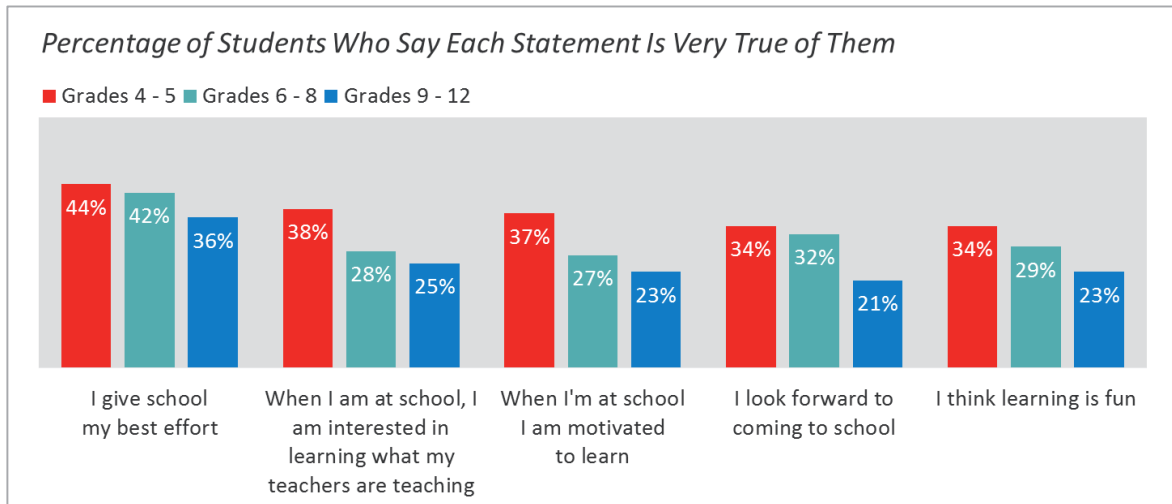
Students paint an even more discouraging picture of their schools than parents. About four in ten students say that “students are motivated to learn” or “students come to school wanting to learn what is being taught” describe their school very well (42% and 39%, respectively).

**Even fewer students describe *themselves* as motivated.**

Not only do students report low motivation and engagement among their peers, they also recognize it in themselves. Fewer than three in ten say that it is very true that when they are at school they are *motivated to learn* (27%), just a third say it is very true that when they are at school they *want to learn* (35%) and four in ten say it is very true that they *give school their best effort* (40%).

Students show similar low levels of engagement when it comes to interest in learning, looking forward to school and thinking learning is fun. Fewer than three in ten students say that it is very true that when they are at school, they are interested in learning what their teachers are teaching (29%), that it is very true they look forward to coming to school (27%) or think learning is fun (27%).

And middle and high school students report even lower levels of engagement than elementary school students:



Parents are under no illusions about their children’s views on learning. Similar to their kids, only one-third of parents say it is very true that their child is *motivated to learn* (33%) or that they *want to learn* (35%), and only four in ten say it’s very true that their child *gives school his/her best effort* (38%).

**Students and parents believe that learning happens when teachers set high expectations, are easy to talk to and make learning engaging.**

Nine in ten students (88%) and parents (89%) say that “teachers expecting that all students can be successful in learning what is being taught” is absolutely essential/very important in making sure that



students in their school receive a great education - yet only half of parents and students say that teachers in their school hold these expectations of students.

And nearly all students believe that teachers should make learning interesting (96%) and fun (96%). Further, making learning fun and interesting are the characteristics that rise to the top of students' descriptions of the best<sup>1</sup> teacher they've had so far, with 64% and 58% of students citing these attributes, respectively. Other qualities appreciated in their best teacher include being easy to talk to (63%) and really knowing the subject he or she teaches (55%), with the latter item being a full 20 points higher among students in 6<sup>th</sup> -12<sup>th</sup> grade compared to students in 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grade.

Many students also say their best teacher teaches or taught in ways that “aren't just lecturing at us,” that their best teacher provides feedback to them that lets them know how to improve, and that their best teacher lets students use technology to learn.

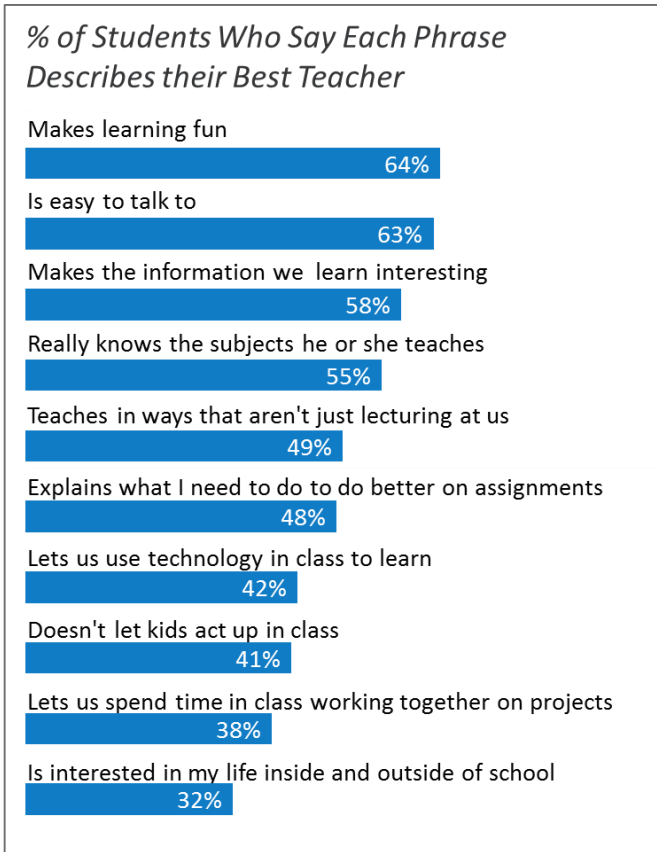
**Students and parents say technology can positively impact student motivation.**

It comes as no surprise that when asked the impact that technology has on their learning, kids cite “makes learning more fun” more often than any other option (at 64%). But this is not the only benefit that kids feel technology can impart. Sizeable percentages also say that technology is very helpful in:

- Allowing them to work at their own speed (54%)
- Giving them a way to learn outside of the classroom (through videos, online lessons, etc.) (52%)
- Providing ways to review things that were not fully understood when they were taught in class (46%)
- Providing a learning experience that is customized “just for me” (44%)

Further, these sentiments—as shown on the chart on the following page—strengthen as students advance from elementary to middle school. Of particular note is how the percentage of students who say technology “makes learning more fun” spikes among middle schoolers. The opportunity to leverage technology to engage students of this age group is vast.

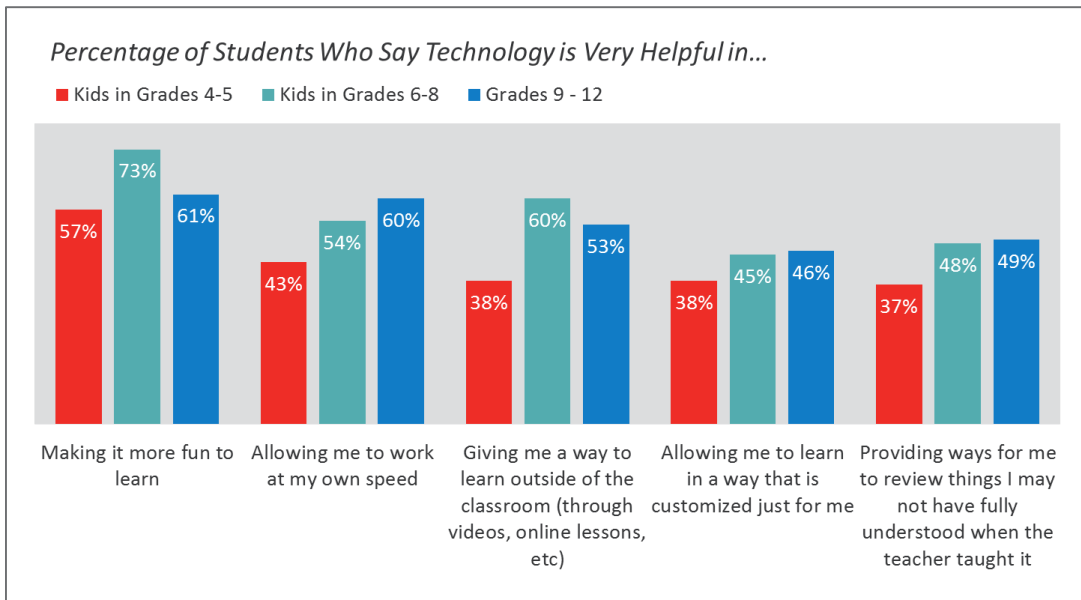
Even more critically, middle school is the time at which peer pressure to disengage from academics and focus on social relationships kicks in in earnest. And with a majority of kids in 6<sup>th</sup> – 8<sup>th</sup> grade having their own smart phones (42% with an additional 33% having access to one that they do not consider “their



<sup>1</sup> In the survey, we defined “best teacher” as the teacher from whom “you learned (or are learning) the most”.



own”), and many having access to tablets (70%) and laptops (82%) at home, the notion of checking technology at the school door seems illogical at best.



Parents share similar views as students on technology’s role in making learning more interesting and fun. Sixty percent of parents say that technology would be very helpful in making learning more interesting for their child. And fifty-six percent say that technology would help create a learning experience that is customized to the needs of their child.

### **Our Take:**

*Lack of motivation stems from students’ feeling that their opinions simply don’t count on topics from relevancy of content, to ways to learn and show what they have learned, to school climate & culture. When we asked an 11<sup>th</sup> grade boy what he’d communicate to those who hold the power to improve his school, he told us: “Ask students what they need from a learning environment and allow students to help shape that environment.”*

*Students need teachers that believe in each child’s capacity to learn and they need content and instructional resources that engage their imagination in ways that mean something in the context of their real lives. Technology can help with the latter while enabling kids to have a greater degree of control over their learning via the devices and methods they are already used to using outside of school and in their social lives. We see a critical need for a school environment that empowers students to engage with their own education to ultimately help them re-discover and reassert their enthusiasm for learning.*



**For more information about this research, or on YouGov’s research capabilities in the fields of youth, family, and education (including ed-tech), please contact:**

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#### METHOD

The survey was conducted online between September 16 – 28, 2015 among 704 U.S. parents of children in grades 4 – 12 and their 4<sup>th</sup> – 12<sup>th</sup> grade child. Sample balancing was applied to ensure results were representative of U.S. households with children in grades 4 – 12.