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## An Intimate Look Inside High Schools

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Like many reporters, I get hundreds of opinion surveys every year. Most of them I toss in the trash. They are usually designed to promote the agendas of the groups who sent them and have few surprises. It is nice to know that Americans think schools could be better and teachers want bigger salaries, but that is about as newsworthy as my growing despair over the quality of Redskin quarterbacks.

At Indiana University, on the other hand, a group of education experts have been compiling student surveys so large, deep and intriguing that I always read them and often write stories about them. The Hoosier scholars first focused on learning experiences in colleges, but have begun to explore high schools -- my favorite subject.

Their latest report, available at [www.indiana.edu/~nsse/hssse](http://www.indiana.edu/~nsse/hssse), is called the High School Survey of Student Engagement (HSSSE), commonly pronounced Hessie. It is based on surveys of 80,904 high school students in 2005. This is much better than the surveys I typically get, based on 1,000 to 1,500 respondents, and the questions go to the heart of what's wrong -- and in some cases what's right -- with high schools.

This is the second year the Indiana high school scholars have collected data. In total, they have results from 180,000 students from 167 high schools in 28 states. Like the five-year-old National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), which is put together by a team associated with the HSSSE researchers, the high school project plans to include more schools in more states and see how much of our teaching of teenagers makes sense.

The latest survey has some predictable conclusions: Girls study more than boys, many African American students feel unsafe in their schools and most students of all ethnicities plan to go to college. But there is a great deal more, some of it encouraging, some of it not:

\*Seventy-seven percent of the students reported spending three hours or less on personal reading in books or magazines, and 84 percent devoted three hours or less to personal reading online. (They do not appear to have asked specifically about newspaper reading, but I am pretty sure if they had, the results would have depressed me even more than these do.)

\*Sixty-five percent of the students agreed or strongly agreed that at least one adult in their school cared about them and knew them well, and 64 percent said that they were supported and respected by teachers.

\*Forty-two percent indicated they had never or only sometimes worked on a paper or project using information from several sources, such as books, interviews or the Internet.

\*African American students (60 percent) were the most likely to say they frequently contributed to class

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discussions, followed by whites (58 percent), Asians (46 percent) and Hispanics (43 percent).

\*Only 53 percent of all students said they put forth a great deal of effort in their schoolwork.

\*Sixty-seven percent thought their high school education contributed substantially to their writing ability, but 36 percent reported they had not written *any* papers more than five pages long during the current school year. Only 39 percent had written more than three papers three to five pages long.

\*Only 7 percent said they never participated in a conversation with a student of a different race or ethnicity, and 47 percent indicated they had such conversations very often.

\*Sixty-seven percent said they take pride in their schoolwork. African American students (72 percent) were the most likely to voice such pride.

\*Eighty-one percent reported that they often or very often come to class with assignments completed, but 80 percent said they spend three hours or less each week completing assigned readings.

The Indiana surveys, both college and high school, are based on research into what produces the best learning environment. Studies have shown that classroom discussions and small-group activities engage student interest, so the scholars ask about that. Talking about classroom topics outside of class with friends or teachers is also good, and that factor goes on the survey. Students who feel socially isolated do not learn as well, so the researchers explore that dimension, too.

Then, thankfully, they share the results with the high schools. The National Survey of Student Engagement has pioneered this method with nearly 1,000 colleges. I complain frequently that most NSSE colleges have declined to release their results, but at least they have the data and presumably are doing something productive with it.

The results of the new high school surveys are similarly kept confidential by the schools, but the Indiana report insists it is being put to good use. The report said when an urban high school saw that few of its students were writing papers longer than five pages, and rarely getting feedback from teachers, volunteers were recruited to help teachers with paperwork and other routine activities so they would have more time to help students with their writing. A large high school adopted a peer tutoring program, a homework hotline and more random quizzes when the survey reported that most of its students spent no more than three hours a week preparing for class. A rural high school created a free reading period when it learned that its students were reading less than students at other schools.

As nearly everyone has said recently, including many of those whose predictable polls fill my e-mail basket, our high schools should be doing better than they are. But at least with the Indiana survey, we have a clearer sense of what exactly they have to do and, just as importantly, what is already working among the many changes they have already made.

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