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Is school challenging enough?

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A collection of student commentary from StudentsSpeakOut.org

The question of "is school challenging students enough today?" has come up in several discussions on Students Speak Out. Most students and teachers agree that schools are not doing enough to challenge students and encourage higher-level thinking skills. Unchallenged students quickly become bored students. Students, especially those who attend alternative education programs and chartered schools, assert that some schools are addressing this problem with innovative curriculum and school structures. Students on the site agree that they want to be challenged and want to have time in class to go more in-depth into topics that interest them and current events. The challenge for teachers is creating more time during the day to teach beyond the mandated standards. In this brief, readers will notice that students asked insightful questions getting to the heart of what is a good education system.

Do schools challenge students enough?

Brett (Freshman, Avalon Charter School) "I don't believe we really challenge students enough. I also believe that part of that is because we don't have the right resources and funding (also system) to provide a good education for students-in other words the right challenge for them. I left my district school and one of the reasons was lack of a challenge in more aspects than just not going far enough in math. A challenge will be different for each student and many challenges will be similar.

...What really is more challenge in schools? It will be different for each kid, but does that mean we need to have rigorous homework, or include more critical thinking? What would be a common challenge for every student, what would be personal challenges or goals? I don't know if a challenge necessarily means we need a lot of rigorous homework every night, (but that doesn't mean we shouldn't have it.) ..."

Ben (Freshman) "I believe that students are NOT challenged enough in most schools today, however there are some exceptions. When I was in grade school, my school, Burroughs Community School had a program called Zenith that was basically a more challenging curriculum for more advanced learners. I really enjoyed being in it, but ever since then I feel I have not been challenged enough. ...The main problem is a lack of funding. Touching on what was covered in a different topic, I believe the reasons that schools like Trinity succeed in having really advanced students is because of the trust they put in the students. From what I've seen, more trust in the students leads to a less structured environment, which obviously can't be right for everyone. However, if a student really catches on to that environment, where faith is put into the student to be in charge of their education, that is the most challenging type of learning, based on my experiences."

Holly (Freshman, Avalon Charter School) "I believe that politicians, education and community leaders need to emphasize that today's generation is tomorrow's future, and that if we don't increase funding and inspire critical thinking in today's students, what hope is there going to be for the future? Challenging our students should be a priority in public, private, and alternative schools around the country..."

Students are "bored". What causes boredom, and what schools do about it?

Annie (Freshman, Southwest HS) "...I took part in the 'gifted in talented' programs all through elementary school. I remember thinking it was really cool we got to leave class to go to this special group, and I was with a lot of my friends. As for what we did...I don't remember a lot, but I remember we read short stories and discussed them, which I liked. I don't remember it feeling super challenging or special...it was fun, and didn't feel that different to regular class to me. I had some friends who were upset that they weren't in it, and I always felt bad. In a way, it's cool to give 'gifted and talented' kids a chance to go beyond, but I also felt bad, like I was part of this exclusive group...we did things I thought everyone should experience. I think mostly it's a good thing, but is it really right to just single out a few kids and leave the others to do what's 'normal'? Why can't they do the 'special' stuff too? We did things with critical thinking and discussions that were really great, at least at my school. Shouldn't everyone have this experience?"

Brett (Freshman, Avalon Charter School) "[Remember] the bored factor. We need the right challenge, not busy work that will not expand our knowledge or really help us move forward. Especially since we have already grasped the concepts they give us the busy work on. [That work] (at least from my personal experience) really isn't going much deeper anyway."

Bernard (Senior) "I think students need some encouragement, they need to take a cold shower and put on their thinking cap and start working there butts off and stop being so darn lazy."

Matty (former HS student) "I think that there is major difference between laziness and boredom, although there may be a positive correlation. I believe these are the students who are willing to go beyond the recommended standards set by teachers and NCLB. Providing a parallel curriculum, such as a book club would enable youth to consume more education on a more selective basis."

Mai-Eng (Senior, Patrick Henry HS) "...With the issue of how students see school as 'boring', I feel as if its just the way of how teachers are teaching, its not that the stuff students learn is bad, its just the way of how our school system is run now. I mean, as a nation we are looking at our generation as, behind. By this I mean, I once in France experienced a time when I saw that education is seen as important to the citizens. From hearing this from my time in France I kind of question myself that why does other country tend to view education as more important than my own. I mean I do want that kind of opportunity where the government would support education as the key to improving our society. I say this because if we as a nation want to see changes for the future, don't we start the changes with students and begin to support the school system as in education. Although there are many factors that deal with this issue, many students don't have the ability to learn now because as overtime there are too many changes that had affect our nation to decline. As a result I see that maybe it's time for our country to seek alternatives and really draw out the big picture of how education will help us grow to becoming not the most powerful but, one with all unique individuals rich in the ability to learn about all our cultural differences."

Pang (Senior, Patrick Henry HS) "... [Someone on StudentsSpeakOut.org] made a point across already mentioning of students who WANT to succeed will tolerate boring classes while those who doesn't care as much would care less.

I believe this is true but take me as a student for an example. I myself get poor grades and I hate the material we use for Chemistry class. I complain everyday about it; nevertheless because of the teacher and his great pursuit of teaching, I am able to withstand the class. I admire my Chemistry Teacher's lecture because he actually knows what he is teaching about."

Brett (Freshman, Avalon Charter School) "When we were reading the Frederick Douglass Autobiography in American History, one of the main points is about how education is the key for success. In the United States if you are educated and you put in enough effort you can do anything. If we cannot get enough textbooks for our classrooms, and the class size in my math class was 52 kids, how can we expect anyone to do well and get an education? What will our country look like in 20 years when we are not putting in the effort to give quality education to our kids? No wonder there was not challenge in that class, other than for the teacher! With 52 kids there were not enough desks or books! How do we get to that point? I was never challenged in that kind of environment and I cannot see how the teacher would be able

to provide me with anything to allow for that. What can we do so our schools don't get to that level so kids can have the opportunity for challenge?"

Dena (Freshman, Southwest HS) "... I had a great History teacher who involved current issues & events and government into our lessons. This year was the only year that has happened for me (not including my citizenship class in 6th grade). I loved my history class and I definitely wish I could keep my teacher for high school and not leave her in middle school! However in general, I think that teachers need to do more talking about current events in school . . . many students don't even know about what is going on in our country or in the world because they don't read the news paper or watch the news. I think it is the teachers' job to educate us about that - that's their job after all - to teach."

Annie (Freshman, Southwest HS) "Hmm, that's interesting...because I had the same teacher as Dena, but I don't feel the same way. I really liked our teacher, she was really funny and captivating. The subject matter we went over, though, didn't feel as relevant to me. It was a U.S. history class, which I love, but it seemed kind of dry to me, and I felt like we could've really dug deeper...like relating what we were learning about to current events, do debates and mock trials and do more analytical and creative projects to show what we really know. I felt like it was handed to us, in worksheet form or something, and we didn't have to process it, or question it...like, why is it this way? Why did they do this? Maybe because I'm a social studies geek and I'm really into politics and current events, I wanted more."

Brett (Freshman, Avalon Charter School) "I was thinking about this while talking with one of my advisors at Avalon, does anyone else think that the fact we are not going at all in depth with almost any subject cause the lack of challenge? If you have kids learning general information about the civil war, but we never get a chance to go into it for real, effect how we are challenged? I often find my advisors wishing we had more time, or could learn more about a certain subject. Also some kids wanting the same thing."

Pang (Senior, Patrick Henry HS) "To confess something, I as a student, learn best prior to lectures and in class work; in such cases: teachers giving you examples and working through problems as a class whole. I agreed and understand that the teachers are doing their best to put all these knowledge into our brain and such a short time..."

Steve (Patrick Henry HS teacher) "... I think incorporating fun into the classroom is important, but we need to be thinking about creating a balance as well (I guess that is pretty obvious.. but...)

I think its possible that some of the educational problems started with a notion of "entertainment" in the classroom, but it seems to me like its gone far beyond that now. Countries like India, China, and Japan aren't blowing past us by creating entertaining classrooms, they are finding ways to teach their students the importance of education at a very young age. Being a Liberal Arts major, I can't pretend to be ecstatic about their models, but it's also hard to argue with success."

The following comments come from a discussion forum posted by Traci, an adult participant on the site. She asked students to reflect on an article in "Newsweek" magazine judging schools on the "Challenge Index". Under the "Challenge Index" schools are judged on the number of advanced classes they offer versus test scores.

Brett (Freshman, Avalon Charter School) "This kind of shows my points about the right challenge for the right student. AP and IB programs are not the right challenge for everyone. Many kids are just not ready for that big of a step yet or in that direction. If we focus on getting people prepared for AP and IB programs by making sure they are ready and monitoring them so people are not in over their heads, would make a lot of students happier and more successful in school because they were at a good level for them."

Julie (adult participating on the site) "I agree with this. I am one such example that benefited, I believe, from taking GT and AP classes in high school. I never took the required tests when I was younger to gain

access early, but in 10th grade my teachers noticed I was ready to be challenged and encouraged me to take those courses. The first year I felt like I was in over my head but by my senior year I knew what was going on. I went on to earn a Biomedical Science degree and graduate degree at Tulane University.

I was considered an "at risk" student.

What would have happened if I had never been allowed access because I didn't test into them? If teachers hadn't encouraged me to participate in more challenging courses? I would have still gotten good grades in high school but I think I would have struggled in college more. Just the knowledge of being able to excel in more challenging courses during high school gave me the confidence I needed for college coursework."

Brett (Freshman, Avalon Charter School) "Yeah I see what you are saying and agree, I just feel so bad for students left behind and that don't have those important skills down because there is not a good chance too, and after a certain point they may never get the chance to master them if they don't have them down by Jr. High. I think that some people will kind of float on by with not knowing some skills, even though they may be ready to go deeper and more advanced-be challenged elsewhere. I am looking forward to my advanced topic projects (since I don't have classes,) because I know there is a lot I can do with them, but I think some kids will dread a few of the topics because they are not ready for that area because they were not well prepared. That could be one of the reasons that there are a fair amount of students in some advanced classes not doing well . . . maybe its something else."

Gayle (Senior, Patrick Henry HS) "I was actually one of the IB students at Patrick Henry and I can tell you that this was a great program to be in. Students need to be in challenging programs to better prepare for college and that is what the IB program does. Students do not have to have an entire course load of IB classes however. I took 3 my senior year and got college credit for passing the tests. This is one of the plus sides. Both AP and IB are looked at many colleges as basically the same thing. Meaning based on a students score that will get the same amount of credits, whether it was an IB or an AP test. Many students are apprehensive to take classes at this level because they have preconceptions that they are difficult but in all actuality that are not too much harder than the regular classes that students are taking and it reaps rewards in the end. One thing that many colleges look at is the level of the course in judging a student's grades. For example, say a student gets a B in IB English but gets an A+ in regular English, the IB student is still going to be judged at the same level as the regular classes because of the difficulty level, so it is best to encourage students to take IB and AP classes."

Emily (Freshman, Southwest HS) "I think that it's a good idea to encourage students not necessarily to take AP and IB classes, but to encourage them to do their best. Kids shouldn't have to take all AP's and IB's to have to get into a good college. Some kids just don't learn as fast as others, and some are trying their hardest but can't seem to understand things. ...You can be in non-advanced math and still be smart. I think teachers should be encouraging kids to do their best, which isn't necessarily the kid taking IB or AP courses."

Annie (Freshman, Southwest HS) "That's an interesting point...shouldn't you be able to take just 'regular' classes and get into a good college? That's what my parents' generation did, but now, they're telling us we *need* to take AP and IB classes to get into colleges...even though those are challenge classes, and kind of optional.

At my school (Well, my middle school...I'm going to high school in the fall and I'm not sure if this will stay true there), some kids in the advanced classes really of talked down about the regular classes...like saying non-advanced math was 'stupid math'. Even most of the kids in non-advanced math called it 'stupid' math...even if they were passing with an A. It seems like schools give lots of focus and attention to the extra, advanced classes and don't recognize the successes of students in the non-advanced classes. Which doesn't seem right to me...because the kids there are not by any means 'stupid'...like Brett said before, they are at the right place where they can succeed. It's better to take a class that you understand and pass with an A, even if it's not "advanced"...than to fail an IB class.

...these 'regular' classes should be preparing students for college as much the AP or IB classes...it's not right that only the students who take advanced classes should get into good colleges/postsecondary school."

Brett (Freshman, Avalon Charter School) "There is really no reason that we should need to lower the standards-just make things work for the individual student. Let kids work at a pace that is fit for them without lowering the standards of what they need to address and master within their school years. We have plenty of smart bright people out there, the problem is that we are all so different and also learn differently, so having one system or one type of school, and pace for everyone wont work. That is one way that will help more students achieve."

The topic of skipping grades was brought up in response to challenging students, specifically gifted students. The participants in the discussion felt that this was not the best way to challenge gifted students and that skipping grades actually create more problems for the individuals, but that individualized learning would be appropriate.

Brett (Freshman, Avalon Charter School) "To your skipping grades comment I think that it is somewhat of a bad idea for kids to skip grade levels. I don't really like how we have students divided up now anyway, and to make the social aspect even more challenging is usually the real learning experience kids get out of it. You are only a kid so long so why not enjoy it anyway? I know a kid who skipped two grades and his learning and challenges in school are at social levels, not the academic. Social aspects of life are just as important as the academic parts of school, and when students are put into situations were they are going to be so vulnerable socially (like when kids skip grades,) it can have more negative impacts than good and the out come might not be what people hoped for."

Holly (Freshman, Avalon Charter School) "... As a second grader, I was ahead of the class in most cases, and became frustrated with the whole thing because my teacher didn't do much to help me learn. The behavior of the other students also became very distracting from the work I was trying to do, and all this frustration was building up. Although I never got mad or acted out in school, I tended to take it out on my family, which was very hard on all of us. Now, at Avalon, I am able to challenge myself, and as a freshman, I also interact with older students on a daily basis. This is really good for us all, because it sets up good role models for the younger students, and is helpful for the mentors and older students to become confident with the responsibility that is placed on their shoulders. ... I think that there needs to be more encouragement, support and challenges for the students who are a little ahead. If we don't help these students, they're going to act up and get just as frustrated as I was."

Brett (Freshman, Avalon Charter School) "I think that we have to work more on giving kids those (different classes) options. I know I could have been in a higher level class than I was in at my previous district school in most all of my classes. It was all (except math,) just the mix of 7th and 8th grade curriculum in every class. We covered very basic areas and did not go at all in depth. We had kids at 5th grade or below reading levels in English class with other kids at college levels. I was reading some of the same books over again as I did in 5th grade. I am so glad I found a place were I was not limited because other kids were not caught up and 'equal' to me academically. I was almost never challenged at my old district school or allowed to reach my full potential. I know my best friend is going into the IB program at Patrick Henry, and she is very excited about being able to pursue things at the higher level, and also a little worried since she has never really been challenged before. I know a lot of kids who could get minimum requirements for school done quite quickly, and it would be nice if they could go beyond during their school years like Cyber Village Academy does, and Avalon."

ABOUT STUDENTS SPEAK OUT:

StudentsSpeakOut.org is an initiative of the Citizens League Minnesota 150th Anniversary Project (MAP 150). MAP 150's purpose is to find ways of cultivating citizens' ability to participate in designing public solutions by developing new spaces and roles that respect citizens' experiences and ideas as relevant to the policy discussion. People affected by the problem should be included in defining it. StudentsSpeakOut.org is a project whose face is a social networking Web site. We are testing a variety of strategies for involving young people as active citizens by meeting them where they are (on the Web, using technology, and in both school-based and outside-of-school learning environments). The Web site was at first Minneapolis-focused, and has now expanded to all of Minnesota and Milwaukee, with potential for further expansion nationally.

There are forum discussions where students and adults raise questions and discuss ideas for solutions. We've "turned the tables" and asked students to act as commentators on the education-related ideas of high-profile adults in Minnesota. The Web site was also the host of the "I Am Minnesota's Future" Video Contest, a pilot-level contest providing a forum for students to articulate what adults and youth must do to ensure a better future in Minnesota.

There is a lot of behind-the-scenes work, too, that occurs to cultivate active citizenship and bring the site to life. For example: Student leaders from Minneapolis and from Minnesota's alternative-education programs have project coordinators who assist them in investigating topics of their choice on video and in written story, and who connect the students to decision-makers working in their scope of interest.

In Milwaukee, students learn how to use the site to address education matters they care about via workshops, and adults participate in separate workshops to learn how to support the students on the site. The workshop designs and in-person recruiting strategies built on the successes of Minnesota's site, and the strategies are succeeding (as evidenced by rapid growth of site participation—almost 80 new participants since its launch in mid-April 2008.)

There are a number of strategies for facilitating more dialogue amongst students regarding respect, and other issues affecting students, using the site's discussion forums and cultivating student leaders to run the discussion. Most important to the students' willingness to participate is their trusting that there is an audience willing to consider their ideas. If that's you, and you would like to know more about working with Students Speak Out to involve students in your work, contact us: studentspeakout@map150.org