



Pupils say they despair in school

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Thousands of Pinellas high school students say their teachers don't inspire them, care about them or seem to be having much fun.

Nearly 30 percent say bullying is a problem at their school. Only 27 percent say students respect each other. More than 80 percent say getting good grades is important to them, but only 68 percent say they give it their all.

Their statements - gleaned from a recent survey of 22,610 high school students - are roughly in line with those of thousands of other students who answered the same questions last year in 22 districts around the nation.

They also seem to confirm what graduation rates suggest: that many American high schools are in need of repair.

"I'm not sure this bodes too well for our future unless we make some changes," Pinellas school superintendent Clayton Wilcox said last week as he unveiled the numbers at a meeting of high school principals. "There are some things here that will shock you, I think."

Some of the numbers might seem positive at first glance, like the nearly 60 percent of students who agreed that their school is a "welcoming and friendly place." But in an age when educators are held to account for every student who walks the halls, numbers like that aren't good enough.

Wilcox was particularly concerned that 28 percent of high school students across Pinellas said bullying is a problem.

"If schools aren't safe," Wilcox said, "you can't do a lot of other things."

Another set of numbers hit many educators between the eyes: 87 percent of the students surveyed said they planned to go to college; 84 percent said college was important to their future; 91 percent agreed with the statement, "I believe I can be successful."

Good news? Yes.

But many wondered how such strong aspirations can come to nothing for so many. Only 67 percent of Pinellas high school students graduate on time with a standard diploma. The number is only 46 percent for black students.

"If 90 percent of them agree they can do it, what am I doing wrong in those early years?" asked Kent Vermeer, principal at Tarpon Springs High.

The survey was devised by the Quaglia Institute for Student Aspirations. Russell J. Quaglia, who heads the institute, has identified eight "conditions" he says need to be present in schools for students to reach their goals. The conditions have names like "Belonging," "Curiosity and Creativity" and "Spirit of Adventure."

About two-thirds of Pinellas' 34,000 high school students took the 15-minute survey in late August and early September, producing what educators say is an unusually insightful look at the kids who fill their buildings.

In many cases, the numbers reveal a gap between what students aspire to and what actually happens to them in school. The results in Pinellas roughly match those in other districts, though Pinellas fares worse in a few categories.

One area of concern surfaces in the conditions called "Heroes" and "Fun and Excitement."

The fact that some students are bored and uninspired in high school is hardly news to educators. The condition has existed since high schools were invented.

But Wilcox said that's no excuse to dismiss the survey. Students today are different and so are the government-mandated consequences for failing them, he said.

In the next few weeks, they will share them with their teachers, parents and students.

The idea, Wilcox said, is to use the results as a tool for change.