



# Focus On: School Engagement

## DANE COUNTY YOUTH ASSESSMENT

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*These Focus on:  
reports provide an  
in-depth analysis  
of specific  
topics/issues on  
data from the  
2005 Dane County  
Youth Assessment  
of 7<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> graders  
in 14 Dane County  
school districts.*

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## Student-to-School Connections in Dane County

This issue of *Focus On* explores students' connections and feelings of belonging to their school. In the *2005 Dane County Youth Assessment*, as in past Youth Assessments, students were queried about a variety of topics related to their "connectedness" to the school they attend. The following report will explore national and international data on this subject, the responses of Dane County students and offer recommendations for further discussion.

### Overview of School Connection

In the research literature, the common term for "student connectedness" is *engagement*. Students who are low in their engagement at school are called *disengaged* or *disaffected*. Typically, engagement looks at two sets of characteristics: 1) Attitudinal – do students feel involved and included in their schools and have a sense of belonging at school? and 2) Behavioral – how do both positive and negative activities, such extra-curricular activity and truancy, relate to school connectedness?

Research on student engagement has studied a variety of factors - ranging from school size to parent involvement to relationships with teachers. Other studies (Meehan, et al 2002) have looked at the interactions of a number of variables and their influence on student engagement.

One of the most comprehensive studies of a student's belonging to school was conducted by the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) using a research tool called the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). The results were published in 2001. This international study looked at 315,000 15-year-olds in 43 industrialized countries (including the US). The PISA project explored the students' feelings of belonging at school, participation (positive and negative) and literacy (language and math).

The results of the PISA study found that students fell into one of 5 categories:

- **Top Students** (26% of all students) – Above average sense of belonging and participation and above average literacy (language and math proficiency).
- **Engaged Students** (27%) - High sense of belonging, above average participation and close to average literacy.
- **Students Feeling Isolated** (20%) – Low sense of belonging with average participation and literacy.
- **Non-academic Students** (17%) – Below average sense of belonging and average participation and very low literacy,.
- **Absent Students** (10%) – Average sense of belonging low participation and low literacy.

## School Characteristics

According to the results of the PISA research (mentioned above) there are 4 characteristics of schools with the highest sense of engagement:

- 1) *Proportion of students from lower economic backgrounds.* A higher proportion of economically disadvantaged students correlates with lower engagement school-wide.
- 2) *Student-teacher relations.* Schools where students feel teachers are helpful and fair have higher engagement levels.
- 3) *School discipline.* Schools where students are not disrupted or distracted by negative behavior have better engagement.
- 4) *Expectations of performance.* Students who are expected to do well and work hard demonstrate a higher sense of engagement.

From the study, the OECD drew a number of conclusions about student engagement in school:

- In the U.S., on average, 25% of the 15-year-old students were significantly disengaged from their schools. That was the 8<sup>th</sup> lowest of the 43 countries in the study. Japan, Korea and Poland were by far the lowest, all with nearly 40% disengaged students.
- School engagement doesn't necessarily predict better school performance. Some high performing students (14%) were disengaged and many average performing students (31%) were highly engaged.
- Students from low economic circumstances were at the greatest risk of being disengaged.
- Students from low economic circumstances in schools with large populations of other low economic students were at the highest risk to be disengaged.
- Schools with consistent structure, good teacher-student relations and higher expectations had better student engagement.

A broad conclusion of the PISA data was that –although the influence of economic factors is significant– conditions within the school were more likely to shape student engagement than external factors or socio-economic status.

These findings are consistent with other research (Osterman, 2000) that found high school students' attitudes about their class and school work were primarily influenced by their relationships with their teachers.

What are some of the characteristics of schools and classrooms that help students feel more connected to their schools? A review of the research finds that there are some promising strategies which appear to build positive connections between students and school faculty:

- Allowing students more autonomy and decision making (Cothran and Ennis, 2000)
- Providing "authentic work" connected to the world beyond school (Marks, 2000)
- Fostering a willingness by either teacher or student to build relationships at the high school level (Cothran and Ennis, 2000)
- Providing more opportunities for students to get to know each other (Phelps, 1990)

## Skipping School

In the PISA study of 43 countries, there was a surprising relationship between “skipping” school and a sense of connection to school (by country).

Schools in Belgium and Sweden had very high rates of absenteeism. Yet students in these countries expressed the highest sense of belonging to their schools.

In the case of Japanese and Korean schools, absenteeism was minuscule (average around 5-8%); yet student engagement in these countries was the lowest in the study.

According to the OECD researchers, this does not mean individual students who skip school feel more connected to their school.

Rather, the OECD interpretation is that countries/institutions that spend a lot of energy on attendance tend to have students who are less engaged in their school.

## Dane County Students’ Connection to School

This study of school engagement analyzes the responses of more than 21,000 7<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> students who participated in the *2005 Dane County Youth Assessment*. This analysis focuses on characteristics similar to those used in the PISA model (as well as other researchers). This model measures school connectedness by assessing 1) a student’s attitude about his or her school experience and 2) a student’s behavior.

For the purposes of this report, we look at a particular set of survey items from the *2005 Dane County Youth Assessment*:

### Student Sense of Connection

*School connection factor (Espelage, 2005)*

This factor is made up of seven items that ask students to assess

- school staffs’ attitudes towards students;
- the fairness of school rules;
- the quality of their education; and
- adult respect for their opinions.

A phrase that could summarize this factor would be “I feel good about my school experience.” (See Table 1 for a list of the items.)

By looking at a profile of students on this factor, we can begin developing a picture of those students who feel connected to their school and those who don’t, and explore the implications of these findings for school and community leaders.

## Skipping School in Dane County

In 20 years of DCYA data, the percentage of students who say they have skipped school in the past 30 days has declined slightly.

Below is the percentage of students, by year, who reported skipping school:

### Year % Skipping

1985 - 31%  
 1990 - 31  
 1995 - 34  
 2000 - 28  
 2005 - 27

Also, it should be noted that of all 7<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> graders who reported skipping school, 44% of them were juniors or seniors in high school (DCYA 2005).

## School Connection Factor

Factors (sometimes called scales) are efficient – and typically more accurate – tools for summarizing the underlying attitudes of survey respondents. Essentially, these are a set of items or questions that respondents tend to answer in the same way. The items that comprise the *school connection factor* on the 2005 DCYA are listed in Table 1.

Students participating in the DCYA 2005 consistently answered these seven items in the same manner, suggesting an underlying value or opinion. This is determined by a statistical function called factor analysis. Factors are commonly used in the analysis of survey responses. A popular example of factors is the Myers-Briggs Personality Inventory which has factors like Extroversion and Introversion based on sets of items in the inventory.

**Table 1**

### **School Connection Factor – DCYA 2005 Items**

Students in my school are typically asked to help set rules and solve problems.

The rules at my school are enforced fairly most of the time.

I am getting the education and skills I need to be successful after I graduate from high school.

Generally, the adults in my school respect my opinion.

I believe I am getting a good education at my school.

I usually enjoy going to school.

Adults in my school care about me and how well I do in school.

(Items were answered either strongly disagree, disagree, agree or strongly agree)

In the analysis that follows, we look at students who disagree or strongly disagree with most of the items in Table 1. These students' responses to the survey indicate significant negative attitudes about school and feelings of being disconnected from their school. Below is a summary of how Dane County students (7<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> grades) responded to the School Connection Factor ("I feel connected to my school").

<i>Response Options</i>	<i>"I feel connected to my school"</i>
Strongly Disagree	4%
Disagree	18%
Agree	58%
Strongly Agree	20%

The following sections will profile these students and analyze the relationship between school connectedness and a variety of behaviors and attitudes in students' school, family and community. Finally, the commission will offer recommendations to prevent or remediate students' feelings of disengagement from school.

### A Historic Look

A few of the questions from 2005 "Connection Factor" have been asked in previous surveys.

The response from 7<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> grade students on all three common items is summarized below.

#### Percent of Students Who Agree

*"I usually enjoy going to school."*

**1995** 60%  
**2000** 61%  
**2005** 60%

*"I believe I'm getting a good education at my school."*

**1995** 75%  
**2000** 79%  
**2005** 87%

*"The rules in my school are enforced fairly."*

**1995** 53%  
**2000** 60%  
**2005** 67%

The last two items show a positive trend in student perceptions. More students feel they are getting a good education and that school rules are "fairly" enforced.

### Profile of DCYA 2005 Students

Using the School Connection Factor (above), how do students who have negative feelings about their school (the 22% who disagree with the items) compare to students who feel mostly positive (the 78% who agree with the items)? The data below show areas of similarity and some fairly distinct contrasts between these two groups of students.

(Please note: the numbers listed below are percentages **within** each of the two groups – students feeling negative and students feeling positive – so they will not add to 100% across the groups. For simplicity we will call these two groups the "Disconnected" and "Connected" students.)

**Table 2**

<b>Demographic Profile: Connected and Disconnected Students</b>		
<u>Demographic Profile</u>	<b>% of Disconnected Students</b>	<b>% of Connected Students</b>
Gender	Male = 56% Female = 44%	Male = 47% Female = 53%
Age	12-13 Yrs. Old = 18% 14-15 Yrs. Old = 34% 16-17+ Yrs. Old = 47%	12-13 Yrs. Old = 29% 14-15 Yrs. Old = 35% 16-17+ Yrs. Old = 37%
Racial	Asian = 2% Black = 6% Hispanic = 3% Hmong = 2% White = 75% Mixed Race = 7%	Asian = 3% Black = 5% Hispanic = 4% Hmong = 2% White = 77% Mixed Race = 6%
Parents' Education	4 years or more of college = 40%	4 years or more of college = 47%
Where they live	Outside of Madison = 49%	Outside of Madison = 52%

**Friends and Connections to School**

Students who are disconnected from school report more risky behavior by their friends. The “friend questions” show some of the sharpest contrasts between Disconnected and Connected kids:

Friends don’t drink, do drugs  
(% Disagreeing)

Disconnected =61%  
Connected =34%

Friends don’t have sex  
(% Disagreeing)

Disconnected =51%  
Connected = 36%

Friends stay out of trouble  
(% Disagreeing)

Disconnected = 45%  
Connected =18%

**Table 3**

<b>School-Related Factors</b>		
	<b>% of Disconnected Students</b>	<b>% of Connected Students</b>
Homework (5+ hours per week)	38%	50%
Grades in School (AB or better)	42%	63%
(C or less)	23%	11%
Plans After High School (4-year college)	48%	66%
*Harassed at School <sup>1</sup> (At least 1 time in the past 12 months)	49%	29%
Skipping School (At least 1 time in the past 30 days)	45%	23%

<sup>1</sup>Harassment is defined as being "teased, threatened, chased or cornered by another student because of your gender, how you look, how you dress, or sexual orientation."

The greatest disparities between Connected and Disconnected students in Table 3 are in the areas of academic performance, skipping school and being harassed by other students. Disengaged students are less likely to do home work, and fewer have plans to continue their education beyond high school.

**Need for Belonging**

People have an inherent need for “belonging” according to an extensive body of research (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

People who feel accepted, included or welcome tend to report more intense feelings of . . .

- Happiness
- Elation
- Contentment
- Calmness

On the other hand, people who feel rejected, excluded or ignored tend to report feelings of . . .

- Anxiety
- Depression
- Grief
- Jealousy

According to Baumeister and Leary’s work (a summary of over 300 studies), “belongingness is the primary cause” of a variety of basic positive and negative

**Table 4**

<b>Time Spent out of School</b>		
	<b>% of Disconnected Students</b>	<b>% of Connected Students</b>
Extracurricular Activities-not sports (5+hrs per week)	13%	14%
Music, Dance or Drama (5+hrs per week)	20%	21%
Spending Time with Family (5+hrs per week)	32%	42%
Reading other than school work (5+hrs per week)	30%	30%
Playing Electronic Games (5+hours per week)	29%	15%
Playing cards/Gambling (5+hours per week)	21%	9%
Part-time Job (Working at least 1 hr/wk for pay)	35%	19%

There are no significant differences between the two groups in time spent in extracurricular activities, reading for pleasure or engaging in activities related to the cultural arts.

Disconnected students are significantly less likely to engage in activities with their families and more likely to have a part-time job, gamble and play electronic games.

**Relations with Parents**

One of the areas of greatest contrast between Disconnected and Connected students is in their relationship with their parents. Disconnected students report a lot less communication with and “caring” by their parents.

As noted in Table 4, above, Disconnected students tend to spend far less time with their parents than do Connected students. Table 5, below, indicates Disconnected students also are less likely than Connected students to know their parents’ values regarding teen sex and drinking alcoholic beverages. A minority of Disconnected students report having had good talks with their parents about future plans or having their parents around when they really need them.

**Topics with Little Difference**

There is very little difference between geographic area (rural vs. urban) or racial groups in the percentage of students who feel disconnected from their schools.

That is also true for parent education, which is a strong predictor of the socio-economic level of families.

**Table 5**

<b>Connection to Parents</b>		
	<b>% of Disconnected Students</b>	<b>% of Connected Students</b>
Parents there when I need them (Often, very often)	47%	88%
Good talk with at least one parent about future plans (Often, very often)	43%	55%
Parents think it's wrong for teens to have sex (Agree to strongly agree)	55%	79%
Parents think it's wrong for teens to drink (Agree to strongly agree)	67%	84%

**Very Connected or Very Disconnected Students**

Approximately 20%\* of Dane County students reported a very strong connection to school (strongly agree to items on the factor) versus about 4% who were strongly disconnected (strongly disagree to items on the factor). As the items below demonstrate, the differences between these two groups of students are striking.

**Table 6**

<b>Comparison of Student who are <u>Very Connected</u> and <u>Very Disconnected</u></b>		
	<b>% of Very Disconnected Students</b>	<b>% of Very Connected Students</b>
Gender	Male = 66% Female = 34%	Male = 45% Female = 55%
Grades in School	B/C or Less=55%	B/C or Less=17%
Homework at Night	One Hour or more per night = 11%	One Hour or more per night = 43%
TV hours per week	Twenty+ hours =25%	Twenty+ hours =8%
Daily Marijuana Use	21%	1%
Rarely/Never talk to parents about problems	56%	14%

\*20% = 4700 students 4% = 850 students

**Key Influences**

Experts in the field of youth development generally agree that there are four key factors that greatly influence whether a youth feels connected to his/her family, community or school:

**A SENSE OF BELONGING**

Youth need to feel they are wanted at home, in their schools, and in their community.

**A SENSE OF COMPETENCE**

Youth need to feel that they can do something well and that it is appreciated by others in their homes, schools and community.

**A SENSE OF USEFULNESS**

Youth need to have opportunities to do something of value for other people.

**A SENSE OF POWER OR INFLUENCE**

Youth need a chance to be heard by those in positions of power or authority in order to influence decisions affecting their future.

The effect of these factors is cumulative and developmental. That is, the more often these “senses” are experienced in different environments (home, school, community) and the more they are experienced over time, the more likely it is that the young person will **not** experience “rotten outcomes”, including estrangement from school.

Very Disconnected students are more likely to be male, make lower grades, spend little time doing homework, watch a lot of TV and talk to their parents about personal problems. One of the biggest differences between the two groups is the daily marijuana use, with one in five Very Disconnected students reporting that behavior vs. virtually none of the Very Connected students.

**Dangerous and Self-Destructive Behaviors**

In many cases, disconnected kids are two to five times as likely to indulge in risky or self-destructive behavior as are their counterparts that have a more positive attitude about school. Clearly, school disengagement is just one of many areas in which these students are acting outside the socially expected norm for youth.

**Table 7**

<b>Dangerous and Self-Destructive Behaviors</b>		
	<b>% of Disconnected Students</b>	<b>% of Connected Students</b>
Attended School After Smoking Marijuana (At least 1 time in last 30 days)	21%	7%
Smoking Cigarettes (At least 1 time in last 30 days)	25%	10%
Thoughts of Depression and Suicide (At least 1 time in last 30 days)	30%	12%
Drinking Alcohol (Any drink in last 30 days)	44%	20%
Sexual Behavior (Ever had sexual intercourse)	51%	31%
Binge Drinking (5+ drinks at one time in last 30 days)	41%	20%
Current Involved in a gang	10%	2 %
Committed Retail Theft or Vandalized Property within past year	31%	9%

## Key Findings

The concept of a student connection to or engagement in school is not a clearly defined subject such as alcohol and other drug use or gang participation. The most comprehensive school engagement study (PISA 2002, mentioned above) shows a range of about 18-30% of students not feeling “connected.” In Dane County that figure is 27%. The DCYA 2005 found that these **Disconnected** students were more likely to have the following characteristics (compared to the students who were more connected to school):

- Tend to be males; have lower grades; have lower aspirations after high school
- Feel less connection to parents; dramatically high percentage who say their parents aren’t “there when I need them.”
- Are more involved in some risky behaviors, particularly marijuana, alcohol use and binge drinking.
- Are more likely to be involved in negative school behavior like skipping school or coming to school under the influence of marijuana.

There were no significant differences between connected and disconnected students along racial/ethnic lines.

The question these data raise is what is the cause and what is the effect? Does their disconnection from school (which is a huge part of their lives) foster some of the risky behavior and erode relationships with parents? Or do poor relationships with and lack of guidance from parents result in poor school connections – and risky behaviors?

Research in the field of youth development suggests that we must be proactive in developing positive behaviors and attitudes among youth rather than relying on remedial, rehabilitative or punitive programs that address problems after they occur.

## Recommendations

The Dane County Youth Commission, after reviewing the findings in this paper, offer the following recommendations for consideration by school officials, community based organizations and elected officials. Priority should be given to those recommendations that focus on preventing the lack of engagement or connection in the first place.

- 1. School districts should develop a systematic policy of matching every student with an adult in the school in whom the student would feel comfortable confiding (mentor, advisor, advocate, coach, counselor, etc.).** Ideally this would be one of the student's teachers.
- 2. School districts should provide in-service training(s) for all staff that addresses the importance of the link between students' sense of belonging and their willingness to engage in their schools.**
- 3. Schools and communities should emphasize the importance of parents providing support, encouragement and high expectations for their children.** This might include an outreach program pairing new students (and their families) with students (and parents) who are connected to their school. This might be a project that is initiated by PTAs and PTOs.
- 4. Schools should explore the potential of recruiting members of service clubs and similar organizations to act as tutors/mentors for elementary, middle and high school students.** (These organizations might include
  - **business-related groups**, such as the Business Volunteer Network, union members, business associations, members and alumni of business and community leadership programs e.g., Leadership Greater Madison and resources available through the United Way of Dane County;
  - **community based organizations**, such as Centro Hispano, RSVP, Urban League of Greater Madison, Big Brothers & Big Sisters, Families and Schools Together (FAST);
  - **organizations that focus on or include retirees**, such as RSVP university retirees, retiree groups at larger businesses and retired educators;
  - **civic groups**, such as community sororities and fraternal organizations, faith-based groups, One Hundred Black Men the Schools of Hope initiative, the RICE program (Rotarians Investing in Children's Education) in Sun Prairie that provides recognition to students who are not recognized as high-achievers in their schools; and
  - **academic resources** such as high school students, PTAs, PTOs, university students sororities and fraternities and resources available through the Morgridge Center at the University of Wisconsin
- 5. Community based afterschool programs should partner with schools to develop strategies that maintain and increase student engagement in schools.** These strategies might include the development of afterschool homework clubs that have access to daily class assignments, having schools recognize students' success in afterschool activities, encouraging afterschool staff to attend parent conferences or school planning, developing mechanisms that enable school staff and afterschool staff to share information on student performance or other aspects of a student's life, etc.
- 6. Schools, working with community based organizations, should take the lead in developing proactive strategies at the elementary level to prevent school disengagement from happening.** These strategies might include reaching out to community groups to encourage them to "adopt" a school or classroom with a special emphasis on 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grades, implementing or expanding the School Parent and Reading Connection program (SPARC) that currently operates in many elementary schools; creating partnerships with United Way of Dane County to develop volunteer opportunities for elementary classes, and supporting early childhood programs such as the Dane County Parent Council (Headstart).

7. **Schools should use volunteers and staff to conduct very active outreach efforts to involve and engage parents so that they feel comfortable attending school conferences and interacting with school staff.**
8. **The AmeriCorps project, Partners in AfterSchool Success (PASS), which will place 25 AmeriCorps members in afterschool settings in the fall of 2006, should be integrated into school efforts to prevent or reduce student disengagement.** Many of the recommendations previously mentioned would serve as appropriate vehicles for developing this partnership.

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