viewpoint

Education Department Hears Student Voices Supportive of Increased Graduation Standards

"What do high school students think?" is a question we heard dozens of times as our Task Force on High Achieving High Schools wrote its report (available online at www.prichardcommittee.org).

Now, thanks to the student summits that the Kentucky Department of Education held around the state, we have a pretty good answer.

The summits attracted about 1,500 students to five locations (Somerset, Northern Kentucky, Murray, Prestonsburg and Shepherdsville). The cross-section of students included many who were articulate and confident enough to speak out. (And the intelligence with which they expressed themselves was striking — a cause for optimism about our younger generation.)

By Robert F. Sexton
Executive Director

What they said about their high school experiences — what they expected, what's going well and what isn't — will be organized into a full report that will be published soon. But several messages were loud and clear and reminded me of the student focus groups we conducted in the mid-1990s using the firm of Roberts and Kay.

Ten years ago, high school students told us emphatically that they wanted teachers who were engaged and who challenged them, adults who showed that they "cared about them as human beings," someone to connect with them — know the students' names, talk to them when they don't have to. "Teachers do this with the best students, but not with all of us," the students said.

In short, they wanted to be treated with respect, not like "inmates." The students who participated in our focus groups also said they were willing to do much more in school; expectations were too low and teaching was too routine. They longed for more engaging teaching, more opportunities to learn at their own pace, more options for independent and hands-on learning, internships and field trips — for striking out on their own as adults *in school* like they often did *out of school* in part-time jobs.

They were derisive and dismissive about teachers who didn't challenge them. Rona Roberts, who has studied student attitudes for 10 years, said their message was that they "want adults to hold us accountable for doing things we wouldn't do on our own unless we're made to do them. If adults push us we will respond. We need someone to make us do more."

'High school students say they want to be pushed to take higher-level courses that will better equip them for later success.'

Let's fast forward on that point to the recent student summits, where the same message was delivered. With a growing but incomplete awareness that success in life will depend on education *beyond* high school, the students' mostpowerful plea was for more rigor and more challenge in their courses. They want to be pushed to take such courses as higher-level math, science and language that they believe will better equip them for later success.

But, as one observer said, "they'll also play the game."

That phrase reminded me of what is perhaps the most influential book ever written about high schools, "Horace's Compromise," authored by Ted Sizer 20 years ago. For Horace, the teacher and hero of the book, the compromise was "I won't push you too hard, and you won't demand too much of me, and we just won't tell anybody."

In the real world this is a variation of the old cynical joke by workers in socialist economies like the old Soviet Union: "We pretend to work and they pretend to pay us."

The students we're hearing today say they know that this approach isn't working for them. They might be even more convinced if they and their parents knew the specific payoffs of completing more challenging high school courses.

What would they say, for instance, if they and their parents knew that their chances of succeeding in postsecondary education are only 8 percent if the highest math course they've taken is Algebra I, but jump to 80 percent if they've taken pre-calculus, calculus or physics? Do they and their parents know that access to jobs that pay more than a minimum wage, access to American middle class incomes, requires at least some level of postsecondary education? Do they know that with less than a high school diploma they most likely will be consigned to the ranks of the nation's working poor?

I expect that many of our students do know this. That's why they're saying: "push us."

And that's why it's important that the Kentucky Board of Education adopt the stiffer graduation requirements that are being considered.

Yes, change will be tough. Yes, it will take several years to reach all students with more challenging coursework. Yes, high schools must be restructured. Yes, teaching must improve to reach all students. Yes, the best and brightest must be attracted to teaching and they must stay there. Yes, elementary and middle schools must equip all students with the basics before they get to high school. Yes, more money is needed to do all of this.

But, all that being said, we know that low expectations don't work and high ones do. Students themselves tell us this. It's time for adults to give them the challenge they want. They say they'll respond. We believe they mean it.

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