About NAIS

The National Association of Independent Schools provides services to more than 1,800 schools and associations of schools in the United States and abroad, including 1,500 nonprofit, private K-12 schools in the U.S. that are self-determining in mission and program and are governed by independent boards. For more information, visit www.nais.org.

NAIS conducts research among schools nationally and then provides you with targeted, synthesized reports you can use to evaluate your own practices. Our research clearinghouse also identifies external research relevant to independent schools and helps you understand how to use the findings in your work.

See the full suite of NAIS research reports at www.nais.org.
Engagement by School Level: NAIS High School and Middle School Students

Executive Summary
Background
Methodology
Why Engagement Matters

Key Findings
- High School Students Appear To Work Harder And Be More Involved ... 10
- But Are Less Interested In School Than Middle School Students 11
- Why Are High School Students Less Engaged? 20
- How To Better Engage High School Students 21
Executive Summary

If we look at the hours spent on schoolwork, interaction with teachers, and involvement in school-sponsored activities, NAIS high school students appear to be more engaged than their middle school peers. Seventy-six percent of high school students report spending at least 4 hours per week completing homework assignments, compared to 60 percent of middle school students. Seventy-three percent of high school students report discussing grades with teachers at least sometimes, compared to 61 percent of middle school students. Fifty-five percent of high school students spend at least 4 hours participating in school-sponsored activities, compared to 38 percent of middle school students although middle school students are more involved than older students in activities outside of school (58 percent and 40 percent, respectively).

Although middle school students might appear to be less involved than high school students, a higher percentage report being engaged in school. Middle school students are 7 percent more likely than high school students to go to school because they enjoy being there (68 percent and 61 percent, respectively) and 6 percent more likely to go to school because of what they learn in classes (75 percent and 69 percent).

Seventy-nine percent of middle school students report giving their maximum effort in at least most of their classes, compared to 66 percent of high school students. In addition, 77 percent of middle school students report working harder than they expected to in school, compared to 70 percent of high school students. High school students are more likely than middle school students to be bored in class and are less engaged by various methods of teaching. These results compare to national trends, where students become less engaged as they progress from grade to grade.

In addition to academic engagement, there are several key differences between how NAIS middle school and high school students choose to spend their time outside of the classroom. Twenty-eight percent of middle school students report reading for personal interest for at least 4 hours per week compared to 19 percent of high school students. Middle school students are 4
percent more likely than high school students to participate in family commitments (chores, caring for siblings, etc.) for at least 4 hours a week (43 percent and 39 percent, respectively). Finally, high school students are 4 percent more likely than middle school students to spend at least 4 hours a week watching TV or playing video games (42 percent and 38 percent, respectively).

There are also several differences between NAIS middle school and NAIS high school students regarding experiences of bullying and perceptions of administrative support and school rules. While more middle school students than high school students have either witnessed bullying (29 percent versus 25 percent) or been bullied themselves (22 percent versus 14 percent), middle school students are more likely than high school students to feel supported by school administrators (86 percent and 79 percent, respectively). These perceptions of administrative support could be a result of how students view the enforcement of school rules. Eighty-one percent of middle school students believe that school rules are applied and enforced consistently, compared to 69 percent of high school students.

High school students in NAIS schools may be less academically engaged than middle schoolers because of a lack of perceived relevance of their schoolwork. NAIS middle schoolers are more likely to understand the relevance of their education outside of school. Seventy-nine percent of NAIS middle school students see how the work they are completing will help them beyond school; 64 percent of NAIS high school students do so. In addition, middle school students are 11 percent more likely than high school students to believe that their schooling helps them understand the importance of their education for life after school (73 percent versus 62 percent). Finally, 78 percent of middle school students report that their school experience has contributed to applying school-based knowledge to everyday life; 70 percent of high school students do so.

The “NAIS Report on the 2016 High School Survey of Student Engagement” makes several recommendations on how to better engage high school students. The findings in this report suggest recommendations that relate to job skills and contextualized teaching and learning.
Background

During spring 2016, NAIS launched the Middle Grades Survey of Student Engagement (MGSSE) among independent schools. The MGSSE project serves three primary purposes: to work with teachers and school administrators to use data to improve practices (teaching and learning); to help educators explore, understand, and strengthen student engagement; and to conduct rigorous research on issues of student engagement. The survey gathers data from students in grades 5 to 9; research indicates that middle school is a critical period in which student engagement often begins to decline.

The results of this survey can help schools assess their effectiveness in providing social/emotional support for academic success, develop a way to comply with learning assessment standards of accreditation without using standardized achievement tests, and capture data that show the value-added experience of an independent school education.

The results of the first year of the MGSSE are compared to the results of the 2016 High School Survey of Student Engagement (HSSSE). The HSSSE serves the same purposes as the MGSSE for students in grades 9 to 12. A full description of the objectives, methodology, and results of HSSSE can be found on the NAIS website.¹

Methodology

In fall 2016, 2,897 students in 26 NAIS schools located in all regions of the United States completed the Middle Grades Survey of Student Engagement (MGSSE). Participating students were in grades 5 to 9.

This report compares the aggregated results for MGSSE to the results of the 2016 High School Survey of Student Engagement (HSSSE) in which 54 schools participated. The report highlights key differences in engagement between middle school and high school students in NAIS schools, and it identifies action steps that will help schools address these differences.

This report was written by Joseph Corbett, research assistant at NAIS.
Why Engagement Matters

The term student engagement is used to describe “the degree of attention, curiosity, interest, optimism, and passion that students show when learning or being taught.” Students are engaged when they care about what’s going on in the classroom, and they are motivated to learn and progress in their studies. Engagement is linked to a wide array of positive outcomes for students, both in and out of the classroom.

Engaged students are more likely to succeed in school. They are genuinely interested in class material. On average, they retain information longer, can understand more complicated material, and are more creative than their disengaged counterparts. They are also academically motivated: Engaged students attend class regularly, cause fewer disruptions, and are less likely to drop out of school than other students.

Engaged students are also more likely to have success in their college careers. Students engaged in high school are more likely to be academically ready for college-level work, and they are more likely to have the study skills needed to succeed in college. These students also report higher levels of overall college satisfaction than students who were not engaged in their high

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4 Vicki Trowler, Student Engagement Literature Review (York, UK: Higher Education Academy, 2010); online at https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/system/files/studentengagementliteraturreview_1.pdf.
school coursework.\(^5\) In addition, research shows that engagement can reduce the impact of disadvantage on historically underserved students.\(^6\)

Engaging students is the first step in creating a culture of learning in the classroom. Engaged students care about the material they are learning, they actively contribute to class discussion, they complete homework assignments, and they discuss academic ideas with their friends and family.

Perhaps most important, engagement instills a lifelong commitment to learning in students. Those who are truly inspired by their studies will continue to learn long after they leave the classroom.


Key Findings

Are high school students better prepared for class? Do middle schoolers get bored more frequently?

Using the results of the 2016 MGSSE and HSSSE, NAIS has identified several areas in which engagement outcomes are different for middle and high school students. This report explores key engagement differences between these groups of students.

High School Students Appear to Work Harder and Be More Involved …

It appears that high school students in NAIS schools are more engaged in academics than their middle school peers. Seventy-six percent of high school students report spending at least 4 hours per week completing homework, compared to 60 percent of middle school students. In addition, 49 percent of high school students report spending at least 4 hours per week studying for tests or quizzes, compared to 35 percent of middle school students. Because high school students are already preparing for college, these results are not surprising.

NAIS Students Engaging in the Following Activities for at Least 4 Hours per Week
High school students in NAIS schools are also more engaged with their teachers than their middle school peers; 73 percent of high school students report discussing grades with teachers at least sometimes, compared to 61 percent of middle school students. In addition, 55 percent of high school students report discussing ideas with teachers outside of class at least sometimes, compared to 48 percent of middle school students.

**NAIS Students Engaging in the Following Activities at Least “Sometimes”**

![Bar chart showing engagement levels for discussing grades and ideas with teachers between high school and middle school students.](image)

High school students are significantly more likely to participate in school-sponsored activities. Fifty-five percent report spending at least 4 hours a week on school-sponsored activities compared to 38 percent for middle school students. Middle school students are more likely than the older students to participate in activities outside of school (58 percent and 40 percent respectively).
But Are Less Interested in School Than Middle School Students

Even though middle school students appear to spend less time studying, discussing ideas with teachers, and participating in school-sponsored activities, a higher percentage report being interested in school than their high school peers. This gap can be seen in student data on motivations for attending school. Middle school students are 7 percent more likely than high school students to go to school because they enjoy being in school (68 percent and 61 percent, respectively). Middle school students are also 6 percent more likely than high school students to go to school because of what they learn in class (75 percent and 69 percent). High school students are more likely than middle school students to report going to school because they want to get out of the house (36 percent versus 26 percent) or because there is nothing else to do (35 percent versus 27 percent).
In terms of student effort, 79 percent of middle school students report giving their maximum effort in at least most of their classes, compared to 66 percent of high school students. Furthermore, 92 percent of middle school students report putting in a great deal of effort when completing schoolwork, compared to 86 percent of high school students. Only 6 percent of middle school students report putting in very little effort for most of their classes, compared to 13 percent of high school students. In addition, 77 percent of middle school students report working harder than they expected to in school, compared to 70 percent of high school students.
Perceived Level of Effort in Classes

High school students in NAIS schools are 13 percent more likely than middle school students to be bored in class at least sometimes (83 percent and 70 percent, respectively). High school students are more likely to report being bored because the teaching methods were not interesting, the material was not relevant, or the work was too difficult. It is interesting to note that almost the same percentage of middle school and high school students (77 and 76 percent, respectively) report that their schoolwork makes them curious to learn other things, despite increased levels of classroom boredom among high school students.

Reasons for Classroom Boredom

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Why Bored?</th>
<th>NAIS High School Students</th>
<th>NAIS Middle School Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teaching Methods Were Not Interesting</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Material Was Not Relevant</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work Was Too Difficult</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Classroom boredom may be the reason high school students in NAIS schools skip school more often than middle schoolers; they are twice as likely to fake an illness or skip school because they are not interested (18 percent versus 9 percent).

High school students in NAIS schools are less engaged across methods of teaching; with the exception of teacher lectures, high school students find most categories of instruction less engaging than middle school students do. This may be especially relevant for high school students since 68 percent report being bored in class because the teaching methods weren’t interesting. However, high school students are more likely than middle schoolers to enjoy discussions in which there are no clear answers (72 percent and 66 percent, respectively). Teachers who use this type of discussion may find their students more engaged in the classroom.

**Student Engagement by Method of Teaching**

![Bar chart showing student engagement by method of teaching.]
Middle school students are more likely to complete specific types of assignments than their high school peers. Middle school students are 12 percent more likely than high school students to complete creative writing assignments at least sometimes (84 percent and 72 percent, respectively), and they are more likely to complete projects requiring interaction with people outside of school (49 percent and 43 percent, respectively).

### Student Completion of Specific Assignments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assignment Type</th>
<th>Middle School Students</th>
<th>High School Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Creative Writing</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>84%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project Collaboration With People Outside of School</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>49%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There are several differences between NAIS middle school and high school student engagement outside of the classroom. Twenty-eight percent of middle school students report reading for personal interest for at least 4 hours per week; 19 percent of high school students do so. Middle school students are 4 percent more likely than high school students to participate in family commitments (chores, caring for siblings, etc.) for at least 4 hours a week (43 percent and 39 percent, respectively). Finally, high school students are 4 percent more likely than middle school students to spend at least 4 hours a week watching TV or playing video games (42 percent and 38 percent, respectively).
There are also differences between NAIS middle school and high school students regarding bullying and perceptions of administrative support and school rules.

Middle school students are more likely to be bullied and to witness acts of bullying than high school students. They are 8 percent more likely than older students to report being bullied at least sometimes (22 percent and 14 percent, respectively), and they are 4 percent more likely
than high school students to report witnessing acts of bullying at least sometimes (29 percent and 25 percent, respectively).

**Bullying Among Middle and High School Students**

In spite of reporting more bullying in their schools, middle school students seem to feel more confident in the school administration than their older peers. Eighty-six percent feel supported by administrators, 7 percent more than high school students (79 percent). These results could reflect students’ perceptions of school rule enforcement. Eighty-one percent of middle school students feel that their school’s rules are applied and enforced consistently, compared to 69 percent of high school students.
NAIS engagement results for middle and high school students are similar to national trends; a 2015 Gallup poll of nearly one million students found that “student engagement decreases in nearly every progressive grade level.” The report suggests that “engagement drops as students age because older students feel less cared for by adults and see less value in their own work.”

The American Psychological Association notes that children’s interest in school wanes with age, and by high school many students view class as “boring and frustrating and the content as irrelevant to their lives.” According to one education professor, “For kids, motivation and engagement in school on average drops as they move from the elementary school into the secondary school system.”

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9 Ibid.
Why Are High School Students Less Engaged?

Why are high school students in NAIS schools less academically engaged than middle school students? The answer may lie in the perception of the relevance of the work they do in school.

Middle school and high school students are both motivated by their desire to get good grades (92 percent and 90 percent, respectively), and they are also motivated by an understanding that school is important to success after school. Eighty-nine percent of high school students and 91 percent of middle school students attend school because they want to learn the skills to get a good job. From these results, it seems that both groups are concerned with learning applicable skills for future success in life. In addition, 92 percent of high school students are motivated by their desire to succeed in the world outside of school.

However, the results of the surveys indicate that NAIS middle schoolers are more likely to understand the relevance of their education outside of school. Seventy-nine percent of NAIS middle school students see how the work they are completing will help them in high school and beyond, compared to 64 percent of high school students. In addition, middle school students are 11 percent more likely than high school students to believe that their experience in school will help them understand the importance of what they have learned for life after school (73 percent and 62 percent, respectively). Finally, 78 percent of middle school students report that their school experience has contributed to applying school-based knowledge to everyday life, 8 percentage points higher than their high school peers.
How to Better Engage High School Students

The results discussed above suggest that ensuring that students are learning applicable job skills may be a practical first step in keeping them engaged in their work. More important, students need to understand the context of their work and how their education will be relevant even after they have stepped out of the classroom.

The “NAIS Report on the 2016 High School Survey of Student Engagement” includes recommendations on how to better engage high school students. We have included several recommendations in this report that relate to job skills and contextualized teaching and learning.

Developing Job Skills

In order to better engage students who want to learn job skills for life after school, the first question to ask is, “What are these skills?” The National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) conducts an annual survey of employers that asks what skills they prioritize when
searching for potential employees. Survey responses identified the following top skills:

- Ability to work in a team structure
- Ability to make decisions and solve problems
- Ability to communicate verbally with people inside and outside an organization

Other skills ranged from general skills, such as processing information, to computer skills, such as technical knowledge and proficiency with computer software programs.

In NACE’s survey, employers identified team dynamics as the first item of importance; this suggests that developing teamwork skills in school is fundamental to success in a future career. How can teachers help students develop teamwork skills in an academic setting?

Collaborative learning, a form of active learning that encourages a group approach, may be the place to start. Collaborative learning provides many benefits for students, helping them develop higher-level thinking skills, exposing them to diverse intellectual perspectives, and preparing them for real-life social and employment situations. Collaborative learning teaches skills that are critical to students’ success in college and that make them highly desirable candidates in the job market.

To encourage collaborative learning in your school, group projects may be the most effective place to start. Seventy-eight percent of NAIS high school students report being engaged by group projects. However, only 40 percent of students report that they often work with other students on projects. Group projects can be vital for building team skills — helping students learn to organize projects, manage time, delegate tasks, and give and receive feedback. Placing more emphasis on group work may be a good way to encourage collaborative learning, foster teamwork and communication skills, and engage students in the classroom.

Encouraging the use of study groups will also help students develop effective teamwork skills. Study groups foster dialogue between students, help them develop their communication skills,

11 Ibid.
12 Ibid.
and enable them to absorb and understand information better than they would by studying on their own. Seventy percent of NAIS high school students report discussing ideas from readings or classes with others outside of class sometimes (41 percent) or often (29 percent). In addition to the benefits mentioned above, study groups could foster the sharing of academic ideas outside of the classroom.

NACE’s survey shows the importance of computer skills in the 21st century business environment. Helping students build those skills is critical if they are to succeed in their careers after graduation.\textsuperscript{14} Using technology is also interesting for NAIS high school students. Eighty percent identify lessons involving technology as an engaging activity. However, only 57 percent report using technology very much for class work. Creating in-class computer assignments may help students develop general skills, such as online literacy, familiarity with standard software, and security and safety skills.

Homework assignments involving computer work may be another strategy to build similar computer skills. Seventy-six percent of the high school students spend more than 4 hours a week on homework assignments, while fewer students (69 percent) spend the same amount of time using technology for their homework. Assigning more homework involving technology, such as an internet research assignment or an online blog post, could help students develop these computer skills in addition to more traditional skills, such as reading and writing.

Students are seeking to develop the skills potential employers are looking for, which include effective teamwork and computer skills. Assigning more group projects or facilitating the creation of study groups are two effective methods to help students develop their teamwork and communication skills. Integrating computer use into class work and homework will help students expand on the technical and software skills they need for future success.

\textbf{Contextualizing Learning}

The method referred to as contextualized learning is “a conception of teaching and learning that

\textsuperscript{14} Adams, “10 Skills Employers Most Want.”
helps teachers relate subject matter content to real world applications.”

This helps students absorb and retain information more readily, as well as providing them with the opportunity to gauge their strengths and weaknesses in the workplace. Contextualized learning can be facilitated by discussing the applications of knowledge gained in class and by personalizing assignments on the basis of students’ individual interests.

For example, a Los Angeles community college created a customized program to teach math and English skills in preparation for employment in the construction industry. While such a program will not be appropriate for all students, assigning projects or homework that incorporates classroom skills in the context of a student’s interests will help him or her understand the applications of those skills.

Helping high school students understand the context and relevance of their schoolwork is another important way to engage them in classroom learning. A good way to begin contextualizing schoolwork may be to help students understand their postgraduate goals. Creating and implementing postgraduate goals are very important to NAIS high school students. Eighty-nine percent go to school to learn skills to get a good job, and 92 percent are motivated to succeed in the world outside of school. However, only 28 percent of NAIS students believe that their experience at school contributed “very much” to helping them develop career goals, one of the lowest ranked skills of those surveyed.

Thinking about future careers may be very important for postgraduate success among NAIS high school students. Research conducted by Allison Cheston, a career coach based in New York City, reveals that students who began exploring career options in high school are more likely to be on a successful career path by their late 20s than those who did not. Career coaching may be extremely valuable for NAIS students, especially because they are focused on achieving success outside of the classroom.

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16 Illowsky, “Integrating Contextualized Learning.”
In addition, understanding future career goals may help engage students in their current schoolwork. Thinking about and exploring future careers will help students identify the skills, competencies, and knowledge base required for success in their chosen fields. By connecting classroom instruction to the development of these skills and knowledge, teachers can help students understand the importance of their education for career success in the future.

A school can begin to address students’ career goals by having guidance counselors hold annual meetings with students to talk about their goals, dedicating class time to career-focused discussions, and providing feedback on students’ job strengths.

NAIS high school students are highly motivated to cultivate job skills for a successful career and to understand the context and relevance of their schoolwork. By helping students build these skills and understanding, teachers can better engage their classes, while preparing students for success outside the classroom.