

YouthTruth

STUDENT SURVEY

A NATIONAL NONPROFIT



Learning from Student Voice:

How challenged do students feel in school?

Rigor has become a buzzword across the education landscape — and with good reason. Rigorous coursework and instruction are fundamental to student engagement and achievement, and a critical part of setting students up for post-secondary success. The majority of students today want to go to college, and it's important that their K-12 learning experiences prepare them for the academic challenges they will face there.¹

Since student perception data is predictive of academic outcomes, understanding students' experiences in their K-12 classes can give educators and school leaders rapid feedback to inform instructional practices. We analyzed data, collected from nearly 183,000 public school students across the country in grades three through twelve, and found a number of interesting results:

- 1 Overall, the majority of students **feel challenged** by their teachers and believe they must **work hard to get good grades**.
- 2 Fewer students feel that the work they're doing is **meaningful to their learning**.
- 3 As students progress through the grade levels, fewer students feel **challenged and supported**.

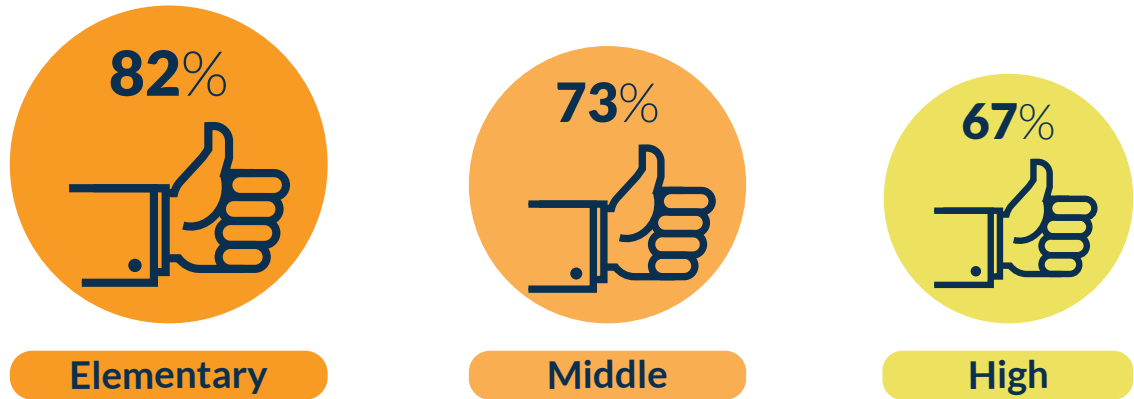
¹ Learning from Student Voice: College and Career Readiness. YouthTruth Student Survey, (2016), 2.

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Overall, the majority of students **feel challenged by their teachers** and believe they must **work hard to get good grades**.

It's encouraging that the majority of students report feeling challenged at school. Across all grade levels, most students report that they feel challenged by their coursework and teachers, including 82 percent of elementary school students, 73 percent of middle school students, and 67 percent of high school students.

Students Feel Challenged



Similarly, the majority of students believe they must work hard in order to receive good grades, ranging from 76 percent of elementary school students to 87 percent of middle school students, and 82 percent of high school students.

I Have to Work Hard to Get Good Grades



2 Fewer students feel the work they're doing is **meaningful to their learning.**

However, while students may feel challenged to work hard, how are they experiencing the *type* of work they're being asked to do? Across all grade levels, only about 60 percent of students agree that their assignments help them understand the subject. When asked if the work they do in class makes them really think, the results were only slightly better: 61 percent of elementary school students, 68 percent of middle school students, and 67 percent of high school students agreed.



Meaningful Assignments

Of the students surveyed, only

60%

report that the schoolwork assigned by teachers helped them understand the subject.

Given today's emphasis on 21st century skills like critical thinking, this data raises some sobering flags — with a third of students feeling neutrally or negatively about whether their classwork makes them really think. According to students across all grade levels, there is substantial room for improvement when it comes to assigning work that gives students a deeper level of understanding about the subjects they are learning. Armed with this type of information, educators and school leaders must confront some tough questions about how to ensure that the work students are doing is as meaningful as possible to their learning.

The work I do in class makes me really think.



Elementary
61%



Middle
68%



High School
67%

3 As students progress through the grade levels, fewer students **feel challenged and supported.**

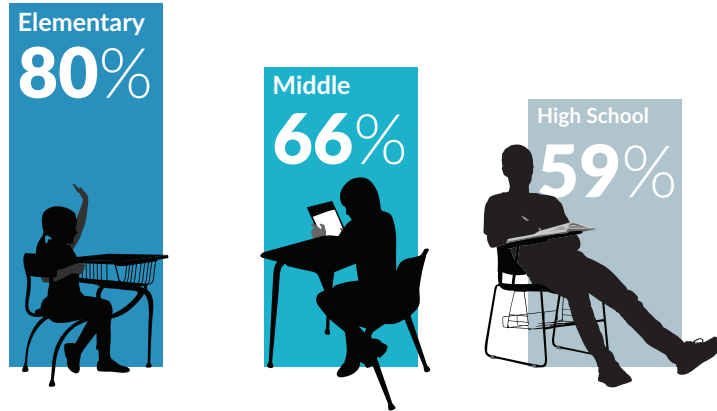
On a concerning note, our data also found that as students progress through the grade levels, a lower proportion feel supported in their learning.

When asked whether they learn a lot in class every day, 80 percent of elementary students answered positively, compared to only 66 percent of middle school and 59 percent of high school students. Furthermore, while 85 percent of elementary students agree that their teachers don't let them give up when work gets hard, that proportion drops dramatically to only 54 percent of high school students.

This data is not indicative of teachers' intentions, but does speak directly to students' experiences and can be a powerful conversation starter.

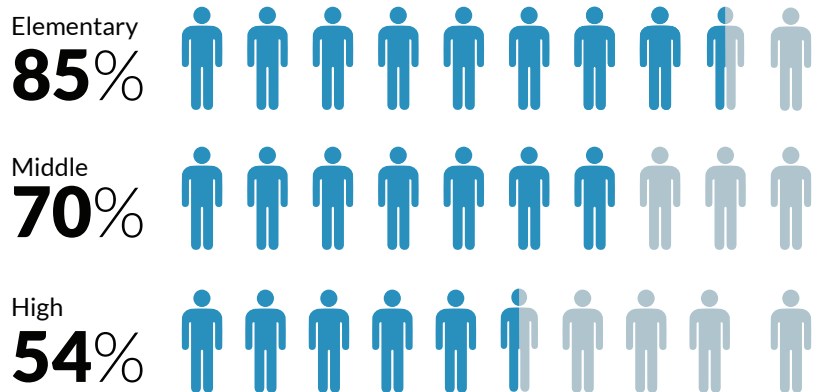
How Much Do Students Learn in Class Each Day?

As students progress through grade levels, fewer students agree they learn a lot in class on a daily basis:



Perceived Support Decreases as Grade Level Increases

Percentage of students who feel their teachers don't let them give up when the work gets hard:



Understanding how students experience rigor in the classroom is a vital piece of the puzzle when thinking about students' future success. The academic rigor of a student's K-12 experience lays the foundation for their college career, and the stark reality is that many students are not prepared: only 59 percent of students graduate college in 6 years, and 28 percent spend precious time and money in remedial courses.^{2,3}

When school leaders have actionable data and timely insights into students' experiences with academic rigor, they are better able to identify areas for growth and ensure that all students are prepared for life after high school. **Student perceptions are a powerful complementary measure of academic rigor, beyond just test scores.** We hope these findings serve as a catalyst for conversations and ideas to improve students' experiences in the classroom.



² Kena, Grace, Lauren Musu-Gillette, Jennifer Robinson, Xiaolei Wang, Amy Rathbun, Jijun Zhang, Sidney Wilkinson-Flicker, Amy Barner, and Erin Dunlop Velez Velez. "The Condition of Education 2015. NCES 2015-144." *National Center for Education Statistics* (2015).

³ Skomsvold, P. "Web Tables—Profile of Undergraduate Students: 2011–12 (NCES 2015-167)." *National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, US Department of Education, Washington, DC* (2014).