



Michigan Student Inspiration Project



Executive Summary of WAVE I Research & Project Recommendations

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Executive Summary of WAVE I Research and Project Recommendations: Michigan Student Inspiration Project

This document summarizes the findings and recommendations to date for the development and execution of a communications plan to motivate Michigan’s students, particularly Title I students, to more fully engage with school and learning. The research and consulting work has been executed by Harrison Group, a national strategic research firm, beginning in July of 2012 on behalf of MDE through MSU’s Office of K-12 Outreach in support of informing and improving outcomes related to Michigan’s Title I and ESEA Waiver programs. Work is ongoing and continuing and is currently planned to culminate in a privately-funded, multi-platform ad-communications program targeted primarily at students.

Guiding Principles of the Project:

At the risk of stating the obvious, Michigan’s educational system is in transition...and the stakes have never been higher. In a way, it’s a “perfect storm” of reform, new initiatives and outside forces. These include: ESEA waiver requirements, adoption of new state, college- and career-ready standards, associated (and impending) testing requirements, and the influence and promise of digital learning. All at a time where family and public budgets are stretched thin and uncertainty is the norm. Outside forces notwithstanding, these new initiatives cannot be successful if they are not embraced by stakeholders...the most important of whom are students.

This work has led to the following conclusions on what needs to happen in order to maximize the odds of success for Michigan’s school improvement efforts:

- Policy-makers must understand that Michigan education initiatives cannot be successful—no matter how well executed—if students don’t own their own learning experience. The power to accept or reject school and learning is in the hands of students.
- Students must be engaged—as the authentic voice of their peers—to define, create and deliver messages to motivate and inspire each other to learn and achieve at greater levels.
- Student commitment and enthusiasm towards learning will galvanize adult commitment and enthusiasm toward teaching.
- The time to act is now. Student motivation is not a new problem, but the changes occurring in Michigan can be used as a spring board to a communications program aimed at motivating students—and especially Title I students—to learn.

Longer term, a communications program to promote school and learning, for students by students, could be the first step in a larger effort to give students a greater voice in on-going school improvement initiatives.¹

¹ The research found that parents and teachers do not think it is essential for students to be involved with school improvement efforts...hence students themselves do not think it’s important. But this flies in the face of how kids

Survey Research Methodology:

Five interlocking studies were conducted in conjunction with MSU's Office of K-12 Outreach. These include:

- **1,016 Michigan students in grades four through 12:** Survey was completed online and sample was sourced from well-established online panel companies. Final dataset was sample-balanced to be demographically representative of students in Michigan.
- **1,016 parents of the above students (a household dyad approach):** All recruitment was done through the parents, in compliance with COPPA and other online privacy laws. For both parents and students, some questions were asked among a "split sample" to control for survey length while keeping sample sizes robust.
- **975 public school teachers (including those who teach in Public Academies):** Survey was completed online and sample was sourced through Market Data Retrieval, a database company which specializes in education markets with an approximate 85% email coverage of teachers. Final dataset was sample-balanced according to key Michigan teacher characteristics per NCES and other sources.
- **327 principals:** Principals were also contacted via email through several channels including a purchased list of principal emails as well as through member organizations including MEMSPA and MASSP. Surveys were completed online. Data were not sample-balanced yet represent an array of principals across school level (elementary, middle and high school) as well as urbanicity (that is, urban, suburban and rural classification).
- **50 superintendents:** One on one, phone interviews lasting 30 minutes (on average) were conducted. Data were not sample-balanced yet represent an array of superintendents across district size and urbanicity.

Additionally, a sample of students who participated in the original research in September were re-contacted in October in order to gain additional insight on measures related to motivation and the school experience. One-hundred and sixty-seven students participated in the re-contact and this dataset was also sample balanced in order to ensure comparability to the original sample.

Key Findings:

Prior research has demonstrated the need to link students, parents and teachers in common cause to improve schools. Through Harrison Group's national research for Dr. William Schmidt at MSU and others, we have learned that:

- Students make a choice of whether or not to consume the content being taught. In fact, parents acknowledge that kids take control of their education early-on in their lives. On average, parents say kids have control over their motivation to get good grades at age 10, they take control of the time they put into their homework at age 11 and they take control over goals for academic achievement at age 12.

engage with all other areas of their life. As consumers of brands, products, media, etc. they have been invited to be active participants and they have embraced these invitations with passion. It is likely that the same would be true if student participation were to become an integral part of school improvement efforts—as has been the case—with much success—in observed schools in the U.K.

- Parents do not know how best to engage with their child’s education—particularly as it relates to issues of educational language and school change. Very few parents are aware of key education initiatives and very few are aware of language and terminology used among educators.
- Educators are frustrated by the volume and character of change. They are more likely to say that the changes underway are causing them to be stressed, frustrated and overwhelmed than to be supportive, excited or proud. And teachers do not feel they have been included in change efforts.

These findings, along with many other related findings, were definitively confirmed through the primary research undertaken with Michigan education stakeholders at the start of the 2012-2013 school year.

Specifically, the current research shows:

1. *Confidence in schools is mediocre at best and perceived reasons for school underperformance span a range of factors including parents, students, the economy and to a lesser extent, teachers and curriculum.*

Only six in ten kids and parents rate their school as an 8, 9 or 10 (on a 10-point scale) in terms of believing that school is serving the child’s best interests (only one in five kids rated their school their school a “10”). Teachers, principals and superintendents are not surprised by these findings. Yet when asked to identify reasons for school underperformance, parent support, student motivation and the economy are identified as reasons among more educators than are poor school management, ineffective teachers or weak curriculum. Among parents, poor school management joins the top contributors to school underperformance (the top contributors are the same as they are among educators: lack of parent support, student motivation and family economic challenges), while weak curriculum, ineffective teachers and low teacher expectations for student success trail these measures slightly.

2. *Relevance is lacking; students don’t know why they should learn what teachers are teaching*

Eighty-four percent of students say it is very important to student success that they understand why they are being taught the things they are being taught; yet only 33% say that this describes their school very well. This disconnect is similar among parents. The gap is also similar among teachers and principals...the very people who are in the position to solve this disconnect for students.

3. *Learning has little cache among kids*

Only 15% of kids choose “learning is worthwhile” as the most important reason for school. The majority (55%) choose “prepares students for future education” while 30% choose “prepares students to get a job.” It would seem that learning—or at least learning what schools are teaching—is *not* a goal in and of itself for students. In fact, as age of students increase, fewer and fewer choose “learning” as one of the top three priorities in their lives. Ironically, learning is the exact task that would increase the odds of kids accomplishing the two items—“my grades” and “getting into a good college”—which increase in importance as students advance through secondary school. Unfortunately, kids do not necessarily see (or perhaps trust) the connection between learning and success in college or career.

4. *Students—and other stakeholders—are ready for the bar to be raised in meaningful ways*

Kids are ready to be challenged in school: just over half of students—and even more lower-income students (two in three)—say that schools focus too much on memorization and not enough on thinking. Students question the meaning of an “A” – with 57% saying “You can get straight A’s in school and still not be smart” (this rises to 67% among lower-income kids). And across the board, around eight in 10 students, parents and educators say they would support schools requiring students to learn more demanding content in mathematics, science and English Language Arts, *even if it means students would have to work harder or study more.*

Teachers too are ready to rise to the challenge with nine in 10 saying they would also support more demanding content even if it meant teachers would have to increase their content knowledge. However, the verdict is mixed in regards to whether or not teachers think that the new career- and college-ready standards will fulfill the goal of more demanding content: only about half think the new standards will help Michigan’s students be better prepared for college or career success and only half think the standards will raise expectations on what students are learning.

5. *Student enthusiasm for learning is lacking – and all stakeholders know it*

Only four in 10 students say that “giving school my best effort” is a phrase that describes them “very well.” Even fewer say they want to learn in school, look forward to coming to school or are motivated to do well in school. Parents’ ratings of their child generally match kids’ ratings. Teachers, on the other hand, are far less likely (14%) to say that “giving school their best effort” is true for almost all their students. Further, while 50-60% of all stakeholders (students, parents and educators) say that student motivation to learn is an absolutely essential ingredient in receiving a great education, fewer than half say that “students are motivated to learn” describes their school “very well.”

6. *Teachers lack conviction that kids can achieve at higher levels*

While seven in 10 teachers agree that all students can learn more than they are currently learning in the grades they are in right now...three and 10 do not feel this way. Further, only 17% of teachers strongly agree with this statement. And only half say that in order to get a great education, it is very important (34%) or absolutely essential (14%) that students learn more advanced content than they are currently being taught.

Some students—and it is more common among lower-income students—sense and experience teachers’ ambivalence on this issue: one in five kids agrees that they “have a teacher (or teachers) who usually expects” them to do poorly in class. The percentage of lower-income kids who feel this way is more than double the percentage of higher-income kids (32% among kids in households with income under \$25,000 vs. 14% in households with incomes of \$100,000 or more).

7. *Students need “permission” and encouragement to say what they need in order to achieve at higher levels*

Fifty percent of students say they often pretend they understand something in class, even when they don’t. Not only are lower-income children more likely than higher-income students to agree to this statement (64% vs. 46%), they are also more likely to worry that they are too far behind in both

math and ELA skills to catch up (just over one in three lower-income kids feel this way vs. one in five higher-income kids). And there is a need to teach kids how learning works: 42% of kids agree that “when it comes to school, once you learn something, you don’t really have to keep practicing it” and fully 70% agree: “it’s OK to say ‘I’m not good in math’ – some kids just don’t get math” (note that 42% of parents also agree to this statement—as do 23% of teachers).

8. *Students’ believe that academic achievement can put their social-standing at risk*

Adding even more complexity to the issue of student academic achievement and attitudes towards school is the fact that nearly half of all students—and this rises to nearly two in three among lower income kids—say that trying to do well in school is a reason some kids are made fun of in their school. And about four in 10 (nearly half of lower-income kids) say that “it is much harder to be cool if you try hard in school.” Given these beliefs, it is no surprise that kids may suppress their enthusiasm for learning.

On an individual level, kids do believe it is important to do well in mathematics, science and reading/writing...they simply aren’t convinced that their peers feel the same way. For example, about half of all students surveyed agree strongly that it is very important for them to study hard and do well academically in school (about nine in 10 agree, in general); however, only one in five believe their friends would say the same. Similarly, about four in 10 agree strongly that asking teachers for help when needed or participating in class discussion is very important; yet only one in five believe their friends would say the same.

9. *All stakeholders know that parents are key to student success—yet parents’ have not been empowered to understand today’s educational issues*

About six to seven in 10 of all stakeholders surveyed say that parents being involved in their children’s education (by doing things like knowing what their children are learning, supporting their children’s learning, etc.) is “absolutely essential” in ensuring kids get a great education (over 90% say this is at least “very important”). And seven in 10 parents expect that they will take some kind of action in the future to get more involved in the changes happening in their child’s school. But awareness of current educational and policy initiatives is extraordinarily low.

While 86% of parents have heard of No Child Left Behind, 25% or fewer have heard of: Michigan’s receipt of an ESEA waiver, Michigan’s “top to bottom” school ranking system or the phrase “achievement gap.” And 30% or fewer feel confident that they would understand the meaning of the following phrases, as they relate to education: 21st Century skills, data-driven instruction, differentiated instruction or formative assessments. Yet these are the very phrases being used in professional development sessions and school board meetings across the state.

Parents rely on their schools to keep them informed of the things that matter in their child’s education (six in 10 or more say they get most of their information related to their child’s education from materials sent home from school, from teachers, and/or from emails from school). A meaningful conversation can’t take place if all parties aren’t speaking the same language.

10. *Educators feel defeated and have limited faith that initiatives will result in success—the promise of digital technology and content is the exception*

Half of all teachers, and even more principals (62%) and superintendents (76%) say the amount of change occurring in education in Michigan is either “very extensive” or “unprecedented.” Educators are far more likely to feel stressed, frustrated and worried about the changes than they are to feel excited, energized or proud. Superintendents are feeling the heat most intensely: 90% say they are frustrated by the changes and 85% are stressed. The majority of educators (seven in 10 or more) say they are often asked to adopt changes before anyone really knows if the changes will be effective. This sentiment applies to specific school improvement initiatives as well: while 65% of teachers think that the new standards will improve student outcomes to some degree and 53% say the same about focusing on the achievement gap, only 28% think that the elements of the ESEA waiver will improve outcomes and only 19% say the same for Michigan’s “top to bottom” school rankings. (Note that in part, these percentages could be driven by a lack of awareness about some of these initiatives.)

However, what educators do definitely believe is that change is most successful when teachers have a say in what those changes are and how they will be implemented (98% agree with this statement). Unfortunately, only half of teachers say that this is the case in their school. (Of note: principals and superintendents are not at all in-synch with teachers on this latter point: nearly nine in 10 of each do think that teachers in their school or district have a say in the implementation of changes.)

One area of change that garners support across the board in terms of its potential for improving achievement *and* student motivation and engagement is the movement towards digital technology. About six in 10 parents, seven in 10 teachers and eight in 10 principals think the use of technology would make a significant improvement in: personalizing instruction, intervening in ways that will help students “catch up,” giving teachers greater access to learning resources and increasing student interest in learning. However, there is caution in this tale as well: about six in 10 teachers and principals say there are so many online resources that searching can be frustrating and slightly more say it is difficult to tell which online resources will be effective and which will not.

Concluding Thoughts and Next Steps:

Clearly, the breadth of these findings lends itself to issues of policy and implementation that go far beyond the scope of increasing student motivation and engagement with school. For purposes of this project, however, we will stay focused on the findings as they relate to the creation of a communications program to inspire and motivate learning in Michigan’s students.

First, there are points of commonality (admittedly with variability in the strength of agreement) woven throughout the key findings that can be leveraged to bring all stakeholder groups on board. These include:

- Belief that parents, teachers and students all have responsibility in improving student outcomes
- Belief that student motivation and enthusiasm for learning is lacking and must be improved
- Belief that relevant, demanding content, high expectations and rigorous career- and college-ready standards are needed
- Belief that technology can help advance student engagement, motivation and learning

These points of commonality can provide a foundation for a communication strategy aimed at increasing student motivation, while also building awareness, enthusiasm and engagement for Michigan’s overall school improvement initiatives.

Second, student participation is key—no attempt at change will be effective without the voice of the student. In fact, **58% of kids who replied to an unaided question** (meaning no response-list was provided, kids typed in a personal response) **said that STUDENTS should be the ones to send messages that focus on motivating kids to commit to school and learning to other students.** This is the highest-ranking response recorded; celebrities, athletes and musicians garnered only 30% of the responses. We believe that when the target audience of the message is the producer of the message, the result is a grassroots communications program that builds organically from the kids and radiates out to other stakeholders—namely, parents and teachers.

Further, when select phrases were tested among stakeholders, the following were among those that held the most appeal across all five groups included in the research in terms of making students more excited and interested in school:

“Learn More in School, Achieve More in Life”

“Say Yes to Learning”

“Your Education is in Your Hands”

Note that these winning propositions impart feelings of success and empowerment, with empowerment being particularly in-synch with the way kids live their lives today.

Third, we must move quickly to build momentum and gain commitment among parent, education and corporate leadership groups to support the creation of a communications program to help motivate kids to learn. This can be done, in part, by sharing key findings from this research with these stakeholders.

Fourth, we must take the key research findings and the plan for the student-driven motivation communications program to the public. This can be accomplished through the creation of a website to serve as a key access point for anyone seeking information on the proposed communications program. This website would be introduced in conjunction with an initial public relations launch to announce the plan for the communications program and to begin to raise funds for its execution. During this phase, focus groups with Title I students will be conducted to ensure that the voices of those with the most need stay front and center.

Increasing student motivation to learn through a student-driven communications program is an ambitious, yet achievable goal that, if accomplished, could serve as much-needed positive platform from which all stakeholder groups can rally together in unity and support for Michigan’s students.²

² Comments and conversation are welcome and can be directed to Linda Forward, Barbara Markle and the project team at Harrison Group including Dr. Jim Taylor, Vice Chairman and lead education and communications consultant (JTaylor@HarrisonGroupInc.com) and Kristen Harmeling, Vice President and project director (KHarmeling@HarrisonGroupInc.com).