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Make school harder, students say (really)

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WASHINGTON - The campaign to make high school more demanding seems to be picking up support from the people who have the biggest stake in the matter: the students themselves.

Almost nine in 10 students say they would work harder if their high schools expected more of them, a new survey finds. Less than one-third of students say their schools sets high academic expectations, and most students favor ideas that might add some hassle to their lives, such as more rigorous graduation standards and additional high-stakes testing.

"The good old times in high schools are being replaced by good old hard work," said Peter Hart, whose Peter D. Hart Research Associates Inc. conducted the survey for the "State of Our Nation's Youth Report," released Tuesday. "There's a recognition among students that they have to be more ready to compete."

The nonprofit Horatio Alger Association, which provides college scholarships and mentoring to needy students, issued the annual report on youth attitudes. The findings are based on a phone survey of 1,005 students in high school last May.

Improving high schools has become an urgent topic in education, as mounting research shows many students aren't ready for college or work after graduation - if they get that far. The call for change has come from President Bush, governors, employers and college faculty members.

Now students are saying it, too.

Julie Hetcko, 16, of Lincoln, Neb., who will be a senior in the fall, has taken three advanced-placement courses and is looking for other ways to prepare for college. High schools that don't offer some type of advanced coursework are holding students back, she said.

"Times are changing," she said. "I don't think people realize how much students are trying to excel, trying to get into college. It's important that adults and parents know that it's not just a walk in the park. We want to work for our grades."

When given options for improving high schools, 95 percent of students agreed that more real-world opportunities, such as internships, would help at least somewhat. More than 90 percent also favored two other ideas: earlier counseling in high school about how to prepare for college, and more opportunities to take college-level courses for free.

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