



## Parents and the Transition to High School in Philadelphia Public Schools

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When children enter high school, the content of their courses becomes harder and the decisions about course choices becomes more complicated. It is commonly believed that parents’ involvement in their children’s schooling drops off at this time, just when children need it most. This report takes a look at this issue in Philadelphia, examining the nature and degree of parental involvement during the 9th grade year as well as parents’ opinions about their children’s education and their aspirations for them.

The data presented here come from the Philadelphia Education Longitudinal Study (PELS) conducted by researchers at the University of Pennsylvania. The researchers are following the experiences of a city-wide random sample of 1500 public school students in Philadelphia from the summer after their 8th grade year (1995-96) through their senior year in high school. The information in this report comes from interviews with 1,483 randomly-selected pairs of parents and students who were reached during the summer following 8th grade and again during the summer after 9th grade.

### Parents’ Opinions of the High School

One of the consequences of school choice in Philadelphia is that most 9th graders are the first of their siblings to have attended their high school. Overall, 72 percent of the parents interviewed had no other children who had attended that high school. As a result, the parents, just like their children, had to learn their way around an unfamiliar high school.

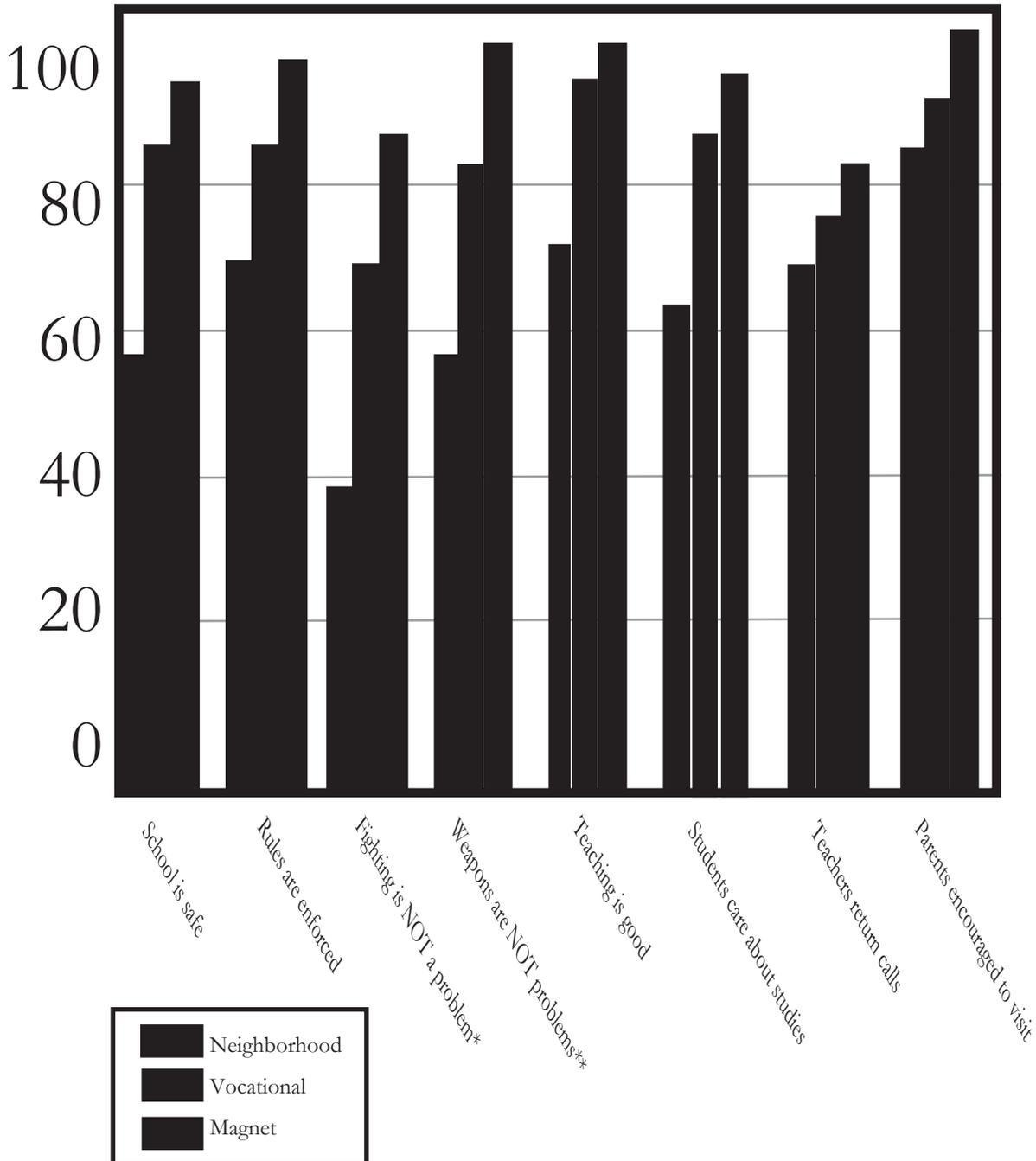
Just like parents around the country, PELS parents typically gave favorable reviews of their children’s schooling on a variety of issues, including safety, quality of teaching, and responsiveness of the teaching staff to parents. The data in Table 1 show that parents’ views became a little less favorable once their children go to high school, but their assessments were still very positive.

<b>Table 1</b>		
<b>Parent Perceptions of Child’s School Before and After 9th Grade</b>		
	Percent reporting “strongly agree” or “agree”	
	<i>Post 8th Grade</i>	<i>Post 9th Grade</i>
Students care about doing well in their studies	97%	89%
The school is safe	77	81
Fighting among students is a problem at the school	49	63
Guns and weapons are a problem at the school	34	40

Number interviewed=737 parents

When parent responses were broken down by the type of high school, attended, however, more differences began to emerge. On every issue studied, parents with students in magnet schools were most positive about the schools, followed by vocational schools, and then neighborhood (comprehensive) high schools. (Figure 1) Gaps among school types were small on some issues, such as satisfaction with parent-teacher interaction, but the differences in parental attitudes were substantial on questions of school safety, the prevalence of fighting and weapons, and whether students in the school care about their studies.

**Figure 1**  
**Post-9th grade parent opinions of high school:**  
**Percent responding “strongly agree” or “agree,” by school type**



When parents were asked whether they were more positive or less positive about their child's high school compared with their 8th grade school, parents of students who attended vocational and magnet schools were just as positive—sometimes even more positive—about their child's high school than the previous school. On the other hand, the trend for parents whose children attended comprehensive neighborhood high schools was to be less positive about the high school than the 8th grade school. The greatest change for these parents was in their perceptions of school safety (with a drop of 18 percent), while magnet and vocational school parents' attitudes stayed the same or were even more favorable. (Figures 2 and 3)

### **Parent Contact with Teachers and Other Parents**

While PELS parents were somewhat less likely to help their children with homework in the 9th grade than the 8th grade, they were just as likely to be in contact with their children's teachers to talk about grades, attendance, and behavior. Almost 40 percent of the parents in both the 8th and 9th grade years reported talking to their child's teachers four or more times. Less than 10 percent reported never having spoken to the teachers during either of those years.

Despite the many parents who knew other parents at their child's high school, there was only a moderate amount of parent-to-parent communication about the school during the freshman year. On the whole, the data suggest that during their children's 9th grade year, parents depended more on information about school from their children and from their children's teachers, though many parents felt that they could have been better informed about their child's academic progress.

### **Parent Responses to Academic Difficulty in 9th Grade**

The extent of failure and poor grades in 9th grade is staggering. Fifty-eight percent of the PELS students failed one or more of their courses; 47 percent earned an average of D or F for all of their courses. Given this profile, what kinds of actions, if any, did parents take in response to their children's academic problems?

In Waves 1 and 3 of the PELS survey, parents were asked whether they had gotten their child tutoring, punished the child, helped with homework, or talked with teachers. Overall, the frequency of these interventions did not diminish between 8th and 9th grades although there was a slight increase in tutoring. What really is quite different, however, is that parents reported that their interventions were less effective with their 9th graders. Whereas 44 percent of the parents said that their child's 8th grade marks had improved "a lot" after they stepped in, less than a third reported that their actions had this effect during 9th grade. In fact, almost one third of the parents, despite taking some action, saw their children's grades stay the same or get worse. The data do not indicate that parents stop pushing their children to succeed in 9th grade. But given the overwhelming academic difficulty that students experience during their first year of high school, parental strategies employed at the 8th grade level were much less effective.

#### **The Philadelphia Education Longitudinal Study (PELS)**

The Philadelphia Education Longitudinal Study (PELS) follows a cohort of students in the School District of Philadelphia from the end of 8th grade until their planned date of high school graduation. The primary methods of data collection are telephone interviews of a random sample of parents and students from across the district, and data from School District records on students' grades, test scores and attendance.

Information for this report comes from Waves 1 and 3 of the survey. Wave 1 of the survey took place following students' 8th grade year in 1995-96. In that wave, 1,483 pairs of students and parents of the 2,938 pairs who were included in the sample (50 percent) responded to the survey. The Wave 3 interviews took place during the summer after the students' 9th grade year (1996-97): 1,017 pairs of students and their parents responded, 70 percent of those interviewed in Wave 1.

The research was commissioned by the Philadelphia Education Fund and is being conducted by a team of sociologists at the University of Pennsylvania headed by Professor Frank F. Furstenberg, Jr. This report is authored by Ruth Curran Neild, Research Associate at the University of Pennsylvania. It is excerpted from a longer report, *The Philadelphia Education Longitudinal Study: Report on the Transition to High School in the School District of Philadelphia, 1999* by Ruth Curran Neild and Christopher C. Weiss. Funding for the study comes from The Pew Charitable Trusts, the William Penn Foundation, the Carnegie Corporation, Johnson & Johnson, the Spencer Foundation, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the Annie Casey Foundation, the Leo Foundation. The report is available from the Philadelphia Education Fund. To request a copy, send your name and mailing address to [rmanzano@philaedfund.org](mailto:rmanzano@philaedfund.org).

Figure 2

Parent opinions of school safety:  
Percent agreeing that child's 8th grade school (post-8th report)  
and high school (post-9th report) are safe,  
by type of high school attended

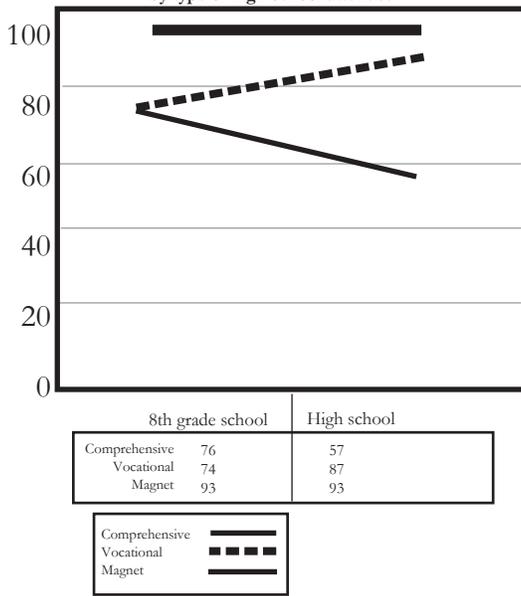
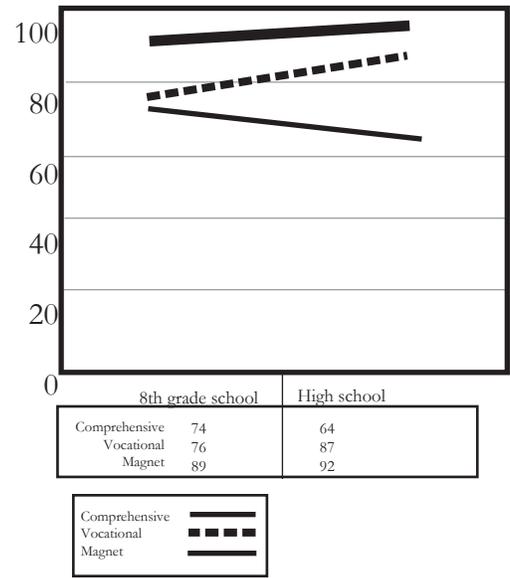


Figure 3

Parent opinions of students:  
Percent agreeing that students at 8th grade school (post-8th report) and high school  
(post-9th report) care about doing well, by type of high school attended



## Educational Expectations

Given their children's poor performance during the freshman year, did parents revise their educational expectations for their children downward between the end of 8th grade and the end of 9th grade?

Overall, parents' expectation levels were high, but they did appear somewhat less confident that their offspring will complete school. While 90 percent thought that the chances of their child completing high school were "high" after the 8th grade, only about 80 percent thought so after 9th grade. However, few parents (3 percent) were willing to say that their children's chances of completing high school were low. With regard to the chances of completing college, there was a decrease in the percent of parents saying that their children's chances were "high" (52 percent down to 40 percent). The percentage saying their child's chances were "low" increased from 10 to 18 percent. The student's 9th grade GPA and having failed a course during the freshman year were important predictors of the 8th-to-9th grade decrease in parents' assessment of chances of completing a four-year college.

## Summary

As parents watch their children move from middle to high school, they maintain remarkably high levels of approval of their children's schools, although those with children in neighborhood high schools are more likely to report a deterioration in the quality of the education. Contact with teachers remains as high as it was in the 8th grade.

Parents' help with homework declines as students enter high school, but there appears to be no decrease in parental monitoring and management to improve their children's performance in school. Most parents are aware of and disappointed by their children's dismal academic performance. It is a particularly poignant reminder of the overwhelming difficulty of the freshman year that despite parental continuation of efforts to help their academically struggling children, so many students' grades stay the same or become worse. The level of involvement that used to produce results in the 8th grade is simply not enough to turn student performance around in 9th grade. The challenge of getting their 9th graders to achieve must seem as bewildering and daunting to some parents as it does to educators and administrators in the high schools.