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Boredom cited as a reason for thoughts of dropping out

■ By Susan Snyder
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The top reason that Philadelphia students consider dropping out of school is boredom.

At least that's the result of a survey conducted by students themselves in a summer program at Temple University.

Of 239 students polled, 27 percent said they had considered dropping out.

Sixty-six percent of those who said they weighed quitting cited boredom as one of the reasons. Other top responses were stress, at 64 percent, and poor performance in school, at 56 percent. Students were allowed to choose multiple reasons.

More than 90 percent of those polled in the admittedly unscientific survey were current students or recent graduates of the Philadelphia School District.

Deloris Johnson, 15, a student at South Philadelphia High School who helped conduct the survey, agreed with the findings.

"A lot of the teachers give you one worksheet a day and after that, you're sitting there the rest of the day. Students want to go to school and learn things," she said.

She was one of 82 students who helped to conduct the survey in the 2003 Youth VOICES Summer Academy run by the University Community Collaborative of Philadelphia. The six-week program allows students to voice their opinions and conduct projects on problems facing the city's schools and youth, and to suggest solutions. The Temple program is part of a larger national project, funded by the MetLife Foundation and coordinated by What Kids Can Do, a nonprofit in Providence, R.I.

Barbara Ferman, a political science professor at Temple and director of the collaborative, said she was bored in school, too, and she surmised that students in affluent suburban districts might say the same. But the issue is more critical for Philadelphia, she said.

Suburban students "have other opportunities from home, networks their parents have and other things. Kids in the inner city are not really getting it elsewhere, so if school can't hold them, there's precious little else that can," she said.

Teachers need to make learning relevant and show students that their opinions and thoughts matter, she said. She hopes the projects from Youth Voices will kick off a new dialogue.

Yesterday, in a discussion at Temple among surveyors, parents and educators, Naja Hill, 15, of University City High School, asked teachers to listen.

"They need to really engage their students to make their classroom more exciting and hands-on," she said.

Nathaniel Fabian, a student at George Washington Carver High School of Engineering and Science, one of the city's academic magnets, said some responsibility lies with students. He noted that students surveyed also said they wanted their teachers to be organized.

"We must be organized as students, too, and not just organized in our materials, but organized in our minds," said Fabian, who was part of a panel of teachers and students responding to the survey results.

To improve city high schools, students recommended more activities that get students excited about learning, taking more responsibility for their own learning, and more one-on-one attention from teachers. A safer school environment and more challenging classes also were among the top suggestions.

Students ranked "more homework" dead last. Only 19 percent of the students thought that would help.

"Hey, they're rational like the rest of us," Ferman said.

Students in the youth voices program also conducted other projects, including a cleanup of a local playground, the creation of a video on gang conflict, and the printing of a pamphlet on how to make the Philadelphia public schools better.

The students said walk-through metal detectors should be at all district schools, including elementary schools, because students of all ages are carrying weapons. The walk-through detectors are in place at high schools. The district has plans to add handheld detectors at elementary schools; middle schools have such a system now.

Anastasia Stogiannis, of the district's office of school and community relations, was impressed with the students' work and said the high school curriculum was being overhauled to make classes more rigorous and engaging.

"We definitely understand what the students are saying, and that's why we've gone through these procedures," she said. "Overall, it was an amazing presentation. It really showcased that students are opinionated, do know the issues, and have ideas on how to correct the problems."



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