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Dist. 87's unique look at students

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High school students often lament that their schedules are so jam-packed, they've barely got enough time to sleep.

So what, exactly, are they doing with their time?

The amount of sleep teens reported in a new survey of more than 7,000 Glenbard High School District 87 students seems to back up their claims of being busy. In the survey, students most frequently reported getting only five to six hours of shut-eye nightly.

Granted, schools can't order students to get more sleep. But using data from the survey, they can give parents an idea how sleep habits can affect student success and health, said Dave Ripley, Glenbard South High School's assistant principal for instruction.

"I think there's some people who don't always appreciate the big picture, and (don't) look at (sleep) as an issue that relates to school," Ripley said.

But it does, he said.

The sleep data and other information about students' behavior in and out of the classroom came from the High School Survey of Student Achievement, which District 87 piloted last year for Indiana University.

The survey, which is expected to be expanded to about 100 schools next year, aims to discover crucial information about students that can't be gleaned from achievement tests.

Obtaining such information has always been an imprecise science at best, said Martha McCarthy, an Indiana University professor who specializes in educational leadership and works on the survey project.

The survey asked students how much time they spent at school-sponsored events, talking on the phone, surfing the internet and reading - either for school or not. Students were also asked how much they contributed to class discussion and whether they talked about career plans with a teacher.

Tests looking purely at academic achievement are used to rank schools' success, but research shows it's just as important that students feel "engaged" and participate actively in school, McCarthy said.

"If students are more engaged, they are going to learn more," she said. "Students who are more involved and engaged ... that (behavior) will carry over when they're adults and they'll be better citizens."

Indiana University has administered the National Survey of Student Engagement to college students across the country since 1999. District 87 Superintendent Timothy Hyland - a former schools chief at an Indiana district - attended a conference where the survey was discussed, then approached university officials to see if they'd design a similar test for younger students.

"There seemed to be a tremendous amount of information that overlapped (between college and high school students)," Hyland said.

He sent five district employees to Indiana last year to help alter the college-level test and make it relevant to adolescents. The survey not only provides educators data on students' use of time and perceptions of school, it's also a customer satisfaction survey, he said.

"I'd like to hear from (students), how they perceive their experience," Hyland said.

That's the sort of information districts can find useful, McCarthy said.

"Let's say that on the survey, they find that (only) one quarter of the students say they've received any kind of support or mentoring from a teacher outside the classroom," she said. "That's something that could be (changed) fairly quickly."

In District 87, for example, a little more than half the students - 52 percent - said they "sometimes" talk about career plans with teachers. If you asked teachers and guidance counselors, though, they'd probably disagree with those results, Ripley said, and would say the percentage is much higher.

"If that's a perception students have, then that's something we need to work on," Ripley said. "Our perception is, yes, we think this is happening. So maybe we need to change the message."

And that's exactly where this survey is useful, McCarthy said.

"We're really excited about the potential for this project," she said.

Hyland will present the results of the survey, and how it has benefited his district, at an American Association of School Administrators' conference later this school year.

Survey: In one district, only half of students discuss careers with teachers.