

**Eastern Caribbean Education Reform Project
STUDENT ATTITUDE SURVEY
RESEARCH REPORT
SUMMARY REPORT**

November 1, 1999

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The project team would like to thank all the students, teachers, principals, parents and other parties who gave up their time and energies to make this survey possible.

EASTERN CARIBBEAN EDUCATION REFORM PROJECT STUDENT ATTITUDES SURVEY

SUMMARY REPORT

1. BACKGROUND

Objectives

There is widespread concern throughout the Eastern Caribbean that youth are becoming increasingly disaffected and disengaged from school, and that schools and teachers do not have the capacities to prevent or overcome these problems. The Student Attitudes Survey was conducted to: **"better understand students' hopes, fears, aspirations and ambitions as well as their attitudes towards school work and their future lives."** Consulting those most directly concerned by education reform -- students themselves -- was seen as an important contribution to education reform process.

Methods

The survey was preceded by extensive preparatory consultations with students, parents, teachers, guidance officers, principals, Ministry of Education officials, employers, police and youth leaders in the OECS countries. These consultations, supplemented by a review of the research literature, ensured that the survey addressed all relevant questions about students' attitudes and motivations, and the factors which influence them.

The survey was administered and coordinated by Local Counterparts in each participating country. It had three complementary components:

1. a 117-item, standardized questionnaire completed by 5,028 randomly selected students in the nine OECS countries, assessing students' school related feelings, attitudes, motivations and aspirations, and the main determinants of these;
2. ratings of those same students' performance and behaviour by the teachers most familiar with them;
3. more than 20 focus group discussions and qualitative interviews held in each country with parents, teachers and out-of school youth.

2. FINDINGS

The number of students who completed survey questionnaires in each country is shown in the following table. The number of students absent on the day of administration is also indicated, to provide an estimate of the generalisability of the results to all students in the country. That is, the higher the percentage of students who were absent when the survey was administered, the less confident we can be that the results represent the entire student population.

Table 1: Student Respondents by Country

Country	Number of respondents	Number (%) of students absent	Percent of whole OECS sample
Anguilla	266	Not available	5.3
Antigua and Barbuda	462	47 (9.2)	9.2
British Virgin Islands	199	100 (33.3)	4.0
Dominica	510	43 (7.8)	10.1
Grenada	670	60 (8.2)	13.3
Montserrat	65	0 (0.0)	1.3
St. Kitts and Nevis	557	56 (9.1)	11.1
St. Lucia	1,312	127 (8.8)	26.1
St Vincent and the Grenadines	987	not available	19.6

Ninety-three percent of students who completed the survey were between 12 and 16 years of age inclusively. Fifty-nine percent attended urban schools, while 41% attended rural schools. Over 90% of respondents were attending secondary school leading to CXC, with the remaining from primary, junior secondary and senior primary schools.

Students' Family Characteristics

The survey provided valuable information about OECS students' families. As the table below shows, a large proportion of students live in single-parent families, while about half live with two parents (either both natural parents or a parent and step-parent). The overall level of educational achievement – in terms of the proportion who had completed secondary education -- of the mothers of survey respondents was quite varied across countries.

Table 2
Respondents' Family Characteristics by OECS country

	Anguilla n= 266	Antigua n =462	BVI n=199	Dominica n=510	Grenada n=670	Montserrat n=65	St Kitts/ Nevis n=557	St. Lucia n=1312	StVincent / Grenad n= 987
Family Type (%)									
Two-parent family (%)	26.8	42.0	37.3	33.2	29.6	38.7	44.7	39.3	37.3
Mother-headed, single parent family (%)	48.3	41.1	47.5	45.4	40.2	35.5	34.1	43.5	38.3
Mothers' education (%)¹									
Completed secondary school or higher	71.0	81.7	71.8	41.5	37.4	74.2	87.1	50.1	39.4
Mothers' work pattern									
Working most days (%)	58.4	60.8	59.5	50.8	47.2	56.9	60.0	51.8	48.8
Not working (%)	10.6	15.6	12.3	30.9	31.2	22.4	17.3	24.2	30.5

¹Among children who knew their mothers' education level, which varied from one-half to three-quarters of students in each country.

Students' Outcomes

The survey focussed on four kinds of outcomes that result from students' experiences with school and from their family environments. **Psychological outcomes** include the child's **attitudes to school**, his or her **sense that attending school has a long-term purpose**, and his or her **feelings of competence** and of **self-esteem or self-worth** in relation to school. Behavioural outcomes include the **level of effort** that the student feels he or she puts into school work. Independent ratings of student outcomes were obtained through teachers' ratings of each student's **academic performance** and **classroom behaviour problems**.

Psychological outcomes

Attitudes of OECS students toward school are very positive. Scores on survey items measuring feeling about and liking for school such as *"Each morning I look forward to coming to school"* were very high (average of 3.2 on a 4-point scale). Even more favourable was students' sense of purpose in attending school, with items such as *"I do my best in school because I can get ahead in the world with a good education"*. The average score on these items was 3.6 on the four-point scale.

Students' sense of competence and self-esteem in school are also very high. The average score on the items measuring sense of competence, such as *"Most of the time I feel that I can do my school work"*, was 3.1 on the 4-point scale. For school-related self-esteem, on items such as *"On the whole, I am pleased with myself at school"*, the average score was 3.2 on a four-point scale.

Behavioural outcomes

Behavioural outcomes were also very positive. On items assessing how hard students want to work in school, such as *"I try hard to make sure that I am good at my schoolwork"*, the average was 3.4 on a 4 point scale.

Problem behaviours

Teachers' ratings of problem behaviours such as lateness, absenteeism, inattentiveness, disruptiveness, failure to complete assignments and lack of effort showed a low prevalence of these problems overall. On a 4-point scale where 1 meant "most of the time" and 4 meant "never", the average score for these problems combined was 3.4.

Academic performance

The teacher most familiar with each student rated his or her performance compared to others at the same level. The average scores on these ratings confirmed the representativity of the sample.

As the table below shows, there are few differences in these outcomes across OECS countries.

Table 3
Average scores for types of outcomes by OECS country

Type of determinant	Anguilla n= 266	Antigua n =462	BVI n=199	Dominica n=510	Grenada n=670	Montserrat n=65	St Kitts, Nevis n=557	St. Lucia n=1312	St.Vincent, Grenadines n= 987
Psychological outcomes ¹	3.28	3.30	3.25	3.31	3.34	3.29	3.29	3.29	3.26
Behavioural outcomes (level of effort) ¹	3.20	3.19	3.14	3.26	3.32	3.15	3.22	3.26	3.26
Problem behaviours (teacher rating) ²	3.36	3.35	3.33	3.44	3.33	3.40	3.43	3.37	3.24
Academic performance ³ (teacher rating)	2.07	2.04	2.08	2.12	2.04	2.26	2.24	2.08	2.08

¹4 point agree-disagree scale, where a score of 4 is most positive.

²4 point frequency scale, where 4 is least frequent.

³ 3-point scale, where 3 is in the top third of students, 2 is in the middle third, and 1 is in the bottom third.

Summary

These very positive results are in stark contrast to the many concerns and difficulties expressed by stakeholders throughout the education system in the OECS. From a research point of view, the results are not unexpected: many of the difficulties experienced by teachers in particular are focussed on the small proportion of problem students, who consume a disproportionate amount of their attention. This survey clearly shows that the vast majority of children attending OECS schools enjoy school and see it as means to improve their futures. They want to work hard in school and generally feel confident that they can succeed. And most, according to teachers' own ratings of a representative sample of students, have no behaviour problems.

Influences on Student Outcomes

The survey also assessed the main influences on students' attitudes to and their behaviours in school. These included the quality of the school experience in terms of the value placed by the student on recognition and praise from teachers and co-operation with other students, the level of support and interest shown by the students' teachers, the cohesiveness, competitiveness and orderliness of the classroom environments, parents' level of involvement and support with the students' schooling, and influence of the student's peer group.

Influences on Attitudes Toward School

Multivariate analyses were conducted to determine which factors most strongly influence students' attitudes toward school. These analyses showed that each of the following factors makes an important independent contribution, over and above all the others, to how OECS students feel about school:

- parental support and involvement: the more strongly the student feels that his parents support, follow, and encourage his progress in school, the more positive his attitudes toward school
- quality of support and interest provided by teachers: the more positively the student views his teachers, the more positive his attitudes toward school
- recognition: the more the student seeks and receives praise and recognition from his teachers through his school work, the more positive his attitudes toward school
- student gender: girls have more positive attitudes toward school than boys
- quality of the classroom environment: the more cohesive, non-competitive and orderly the student perceives his classroom, the more positive his attitudes toward school
- peer influence: the more the student sees school as a place oriented around interactions with friends, the less positive his attitudes toward school
- age: when all other factors are considered, older students have more positive attitudes toward school.

Influences on Behaviour Problems

In multivariate analyses of the survey data, the most important influences on students' behaviour problems as rated by their teachers were:

- student gender: girls have behaviour problems less frequently than boys
- age: older students have more frequent behaviour problems
- students' perceptions of the quality of support and interest provided by their teachers: the more positively the student views his teachers, the less frequently the teacher reports behavioural problems with that student
- quality of the classroom environment: the more cohesive, competitive and orderly the student perceives his classroom, the less frequently the teacher reports behavioural problems with that student
- quality of the student's experience in school: the less value the student places on praise and recognition and the less he seeks to co-operate with others, the more frequently the teacher reports behavioural problems with that student.

Influences on Academic Performance

The teacher most familiar with each student surveyed rated the student's school performance as being in the top third, middle third or bottom third of other students at the same level. Multivariate analyses were conducted to identify the factors that influence these ratings most strongly. These were:

- student gender: girls' performance was rated better than boys'
- student age: younger students' performance is rated as better than older students'
- quality of support and interest provided by teachers: the more positively the student views his teachers, the more highly his performance is rated by the teacher.

Summary

The survey results show that several factors have strong and consistent influences on OECS students' attitudes toward, and behaviour in, school. The two most important influences come from the most significant adults in these young people's lives: their parents and their teachers. The analyses also clearly show that girls' experience in school is more positive than boys': they like school more, have higher academic performance, and have less frequent behaviour problems. The results also suggest that students' attitudes and outcomes evolve over the secondary school period.

ACTION IMPLICATIONS

The survey findings were presented to stakeholders in each participating country in a series of workshops held in September and October 1999. Present at these meetings were representatives of each Ministry of Education, teachers, principals, parents and employers. After a presentation of the main findings for the overall OECS and for the specific country, stakeholders discussed the implications of the findings for the future of education and education reform in their respective countries. The results of these discussions have been synthesised below.

Overall Levels of Student Attitudes

It is clear from the survey data that students throughout the OECS generally have positive attitudes and positive experiences in school, and see education as a means to achieve future life goals. According to these data, collected systematically from a large representative sample, Caribbean youth are not generally disaffected or disengaged from school and indeed have strong motivation for both academic performance and school completion. While this result was not surprising to many of those stakeholders who interact regularly with many young people, especially teachers and parents, it was agreed that these positive attitudes are major strength in the region, and **should be recognised and applauded as a veritable foundation for the future.**

The survey data also disconfirmed the perceived erosion of the link students see between schooling and life success. Eastern Caribbean students have a strong sense of purpose in attending school, definitely seeing a connection between education and later opportunities. Moreover, even out-of-school youth recognise the importance of education. In the focus group discussions with these youth, most stated that school was important and that they might want at some point to further their schooling, despite their repeated experiences of failure.

To reinforce the links between schooling and life success, it was recommended **that private industry should be encouraged to play a more vibrant role in the school system, through apprenticeship schemes and other partnership ventures.** It was felt that wide dissemination of the survey results will assist in making employers aware of the need to co-operate with the school system. In this regard, it was **recommended that media houses, both public and private, take on an essential role.**

It was also recommended **that educational opportunities become more accessible throughout the Eastern Caribbean.** Schools system should pay careful attention to the secondary school curriculum, the teaching methods used as the linkage to the world of work. The issue of the large number of students in the post-primary section of the school system and the curriculum used in these schools needs addressing.

Roles of Parents and Families

The critical role of significant adults, both parents and teachers, in promoting positive attitudes and behavioural orientations toward school is among the most important findings of the survey.

The survey data show clearly that students who have strong support and encouragement from their parents regarding school like school more, feel better about themselves in relation to school, have a stronger belief that schooling will be valuable to them in their future lives, have fewer behavioural problems and perform better academically. The role of parents in determining their children's orientation to school and their academic achievement is therefore critical.

In the dissemination workshops in every OECS country, the issue of parent-school linkages was addressed. It was **recommended that interventions promoting parental involvement in schools and supporting the development of parental skills** in helping their children with schoolwork and reinforcing their progress be developed. As parents in the focus group discussions pointed out, parents -- especially those with low levels of education or negative experiences with school --- may need support or training to create home environments which are conducive to learning and can support school programmes. (e.g., with supervised and structured homework sessions, away from television or other distractions).

It was also **recommended that schools adopt a more modern and flexible view of parents and parenting**. First, links to parents should **go beyond the traditional PTA**, adapting to social and economic reality by reaching out in proactive ways that are compatible with parents' resources and schedules. The survey data on the nature of parents' work schedules strongly support this point: only about two thirds of working parents usually work days only, meaning that many are unavailable to help their children with school work or to become involved in school activities during the regular school days.

Intervention targeting parents should take into consideration the realities of Eastern Caribbean families, finding ways to empower them and increase their sense of involvement and responsibility for their children's school progress. A recommendation emerged from one country **to implement a parents' charter, specifying the roles and responsibilities of parents as partners in the schooling of their children**.

Third, it was recommended **that the crucial role of extended family and neighbourhood networks in raising children be recognised**, and that school include these in their definition of the child's family and try to involve them more directly in schooling.

Fourth, it was **recommended that schools or Family Life Education units encourage employers to take responsibility for developing family-friendly work policies**, by allowing parents time off to attend school meetings or to meet with their children's teachers.

The survey findings showed that parental support is significantly greater for students who live with both their mother and father. This suggests that families headed by a single parent or with other forms of living arrangements find it less easy to communicate with, and to support and encourage

their children. The dissemination workshop participants in several countries **recommended that schools find ways to actively involve fathers who do not live with their children**, for example by inviting them separately to activities, or by sending them the same information they send mothers. In the focus groups, it was also mentioned that younger parents have more difficulty promoting the development of positive attitudes and self-discipline in their children. To counter this, some workshop participants recommended **more emphasis on primary of prevention teen pregnancy**.

Discussion in the dissemination workshops also focussed on other community resources that could be used to strengthen the support networks of children and families. It was **recommended that churches, which often have programs or services for families in difficulty, expand their role** to include more general forms of family support in relation to schooling. It was also pointed out that government agencies other than the Education Ministry are responsible for many of the social issues that lead to school-related problems, and that **a more concerted approach should be developed**. Finally, it was recommended that **resources within the school system be increased to provide more social work services** to families at risk.

It was also recommended that **posters and radio and television spots emphasising the contribution of parents to the educational success of students be developed**.

Teachers' Roles

The role of teachers in determining students' attitudes is extremely important. The survey results show that when teachers are supportive of their students' education and take an interest in their progress, students have more positive feelings about school and their own competencies, and are less likely to exhibit disruptive or problem behaviour. In the survey data, teacher interest and support is the most important predictor of liking for school and of the level of effort that students make in the classroom. Among the variables measured, it is also the only significant predictor other than age and gender -- in other words, the only modifiable determinant -- of academic performance.

It is therefore very clear that teachers wield great potential to shape student attitudes and outcomes and to maintain them throughout the secondary school years. The extent to which teachers demonstrate interest in their students' lives and value and encourage their personal, social and academic development, in addition to being knowledgeable about, prepared for and inspired by the material they teach, are evident and influential for students.

In the dissemination workshops, many specific recommendations addressing teachers' crucial role were made. Three of these dealt with teacher preparedness: it was felt that teachers' negative influence was greatest where they were unprepared for teaching or lacking in commitment or interest in teaching as a professional role. First, it was recommended **that resources be increased to permit greater access to teacher training**. Second, the circuitous route to complete teacher training was questioned, and calls were made for **a shorter training period**. This would make teaching training more attractive to prospective teachers. Third, many stakeholders (including teachers) are aware that some teachers see the job as a stop gap or step into more interesting work,

and have very little commitment to teaching or their students. To limit this problem, it was recommended that **a better job of selecting people for teaching positions be done.**

Within the school, it was also felt that teachers may not receive enough recognition and reinforcement from the superiors or their peers, and that this may contribute to poor commitment. It was recommended in several dissemination workshops that there be **a teacher recognition day or other form of reward for teachers** who are exemplary roles models in the various possible facets of school life. To help motivate teachers, a recommendation was also made **to create a level of “Master Teacher”.**

A major issue under discussion at the dissemination workshops was teachers’ working conditions. Since teacher support and interest are critical to students’ attitudes and achievement, it is **necessary to address teachers’ conditions of service if teachers are to maintain the high level of motivation required.**

The role of peers

It is interesting and perhaps not surprising that according to the survey data, students whose main orientation toward school is peer-related --as a place to socialise, as sources of discussion about schoolwork, have less positive attitudinal and behavioural outcomes in the survey data. In the focus groups with out-of school youth, several young people stated that they often came to school to be in the company of their friends, or that seeing friends was the things they had liked most about school. In other focus groups, both parents and teachers indicated that peers had more negative influences than positive. In the dissemination workshops, it was **recommended that ways be found to minimise the negative impacts of peers.**

Classroom and school environment

The quality of the classroom climate was found to be a strong predictor of many of the psychological and behavioural outcomes examined in the survey. These findings are of particular interest because to the extent that teaching practices and classroom management skills can make classrooms more cohesive and less competitive (for example, through the use of group-based or co-operative learning strategies), students' motivation and level of effort can be improved.

Overall, children in rural schools seem to have somewhat more positive attitudes and experiences, although their academic performance does not differ as measured by teacher reports. In the dissemination workshops, stakeholders stated that the advantages of rural school lie in their smaller size and in their close integration into community life: factors which could be encouraged in urban settings.

Although the quantitative survey did not assess quality of the physical plant, problems with degraded conditions, lack of equipment and conditions not conducive to learning were mentioned in focus groups in every country. In many classrooms, teaching and learning were said to be impeded by

high noise levels due to lack of sound insulation between classrooms, corridors and outside recreation or traffic areas. These noisy conditions disrupt students' concentration and make classroom control more difficult for teachers. Many classrooms were also said to be too hot or to have poor air circulation, with the results that students report being uncomfortable and sometimes sleepy in class, especially in the afternoons. These problems are compounded by classrooms which are too small for the number of students, which means that the arrangements of desks and tables often does not allow the teacher to circulate and provide individualised support to students; but rather forces them to adopt a "chalk and talk" teaching method. Also mentioned were conditions of disrepair, such as leaking roofs and broken furniture and screens, as well as defective plumbing and attendant problems of sanitation in school toilet facilities.

Gender Issues

The survey results confirm unequivocally that boys are disadvantaged in terms of their educational experiences in secondary school. In fact, boys fared worse on every psychological and behavioural outcome examined in this survey: boys like school less, have lower self-esteem, perceived competence, and sense of purpose in attending school, exert less effort in school, and have more frequent behaviour problems and poorer academic performance. In the focus group discussions, the differences between boys and girls were readily acknowledged

It was clear from the attention devoted to this aspect of the results in the dissemination workshops that the issue of gender disparity in student attitudes and motivation is of great and worrisome significance. Stakeholders were deeply concerned about the long-term implications of these findings for human resource development and for the stability of family life in the region. It was clear to all that specific efforts must be made to target boys and improve their psychological and behavioural outcomes.

It was felt that schools are currently not meeting boys' needs for praise and recognition, and that their search for development of personal identity lies outside the school system. To counter this, it was recommended **that special enrichment programs for boys emphasise the importance of academic achievement**, and that this be reinforced by employers. It was also recommended that **teaching methods be modified to provide more "hands on" experiences to cater to boys' need for activity-oriented learning**. Also, there is a need **to introduce and sustain a more varied curriculum**, so that students are provided with a choice of skills and knowledge to apply to the world of work. Finally, within the classroom, **appropriate means of providing recognition to boys and of building their self-esteem** should be developed.

Boys' relatively poorer outcomes could also be addressed by providing stronger male role models both inside and outside the home. First, it was recommended that more attention be paid **to ensuring that boys have at least some exposure to male teachers in both primary and secondary school**. Second, it recommended that **male mentoring programs be developed to provide boys with positive adult male role models**. Finally, it was recommended **that the role of fathers in supporting their sons' academic progress be reinforced**, especially in situations where the father is not present in the home.

Conclusion

The ECERP Student Attitudes Survey has provided invaluable information about not only the levels and determinants of student attitudes in the Eastern Caribbean, but also a wealth of information on family structures and living and parenting conditions. While in general the results are very positive, they also show that the road to improvement of students' attitudes and behaviour in regard to school lies open ahead straight. We hope that the survey results will be put to use by participating countries in the design and implementation of programs and services which can produce even more positive results for all Eastern Caribbean youth, can help improve the futures of the minority of students with negative attitudes and behaviours in school, and can address the looming implications of gender disparities in educational outcomes.