

Students' Perceptions of Educational Experiences: A Sixty-Year Retrospective

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Abstract

This study examines how students' perceptions of their educational experiences have evolved over the past sixty years, offering a retrospective analysis of key shifts in the schooling environment. Data includes perceptions of overall quality of school experiences, challenges faced at school, the importance of the school environment and thoughts on the fairness of rules and policies. By centering student perspectives across multiple generations, this research provides valuable insight into the importance of improving ways educational leaders listen to student voices to improve decisions being made about curriculum, daily schedules, rules and policies, maintaining adequate facilities, socialization needs, and having access to caring teachers who offer support. This is critical to understand the long-term impacts of educational change on citizens and when informing future reforms.

Keywords: democratic schools; middle school; education; generational needs; citizenship

Supporting Young Citizens: Championing Democracy in Our Schools

Our school systems are the foundation of democracy and should reflect the world we want to live in. From approximately age five to eighteen, our youngest citizens spend several hours each day in school, attending school most days of the week as part of their formal education (Sager, 2023). While ideally these school days are full of experiences where students grow knowledge about content and about the democratic process in developmentally appropriate environments, often the primary focus is centered on monitoring and assessing content-subject related educational growth. Despite the narrow focus, the reality is that a plethora of social situations are simultaneously occurring in school and most of these social experiences are out of a student's control. These situations are a result of the societal or classroom environment to which they are assigned. The social events in school have a huge impact on the individual learner and the larger community. With the increase in mental health needs and school violence, as a society, we need to better understand what the school experience is really like for students of the past and present and how institutional execution impacts a student's entire life and our overall democracy itself.

Research shows that to thrive in school and beyond, students need to be healthy, safe, engaged, supported, and challenged (ASCD, n.d., Chafouleas & Iovion, 2021). Student school experiences, directly and in-directly, mold individuals, impacting their development as a whole child (Holt, 2023). This leaves a lasting impact on students who often carry these experiences into their adult lives (Thompson, 2012). While we know today's students have the greatest stake in their education, they have little to no say in how it is delivered (Benner, Brown, & Jeffrey, 2019). Are we making major shifts away from public-school ideologies without knowing whose voices we are listening to, or considering the lived experiences of historical and current stakeholders?

Historically, political decisions serve as a primary driving factor in the day-to-day school experiences; often, what political leaders deem important differs from the immediate needs of students and teachers, exposing a "dichotomy between those who manipulate and those who are manipulated..." (Freire, 1985, p.102). In 2011, Lobman shared "we are living in a time when two of the most important societal institutions, schools and politics, have radically reduced their focus to a narrow set of outcomes." This reductionist focus on a narrow set of educational outcomes remains highly visible in 2026. For example, a major political focus in the United States has been on transitioning federal control of education to a more local control, frequently using taxpayer vouchers to fund parental choices about school rather than actively promoting the local public school at the center of the community.

Perceptions of School: The Critical Need for a Student Voice

Student voices are not heard because they are systematically excluded in discussions about what is best for their lives as active members of society. The breakdown of the checks and balances within educational governance means that decisions regarding how public tax dollars are spent to address school and societal needs frequently lack stakeholder input. Though young, students who attend public schools have many years to live as citizens in their communities; thus, their perceptions and engagement matter immensely to the long-term health of our civic institutions. When public education operates as a top-down bureaucracy rather than a collaborative community, it risks alienating the very individuals it is tasked with preparing for democratic life.

How will we know how the students perceive their school experience? While K-12 school administrators may regularly administer surveys to remain in compliance with requirements of an external funding source, a true feedback loop requires continuous, active dialogue rather than periodic, passive data collection. As future citizens, children must be educated to share authority over collective decisions, solidifying the case for true democracy in school settings. Currently, students are required by law to attend school. If and when data is collected, it is often treated as a bureaucratic formality; consequently, few long-term changes result from it, leaving students locked out of

the operational questions and solutions that govern their daily routines. This systemic omission breeds a culture of passive compliance rather than active civic agency.

Existing literature focuses primarily on contemporary student attitudes, creating a distinct gap in our understanding of how perceptions of schooling and democracy have evolved across generations. Filling this gap is critical, as intergenerational differences directly shape personal behaviors, civic engagement, and long-term democratic participation. To ensure that positive education provides true, resource-efficient benefits without causing unintended harm, systemic investigations must examine how practice occurs “on the ground” across distinct generational eras. Understanding how previous generations internalized their educational experiences allows modern researchers to identify whether current institutional shortcomings are systemic constants or products of recent policy shifts.

Benner, Brown, and Jeffery (2019) compiled a report that makes a strong case for the importance of student voice and engagement in schools, highlighting ways that students should be heard regarding their school experiences. They argue that democratic principles cannot merely be taught through a textbook; they must be actively practiced within the institutional culture. Specifically, they note that “school administrators must regularly engage all students through social media, surveys, town hall meetings, and participatory action research to foster a truly inclusive educational environment.” By implementing these multi-layered communication channels, schools can transition from rigid compliance-driven environments into dynamic spaces where student input directly shapes policy, curricula, and institutional culture.

Actions for Change

Since not all citizens, young or old, have a voice in decisions being made impacting our schools, what is the problems and the solution? While some citizens see no interest in being involved in the education of others and choose to not engage, some are citizens are weak and unable to speak, some are silenced, and some are focused on monetary gain. Gutmann (1999) poses the critical question: “Who should share the authority to influence the way democratic citizens are educated?” This question is frequently examined, manipulated, and enforced by political leaders who often determine how resources are distributed. An attention shift from policymaker’s view to the citizens themselves, individuals shaped by their own schooling experiences, exploring their perspectives on education and how it has influenced their civic identity is warranted.

In 1899, the educational philosopher John Dewey wrote about the school and society. In his writings, he explained “whenever we have in mind the discussion of a new movement in education, it is especially necessary to take the broader, or social, view” (Dewey, 1899, p.4). Political influences in governments often make decisions that

dictate how schools will function. The impact of school related political decisions on our education system years after graduating may be overlooked. Are we learning from the past to prepare for the future? There are a variety of school models that exist and that are implemented across the United States with public schools, charter schools, and private schools the most common. Some schools are divided by age, gender, and socio-economic status. So which type of school is the best for our children? What do learners, who experience the different types of schooling, take away and how does this impact our community?

Furthermore, as shared, a broad range of content subjects are taught each day. Science, math, reading, and social studies are a few common topics we see addressed and assessed for growth in today's schools. How do we know subjects need more work and who's voice should help decide? Other questions related to schooling we should know more about include the following. What technology tools, including artificial intelligence (AI) are being provided for students? How are students supported by teachers? What impact did the physical space of the school have on the learner?

This study explores the perceptions of students' educational experiences from a sixty-year retrospective. By looking at the perceptions of educational experiences, we can make informed decisions about what changes can improve the experiences and help set and reach goals that will better our society.

Methodology

Study Design

This study utilized a cross-sectional mixed-methods survey design to gather a comprehensive dataset. To achieve this, a detailed survey instrument incorporating both quantitative and qualitative data items was meticulously developed and hosted within the Qualtrics platform. The tool itself was systematically partitioned into four foundational focus areas to capture a holistic view of the participants' backgrounds and academic journeys. The first foundational focus area established Demographics, which captured critical participant age cohorts, localized geographic parameters of primary school attendance, structural school categorizations, and the specific localized grade alignments defining elementary, middle, junior high, and high school boundaries.

Building upon this baseline, the second focus area, General School Experiences, captured evaluative rating metrics regarding grade-level experiences alongside open-ended reflections targeting qualitative descriptions of school environments, facilities, and personal highlights. The third area, Academic Experiences, shifted the focus toward academic trajectories by utilizing open-ended fields designed to track structural subject preferences, challenging course terrains, and institutional teacher support. Finally, the fourth area, School and Culture Experiences, engaged respondents

through qualitative inquiries evaluating rule fairness, architectural suggestions for environmental improvement, singular behavioral or policy updates, and technological implementation profiles within their institutions.

To prioritize ethical data collection standards, all 23 survey items were completely optional. This design choice was intentionally implemented to ensure participant well-being, mitigate stress, and provide a strong sense of psychological safety throughout the process. Furthermore, response paths proactively included generalized “other” narrative boxes and “prefer not to say” buffers, allowing participants complete comfort and autonomy when navigating potentially sensitive topics.

Participants and Data Collection

Inclusion parameters required participants to be between 18 and 100 years of age with active digital access to the Qualtrics link. Recruitment occurred across a three-week window spanning March and April of 2025 using strategic online placement across Facebook, Twitter/X, and LinkedIn. An electronic institutional consent protocol was verified before any participant could proceed to the 10–15 minute questionnaire. A total of 61 participants completed the instrument, though item-level counts vary throughout due to the optional nature of the questions.

Data Analysis

The mixed-methods dataset was evaluated using a dual-strand analytic approach to fully capture both numeric trends and narrative depth. Quantitative metrics were systematically analyzed using descriptive statistics, tracking frequency distributions and percentages to map baseline trends across the sample population. Concurrently, qualitative, open-ended string responses were processed using rigorous thematic analysis. To ensure the structural trustworthiness and academic integrity of these qualitative findings, the analysis strictly utilized Lincoln and Guba's (1985) evaluative framework, which is structured around four interconnected pillars of rigor:

- Credibility was maintained through the implementation of systematic member checking and structured peer debriefing processes to ensure the findings accurately reflect participant perspectives.
- Transferability was facilitated by documenting clear, rich contextual descriptions of participant profiles and their respective educational environments, allowing future researchers to determine the applicability of the findings to alternative settings.
- Dependability was preserved via the maintenance of a detailed research audit trail that meticulously tracked codebook progression, operational modifications, and routine methodological checks.

- Confirmability was achieved through rigorous, ongoing investigator reflexivity combined with the strict practice of backing all narrative insights with direct, verbatim thematic evidence from the transcripts.

To eliminate data ambiguities common in multi-era survey feedback and to streamline generational comparisons, participant age brackets were harmonized during the processing phase into four distinct, mutually exclusive categories: 18–34, 35–54, 55–74, and 75–100. Finally, to eliminate potential individual bias and guarantee absolute validity, final thematic codes were cross-checked independently by two researchers, with any coding discrepancies resolved through collaborative deliberation until a complete consensus was achieved.

Results

Quantitative Evaluative Perceptions

To assess long-term shifts in institutional satisfaction, participant evaluation records across elementary, middle, junior high, and high school grade tiers were synthesized into a unified cross-generational framework.

Educational Tier & Generational Cohort	Excellent (%)	Good (%)	Average (%)	Poor (%)	Terrible (%)	Prefer Not to Say (%)
Elementary School						
Ages 18–34 (n = 12)	42	33	17	8	0	0
Ages 35–54 (n = 11)	27	27	39	9	0	0
Ages 55–74 (n = 10)	70	10	20	0	0	0
Ages 75–100 (n = 3)	0	0	33	33	33	0
Middle School						
Ages 18–34 (n = 12)	0	17	67	16	0	0
Ages 35–54 (n = 11)	27	18	45	9	0	0
Ages 55–74 (n = 8)	38	25	13	13	0	13
Ages 75–100 (n = 3)	0	0	33	33	33	0
Junior High School						
Ages 18–34 (n = 11)	9	45	9	0	0	37
Ages 35–54 (n = 11)	18	36	36	9	0	0
Ages 55–74 (n = 10)	30	60	0	10	0	0
Ages 75–100 (n = 3)	0	0	67	33	0	0
High School						
Ages 18–34 (n = 12)	25	58	8	9	0	0
Ages 35–54 (n = 11)	27	55	9	9	0	0
Ages 55–74 (n = 10)	30	50	10	10	0	0
Ages 75–100 (n = 3)	0	0	100	0	0	0

Table 1. Generational Quality Ratings of School Levels Across Age Brackets

Note. Individual sample size variations (*n*) reflect distinct question-level response tracks across the cross-generational dataset. Percentages are rounded to the nearest whole integer.

Thematic Analysis & Discussion

When evaluating the comprehensive qualitative dataset, clear thematic commonalities and divergence patterns emerge across the generations. This discussion treats the qualitative insights, descriptive assessments, and environmental feedback as a unified narrative, explicitly examining the cross-sectional dataset.

General School Experiences & Affective Profiles

The reflective sentiment profiles split drastically along generational boundaries. Within the 18–34 cohort, 62% of participants provided explicitly negative accounts of their educational timeline. These descriptions were dominated by social challenges, such as being bullied, failing to cultivate peer support networks, adjusting to interstate relocations, dealing with unchallenging academic content, and navigating personal trauma like the death of a loved one while managing school workloads. Conversely, only 32% of this younger group shared positive remarks, highlighting high academic rigor, access to good teachers, and strong institutional community bonds.

Cohort Bracket	Positive Sentiment	Negative Sentiment	Neutral Sentiment	Total Responses (<i>n</i>)
Ages 18–34	32% (<i>n</i> = 4)	62% (<i>n</i> = 8)	8% (<i>n</i> = 1)	13
Ages 35–54	65% (<i>n</i> = 11)	35% (<i>n</i> = 6)	0% (<i>n</i> = 0)	17
Ages 55–74	63% (<i>n</i> = 10)	31% (<i>n</i> = 5)	6% (<i>n</i> = 1)	16
Ages 75–100	40% (<i>n</i> = 2)	60% (<i>n</i> = 3)	0% (<i>n</i> = 0)	5

Table 2. Qualitative Sentiment Frequencies for Overall School Experience Descriptions

The mid-tier cohorts presented much higher levels of school satisfaction. The 35–54 age bracket reported a 65% positive sentiment rate, praising deep personal friendships, caring and hard-working teachers, small institutional school sizes, and resilient school cultures. Those pointing out negatives (35%) cited overly rigid rules, forced school transfers, single-sex schooling environments, and large class sizes with limited course options. Similarly, the 55–74 group expressed high positivity (63%), rooted primarily in enduring connections with exceptional teachers. Their negative reflections (31%) targeted a systemic lack of critical thinking, small schools lagging behind neighboring districts academically, and minimal course choices.

The oldest cohort (75–100) leaned heavily negative (60%), highlighting severe language barriers and repetitive, highly restrictive drilled lessons in early elementary grades. Their positive memories (40%) were closely tied to basic needs being met, such as

kind teachers providing warm winter coats, alongside an appreciation for having any general access to learning resources and channels of curiosity.

Core Institutional Challenges Facing Students

While specific stressors varied by historical era, the pressure of balancing schedules emerged as a major institutional challenge for multiple generations.

Generational Group	Dominant Structural Themes & Behavioral Codes
Ages 18–34 (n=12)	• Socialization: Peer bullying, isolation, or difficulty making friends. • Behavioral Disruption: Defiant behavior disrupting teacher instruction and causing lost learning time. • Time Demands: Balancing heavy workloads, early morning wake-ups, and active social commitments.
Ages 35–54 (n=8)	• Academic Barriers: Navigating difficult courses with few elective options. • Social Hardships: Peer harassment, social sorting, and fitting in. • Support Failures: Encountering uncaring teachers who did not provide academic help. • Schedule Stress: Juggling early morning arrivals, sports, and school requirements.
Ages 55–74 (n=9)	• Curricular Constraints: Inflexible schedules and sparse course selections. • Structural Barriers: Large class sizes limiting critical one-on-one time with educators. • Note: 33% of this group stated they encountered 'nothing' challenging.
Ages 75–100 (n=3)	• Discrimination: Gender-based restrictions and unequal treatment of female students. • Physical/Safety: Facing bullies over long geographic distances traveling to school buildings. • Governance: Compliance with nonsensical, rigid institutional rules.

Table 3. Primary Qualitative Themes for Intergenerational Schooling Challenges

Architectural Realities and the Physical School Environment

Across all sixty years of data, the physical condition of school facilities played an important role in shaping student perceptions. The youngest participants (18–34) appreciated security features like locked entry doors and functional bathrooms, yet their descriptions were dominated by structural decline. They reported small temporary “butler buildings” that cramped student capacity, leaky roofs that flooded classrooms during rainstorms, and a lack of basic hygiene supplies like toilet paper.

The mid-range generations reported cleaner but uncomfortable environments. The 35–54 cohort recalled unlocked doors, functional individual lockers, and early computer labs. However, they criticized small, crowded rooms with few windows, and old buildings that lacked central air conditioning, relying instead on loud window

units. The 55–74 cohort focused on architectural features like hardwood floors and safety but noted a complete lack of air conditioning (which was later partially addressed with ceiling fans) and bland, clinical classroom layouts. For the oldest generation (75–100), the physical layout was memorable for dedicated cloakrooms to hang coats, but limited by closed, traditional classroom styles and a total lack of cafeteria facilities.

Structural Evolution of Institutional Fairness, Discipline, and Policy

[18-34 Cohort] ----> 58% Unfair (Sexist dress codes, unequal enforcement)

[35-54 Cohort] ----> 70% Fair (Minor critiques of athletic favoritism)

[55-74 Cohort] ----> 100% Fair (Total consensus on disciplinary legitimacy)

[75-100 Cohort] ---> 66% Unfair (Physical punishment, language bans)

The perceived fairness of school rules and disciplinary policies revealed a stark generational divide.

The youngest cohort (18–34) felt rules were unfair (58%), citing sexist dress codes enforced unequally, strict cell phone bans, and policies that prevented snacking during long school days. In contrast, the 35–54 group viewed rules as mostly fair (70%), though they noted that student-athletes often received preferential treatment from administrators regarding common infractions like running in halls or chewing gum.

Remarkably, the 55–74 group reported 100% consensus that institutional rules were fair. This absolute approval drops sharply in the oldest bracket (75–100), where 66% viewed policies as unfair. They recalled harsh environments where privileges were restricted based on language proficiency, and students faced corporal punishment, such as being physically hit on the tips of their fingers for behavioral mistakes.

Synthesis of Core Phenomenological Findings

The findings of this study revealed several consistent themes across generations regarding public school experiences and perceptions of democratic participation within educational settings. One of the strongest recurring themes involved what participants described as the “systemic middle school problem.” Across nearly all surveyed generations, middle school was consistently identified as the least positive educational stage. Participants frequently described this period as socially difficult, emotionally challenging, and developmentally unsupported. These responses suggest that traditional middle school models may continue to inadequately address the social and emotional needs of adolescents during a critical developmental transition period. Many participants reflected on feelings of disconnection, insecurity, and

limited support during these years, indicating that middle school experiences may significantly shape long-term perceptions of schooling and belonging.

Another major finding centered on persistent environmental neglect within public school facilities. Participants across multiple generations described deteriorating physical conditions in school buildings, including outdated infrastructure, overcrowded classrooms, poor maintenance, inadequate climate control, and limited access to basic supplies. While public education systems often emphasize curriculum standards and academic accountability, participant narratives revealed ongoing concern regarding the physical learning environment itself. Several participants connected the condition of school facilities to broader perceptions of institutional care, equity, and respect for students. These responses suggest that the physical condition of schools may influence not only academic engagement but also student perceptions of value, safety, and dignity within public education systems.

Participants also identified what emerged as a broader “workload balancing crisis” within schools. Across generations, students described difficulty balancing academic demands with extracurricular activities, family obligations, employment responsibilities, and personal well-being. Many participants perceived school expectations as increasingly overwhelming and rigid, leaving limited room for flexibility, creativity, or personal development outside academic performance measures. These findings point to broader structural tensions within contemporary education systems, where institutional pressures and achievement expectations may compete with students’ emotional, social, and developmental needs. Participants frequently described feelings of exhaustion, stress, and pressure associated with maintaining academic performance while simultaneously managing other aspects of life.

The findings further revealed ongoing concerns related to student autonomy and educational choice. Across generational groups, participants expressed a shared desire for greater flexibility in course offerings, instructional pathways, and opportunities for individualized learning experiences. Many participants viewed highly standardized or predetermined educational tracks as limiting student agency and discouraging exploration of personal interests, creativity, and career aspirations. These responses suggest that students value educational systems that provide greater voice, participation, and adaptability within the learning process. The emphasis on autonomy also aligns with broader democratic education principles that prioritize student engagement, participation, and meaningful involvement in decision-making processes related to learning.

Finally, generational differences emerged regarding how participants defined overall school satisfaction. Younger generations were more likely to evaluate their educational experiences based on social relationships, peer interactions, and a sense of emotional

belonging within school communities. In contrast, older generations more frequently emphasized the importance of basic physical conditions, safety, structural functionality, and resource availability within schools. These differences may reflect shifting societal expectations surrounding education, evolving understandings of student well-being, and broader cultural changes related to school climate and student support systems. Collectively, these findings highlight the complex relationship between educational environments, democratic participation, student voice, and perceptions of institutional support across generations.

Study Limitations

These findings must be considered alongside several important limitations that may influence the interpretation and transferability of the study. While the overall sample included 61 participants and provided valuable cross-generational insight, the subgroup sample sizes within individual age categories were relatively small. This limitation reduced the ability to make broad generalizations across generations and limited opportunities for more detailed comparative statistical analysis. However, the study was designed to prioritize depth of perspective and exploratory understanding rather than broad population-level generalization.

Another limitation involves participant recruitment methods. Participants were recruited primarily through social media platforms including Facebook, X/Twitter, and LinkedIn. While digital recruitment increased accessibility and allowed for participation across geographic locations, it also introduced potential bias related to technology access and platform engagement. Individuals who do not regularly use social media, particularly some older adults within the oldest age cohort (75–100), may have been underrepresented in the study. As a result, the findings may reflect the perspectives of participants who are more digitally connected and socially engaged online.

The use of item-level nonresponse protections also contributed to certain limitations within the dataset. Survey participants were permitted to skip individual questions in order to protect participant comfort, privacy, and autonomy. Although this approach supported ethical participation practices, it created occasional gaps in the dataset and reduced consistency across responses. Some participants provided extensive narrative reflections while others responded more selectively, creating variation in the depth and completeness of available data.

Structural variability in educational experiences also influenced the interpretation of findings. Participants classified their schooling experiences differently based on local grade configurations and school structures, including combined junior-high and high-school systems. These variations complicated efforts to create perfectly standardized educational categories across generations and regions. As a result,

educational experiences were interpreted within broader contextual themes rather than through rigidly uniform school classifications.

Additionally, several potentially influential demographic variables were not directly measured within this study. Factors such as socioeconomic status, academic achievement levels, reading ability, disability status, and access to localized educational resources were beyond the scope of the current research design. However, these variables likely shaped participants' educational experiences, civic development, and perceptions of democratic engagement within public schools. Future research should explore how these intersecting factors influence student perspectives and democratic participation across educational settings. Future research should explore how these intersecting factors influence student perspectives and democratic participation across educational settings.

Finally, because this study centered participant voice and lived experience, the findings should be understood as interpretive rather than universally representative. The goal of the research was not to produce definitive claims applicable to all public-school students, but rather to illuminate patterns, tensions, and shared themes emerging from participant narratives regarding democracy, public education, and student experience. Future studies with larger and more geographically diverse samples could further strengthen and expand upon these findings.

Implications for Practice and Policy

First, the clear generational differences in how school experiences were structured highlight the need for educational systems to look beyond historical shifts and consider the broader political and social forces that shape schooling. In today's educational landscape, concerns such as deteriorating school facilities, bullying, and the ongoing threat of gun violence directly impact students' daily lives and their sense of safety and belonging. Complex issues like gun violence are difficult to resolve, but practical improvements, such as ensuring students have unbroken desks, functional lockers, leak-free roofs, and basic hygiene supplies, are entirely within reach. Educational leaders and policymakers must prioritize direct investments in school infrastructure, employ caring teachers with high expectations, implement comprehensive anti-bullying initiatives, expand course choices, and support the needs of the whole child.

Second, ongoing debates over federal versus state control of education directly shape school funding, curriculum content, and democratic participation in school governance. Understanding these political influences is essential for interpreting generational shifts and for advocating for public policies that promote equitable, safe, and inclusive initiatives.

Third, the challenges encountered in recruiting older participants underscore the need for more inclusive recruitment strategies in educational research. Relying solely on digital platforms can exclude older generations. Future research should incorporate alternative methods, such as mail surveys, partnerships with senior centers, or in-person interviews, to ensure broader representation.

Finally, the potential impact of socioeconomic status, access to technology, and reading ability emphasizes the importance of designing accessible research tools. Addressing these disparities is critical for building equitable environments where all students can thrive. Over the past 60 years, persistent challenges remain in environments that lack basic infrastructure, security, and supplies. When compared to other public institutions, such as government buildings, these inequities highlight a concerning misalignment in our societal priorities.

Conclusion & Future Directions

Our children are precious citizens who will grow to live in and eventually lead our shared society. Because the stability of our democratic institutions depends on the preparation of the next generation, continuous educational research is vital to identify, isolate, and systematically address the deeply entrenched, structural issues that impact their holistic development. Systematically gathering student feedback provides critical, ground-level data that should be honored and acted upon by political and educational leaders alike. Rather than viewing students as passive recipients of policy, educational systems must recognize them as primary stakeholders whose lived experiences offer invaluable insights into institutional efficacy, resource allocation, and school climate.

Consequently, future research must explore these distinct focus areas in far greater depth and complexity. Academic inquiries should prioritize examining the specific, multi-layered factors that support successful middle school reform—a developmental period that is traditionally vulnerable to drops in student engagement and academic efficacy. Furthermore, investigations should analyze how expanding elective course options and deliberately modernizing physical school infrastructure can directly optimize student belonging and motivation.

Additionally, a more intersectional approach is required to fully capture the nuances of the student experience. Collecting detailed data on how socioeconomic status, regional differences, and diverse school types intersect will further illuminate how we can build supportive, democratic educational environments for future generations. By looking at how these demographic variables interact, future studies can move beyond one-size-fits-all conclusions and instead provide educational advocates and

policymakers with targeted, data-driven frameworks designed to close equity gaps and foster authentic student agency.

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Presented: June 2026

Included for Publishing: July 2026

Published: July 2026, Volume 17, Issue 34 Academicus International Scientific Journal