

*It's Not A School Where You Should Go If
You Don't Want To Learn:*

**Philadelphia Students Talk About Their
Elementary Schools**

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As part of the Effective Schools Study¹, student focus groups were held in eight Philadelphia elementary schools. The following is not an analysis of the focus groups, rather it is a series of quotes from the third, fourth and fifth grade students who participated.

What We Learn

When our class switches to math we learn more and new things. When we have science in [the teacher's classroom] we do fun activities. We sifted a pan full of dirt to see if big parts stay in or fall out. We were working on dinosaurs and fossils that day.

These 3rd, 4th and 5th graders say they're learning everything from 3.14 (PI) to that "English has a lot of words." In Math, which along with Language Arts, was the subject most often mentioned, students say they are learning fractions--how to use new

¹ The Effective Schools Study, funded by the National Science Foundation, is being conducted by the Urban Institute and Campbell-Kibler Associates in conjunction with the School District of Philadelphia and the Philadelphia Urban Systemic Program and the three El Paso area districts that make up El Paso Urban Systemic Program, El Paso Independent School District, Socorro Independent School District and Ysleta Independent School District.



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calculators for fractions, how to rename and simplify fractions and how to add, subtract, multiply and divide fractions. Along with fractions they mentioned learning Algebra, decimals, graphs, circumferences, long division, multiplication and times tables.

In Language Arts, students report learning grammar, to read and write in Spanish and to spell as well as the Harlem Renaissance, famous people, fairy tales, fantasy, things that happen in the real world and books that show fiction past and present.

In Science students do experiments where the teacher “asks hard questions – it makes you think and learn.” They say they are learning about germs, gas and dry ice, orangutans and their habitats, the digestive system, the solar system and the environment. In their environmental studies, students are learning there’s “a big hole in the ozone,” “the ice caps are melting,” that “something will happen if people keep polluting” and that “planting will help reduce pollution.”

Their Social Studies learning includes the Declaration of Independence, all 43 presidents, the Holocaust, China, the Greeks, Africa, Guatemala and pottery.. Students are also learning about the individual states they are studying as their fourth grade project.

Some students are excited about learning advanced work with fourth grade students saying they are learning fifth, sixth and seventh grade work. Other things students are learning include: “how to pay attention so you get free time on Friday,” “how to do things without being helped,” and “how to share and help people when they are down.”

What Helps Us Learn

The teacher gives us 18 words and we have to look them up in the dictionary or we don't get to go have water ices.

There are many things that students feel help them learn from looking things up in the dictionary and using tapes for reading and multiplication to having a teacher who “keeps her phone charged...she calls parents and tells them we are not working.” Other things teachers do that students feel help them learn include: giving a lot of homework, spelling words every week, math homework, flash cards, science experiments, pop quizzes and diagramming things. As students from many classes were quick to note, it helps them to learn when their teachers give them treats when they get a long division or fraction problem right or look up words in a dictionary.

A number of students feel that teachers who explain things help them learn:

With math he explains it on a board and if somebody don't understand it, he will keep doing it over until we understand it.

[Teacher] describes it, does an example problem, shows us the steps -- if you still don't get it you raise your hand and tell the teacher the problem.

[Teacher] explains the things we have to do—doesn't just tell us.

When we learn and there are people who don't know it, he asks them who doesn't understand, raise your hand and he will help them. Until everyone knows it, he goes over and over and then gives us a test.

She teaches us when we do fraction; if we don't get a question, she'll ask us and make it clearer.

Making things fun helps them learn as well:

She makes it fun for me; she will do stuff with money for learning math.

When doing spelling, she acts out things; if people don't understand, she puts in fun activities to make it easier.

[She tells] some jokes to get people's attention.

What Doesn't Help Us Learn

She lets us draw during health and art. When we are supposed to be learning, we are drawing pictures and stuff.

When teachers are not actively teaching a subject, some students feel they are not being helped to learn:

The reading teacher is supposed to teach us how to read, not have us read.

[The teacher will] give us a crossword puzzle and that doesn't help us learn anything

She makes us write the rules, but it's not really learning.

Students don't feel that giving them free time and watching movies "when we are good" help them learn. Repetition, doing it over and over, writing it on the board, reading it many times, they feel doesn't always help them learn, especially when "it's a question that we don't understand."

While some students feel that everything the teacher does "is always helping us"; others feel sometimes the teacher "talks too fast and we don't understand." Students understand that teachers are frustrated with behavior problems, but they also feel that how teachers sometimes deal with those problems doesn't help them learn:

She sits and ignores us; do that to the bad people and the good kids don't have anything to do.

One day she was explaining math or science, she asked for questions, and somebody interrupted, and she said this is the fifth interruption and just finished-- just put it away, she gets tired when people interrupt.

When [the teacher] writes the homework on the board, he erases it fast—he does it because he thinks people are not paying attention.

How We Behave

Sometimes we are good and sometimes we are bad. Sometimes when some of the kids are bad the whole class is bad.

In general, some kids behave well and some don't. Sometimes "good kids are bad because they are bored, want attention or want to be in the in-crowd," but in one class students act like a "bunch of angels." There are a lot of concerns about "bad kids" who are seen as not caring, kicking people, hitting people, trying to be funny. "They jump around, curse, catch attitudes." The "bad kids" are students who "don't do work when they are supposed to and never listen. But students who act bad can change:

I don't act good myself sometimes... now I do [my homework] every day...because I wouldn't be able to pass if I don't do homework, and I want to go to the charter school and I need higher grades.

Our School

School is fun because your teachers teach you and try to make it as fun as possible, so you can really understand.

Some students are unhappy with their schools because they have to wear uniforms, their teachers are too mean and sometimes they feel the school is not safe. However, for the most part they happy with their schools feeling:

I learn a lot of things; it's a lot of fun.

Teachers help us a lot; every day I want to wake up and go to school.

It's a school where you learn a lot; it's not a school where you should go if you don't want to learn.