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GEORGIA STUDENTS RANK PARENTS AS PRIMARY INFLUENCERS IN SCHOOL SUCCESS

Survey Provides Benchmarks for Changing Attitudes and Awareness

[Atlanta, Nov. 29, 2005] -- Students in Georgia who participated in a recent survey overwhelmingly agree that ***it is their parents*** — not their teachers, not their coaches or religious leaders, not their peers, not the celebrities they are enamored with at the moment — who are the biggest influencers as to how well they do in school. More than 600 high school students from four diverse regions of Georgia were surveyed about their attitudes as part of a research survey initiated by the Partnership for Reform in Science and Mathematics (PRISM). PRISM is a five-year initiative funded by a National Science Foundation (NSF) grant and administered by the Board of Regents of the University System of Georgia to raise student achievement in science and mathematics.

A majority of the students surveyed ranked their parent(s) as ***Very Influential or Extremely Influential***, with teachers receiving the next highest ranking. Celebrities were ranked lowest, with coaches, religious leaders and peers also receiving low rankings in terms of influence as compared to parents.

Surprisingly, many parents don't realize the significance of their influence. Those who took the parent survey were split almost evenly in their perceptions of their own ability to help their children do well in school. Many parents perceived themselves to be only ***as*** influential as teachers, but not necessarily ***more*** influential.

PRISM's survey results come at a time when the State Department of Education, a PRISM partner, is rolling out the new Georgia Performance Standards (GPS), which are raising the bar in many subjects, including science and mathematics. State Superintendent of Schools Kathy Cox believes the new standards alone won't 'make the grade,' and that parents must stay involved throughout their children's education.

"Some parents stop helping their children with their schoolwork once a student reaches a certain age and their homework gets more advanced," said Superintendent Cox. "As the parent of two sons — one in middle school, the other in high school — I understand what they are feeling, but the good news is that help is available. PRISM's research emphasizes to parents that they can assist their child(ren) in the challenging areas of math and science by being regularly involved in their child's educational life."

Why Does Georgia Need PRISM?

PRISM's mandate is to raise aspirations and achievement in science and mathematics for all Georgia students and close achievement gaps among demographic groups throughout the state. Reform efforts are expected and are underway with the Department of Education in pedagogy, counseling, higher education, and community involvement in rural, suburban and urban parts of the state of Georgia.

For years, Georgia students have ranked low on achievement tests, with mathematics and science achievement falling well below that of many other states. In 2005, fewer than 70% of Georgia high school students in more than 100 of Georgia's counties passed the science portion of the High School Graduation Test.

Georgia students who took the SAT in 2004 averaged a 496 on the math portion, the lowest score among states with a high percentage of students participating. Georgia is among a dozen or so states with a high percentage — approximately 65% — of its college-bound students taking the SAT, which many southeastern colleges and universities require for admission.

Georgia Students Rank Parents as Primary Influencers

Add One

“Our students must improve their performance in science and math if they are going to compete in a 21st century economy,” said Superintendent Cox. “The Georgia Department of Education, our partners at PRISM, and dedicated educators around the state are working very hard to improve student achievement in math and science, but we need the help of the entire community, including parents.”

Research is the Key

“Before we could determine how to help Georgia communities best aid our students, we had to understand the existing parent and student attitudes and behaviors around science and mathematics,” said Jan Kettlewell, Co-Principal Investigator of PRISM and University System of Georgia Associate Vice Chancellor for P-16 Initiatives. “We conducted this research in order to gather data on attitudes towards science and mathematics; to underpin and guide the development of the most effective communications to students, parents, and the community at large about the importance of science and mathematics; and to measure shifts in attitudes and behavior among key constituent groups in Georgia.”

The surveys were conducted by a leading educational research firm, Maguire Associates, at 12 elementary, middle and high schools in four diverse regions of Georgia: Atlanta Metro [Southside High School, Martin Luther King, Jr. Middle School and Morris Brandon Elementary School]; East Central [Southeast Bulloch High School, Langston Chapel Middle School and Screven County Elementary School]; Northeast Region [Jackson County Comprehensive High School, West Jackson Middle School and North Jackson Elementary School] and Southeast [Windsor Forest High School, Camden Middle School and Greer Elementary School].

During Phase I of the baseline research, conducted in fall 2004 and winter 2005, Maguire Associates conducted both qualitative and quantitative research with students, educators, school administrators, community leaders and parents.

Some of the research questions the survey explored:

- *What role do parents, school teachers, school administrators and guidance counselors play in students’ interest in science and mathematics?*
- *What are the career aspirations of students? How might connections be made between students’ aspirations and their pursuit of science and mathematics in the classroom?*
- *What are students’ preferred learning methods for mathematics and science?*
- *How interested are students in pursuing science and mathematics curricula? What are the profiles (geographic, demographic, attitudinal) of students who are more and less interested in science and mathematics?*
- *What messages best present the advantages of study and achievement in the areas of science and mathematics?*

Key Findings

A number of key findings were uncovered by the research, including indicators on how students and parents think students learn best. Among them:

- students prefer field trips, experiments and hands-on learning opportunities over lecture-style presentations in science and mathematics,
- computer and video games are the second most popular way to learn new things after hands-on learning methods, and
- parents believe these methods should be more widely used in teaching science and mathematics

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Add Two

These findings are timely, given that the Georgia Performance Standards are now being integrated into classrooms, bringing differentiated learning styles into the equation in both subject areas, as well as others.

“The PRISM research is in agreement with the underlying educational principles of the new Georgia Performance Standards that the Department of Education has put into action in classrooms throughout the state,” said Sheila Jones, PRISM Project Director. “We anticipate that teachers will be able to teach core content knowledge using more hands-on methodology, rather than “teach to the test” methods, and that Georgia’s students, families and employers will reap the benefits for generations to come.”

Additional key findings of the PRISM research are that:

- a majority of students surveyed rated themselves as average in their mathematical and science ability
- African-American students had a slightly higher confidence level in their mathematical abilities than their Caucasian classmates but the reverse was true in science
- most students strongly agreed with the statement that you have to know at least some science and mathematics to do most jobs, although more parents than students recognize that a good, working knowledge of mathematics is important to doing well in the student’s chosen career field or trade
- most students think mathematics is important even for those students who do not plan to attend college
- more students than parents agree with the statement “My parents find it difficult to help me when I have questions about mathematics,”
- 46% of parents talk with their children’s teachers or counselors about how they are doing in school less than once a month
- most parents believe their children know where to go to get help with mathematics and science questions/problems, and
- both students and parents agree that high achievers in science and mathematics can be “cool” and are not necessarily “nerdy.”

“All ten of our PRISM strategies — which connect higher education to K-12 teachers and schools with the goals of closing student achievement gaps while enhancing professional development for teachers of science and mathematics — are benefiting from this research,” said Kettlewell. “It has both validated some of our previous thinking, as well as challenged some pre-conceived notions concerning beliefs among students and parents related to motivators that lead to high achievement in these subjects.”

Research Leads to Public Awareness Campaign

A portion of PRISM’s grant funding is earmarked to create a public awareness campaign, which is expected to engage parents, schools, and members of the broader community toward closing achievement gaps among Georgia students.

“These findings have been essential in helping us develop our Public Awareness Campaign, which is a key strategy for PRISM,” said Rosalind Barnes, PRISM Public Awareness Campaign Director. “Chief among them is communicating that science and mathematics are a vital part of everyday life and that *parents*—the leading influencers of their children’s academic success — need to support their children in choosing more challenging mathematics and science courses even if the parents don’t have a strong background in these areas themselves.”

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Add Three

According to Superintendent Cox, “Parents need to take this information seriously and remember that their involvement is about more than checking homework and attending football games. It requires involvement in every aspect of a child’s education, from kindergarten to graduation. Get to know your children’s teachers and guidance counselors. Talk to the principal if you have a concern or a compliment. Know what opportunities are available to your children and then talk with your kids about setting priorities and pursuing their dreams.”

A complete copy of the survey and its findings are available at www.gaprism.org under the Information tab.

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About PRISM

Partnership for Reform in Science and Mathematics (PRISM) is a five-year initiative funded by the National Science Foundation and administered by the University System of Georgia with the primary purpose of improving student achievement in science and mathematics at all levels of education throughout Georgia. PRISM is working actively in four diverse regions of the state with partners at the university and P-12 level in each region. For more information about PRISM, visit www.gaprism.org.

About the PRISM Research

For both the qualitative and quantitative research conducted, research instruments were developed in collaboration with the PRISM Leadership Team, which is made up of seasoned science and mathematics educators from the kindergarten through twelfth grade and higher education system, as well as PRISM administrators, all of whom have deep experience in education reform and collaboration. All surveys and procedures for data collection were carefully reviewed and approved by the Internal Review Board at Georgia Institute of Technology, and the surveys and procedures for Atlanta students and parents were approved by the Department of Research, Planning and Accountability of the Atlanta Public School System.

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