WHITE PAPER

VARSITY BRANDS

School Spirit: the Connection between **Student Achievement, Involvement** and **Confidence**

Students with ***school spirit*** do more than show support for their school. They perform better academically, are more socially and civically engaged, and are happier in general than their less-spirited peers. What's more, the majority of principals (92%) feel that high school spirit is tied to high student achievement.

To better understand the real and perceived connections between school spirit and student achievement, Varsity Brands commissioned Harris Poll to conduct an online survey of 1,016 high school students, 315 parents of high school students and 150 high school principals across the United States. Interviews were conducted in the Spring of 2014. These groups were asked about school pride, academics, self-esteem, community involvement and more. This white paper shares some of the insights our research elicited and, in particular, looks at how school spirit is connected to the way high school students ***learn, lead*** and ***grow***.

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School Spirit and The High School Experience

School spirit is a multi-faceted concept with different meanings to different people. To offer a birds-eye view of the issue, we have developed a "school spirit index" for students based on the following four attributes: 1) students' self-assessment of their level of school spirit; 2) students' self-reported pride in their school; 3) students' propensity to get other students to be active in school events; and 4) students' plans to return to their school for special events after graduation. Students were grouped into categories of high, moderate[1], and low school spirit based on their combined responses to these four components.

From ***academic achievement*** to ***general happiness***, there is a positive relationship to school spirit. Principals overwhelmingly feel that it is important that they personally build school spirit at their school (89%) and that higher levels of school spirit is tied to higher student achievement. And parents who say their child has a lot of school spirit are more likely than parents who don't to report that their child performs above average in school academically compared to other students (61% vs. 31%, respectively).

Four out of five high school principals believe that school spirit is a key measure of an effective school administration. "School spirit is **the heartbeat of the school**," one principal explained. "It can make or break a school year."

Principals report that compared to students with lower levels of school spirit, those who have a great deal of spirit are:

More confident **91%**

More likely to be leaders **90%**

Happier **88%**

More active in their communities **87%**

More fulfilled **73%**

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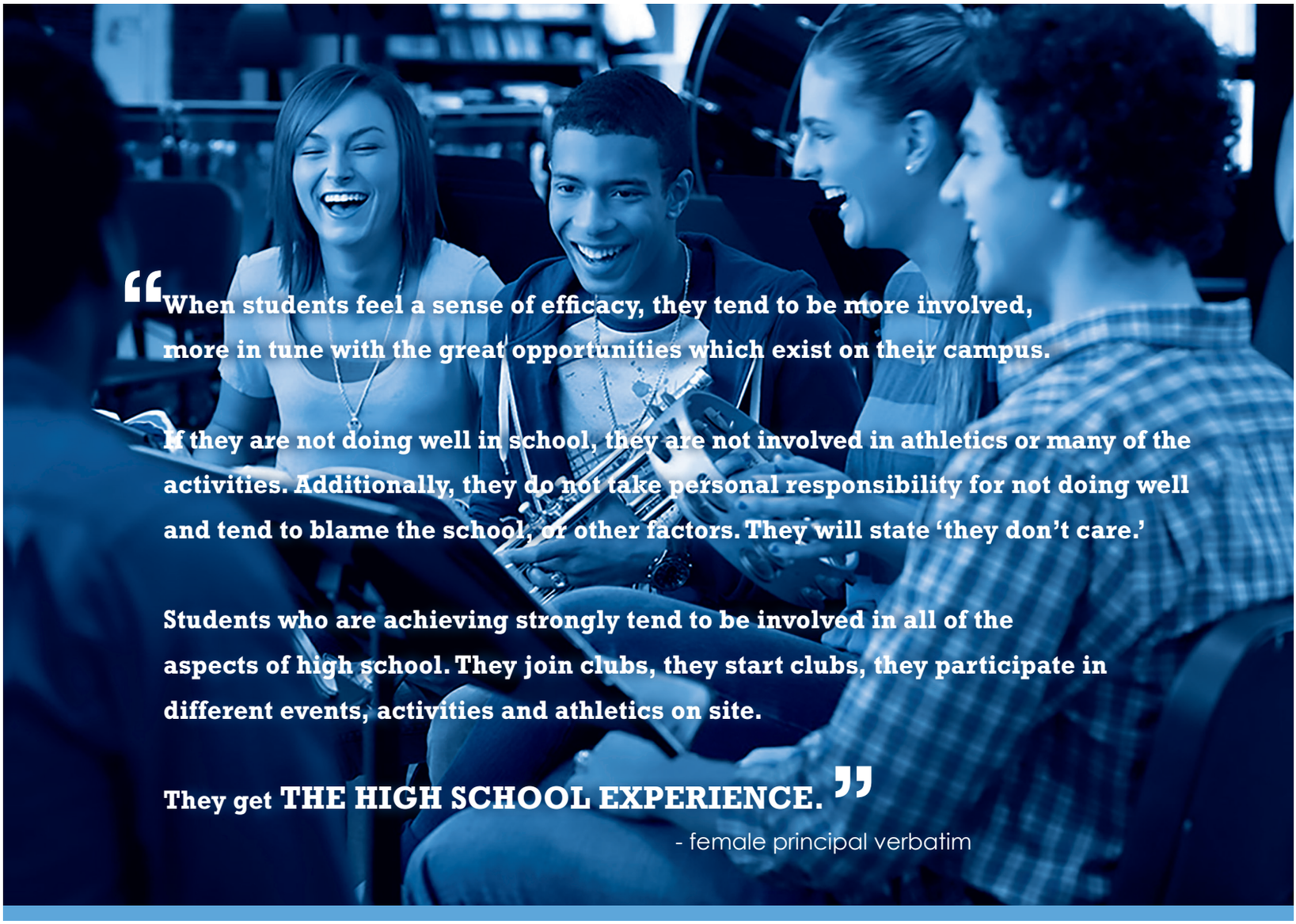

"When students feel a sense of efficacy, they tend to be more involved, more in tune with the great opportunities which exist on their campus.

If they are not doing well in school, they are not involved in athletics or many of the activities. Additionally, they do not take personal responsibility for not doing well and tend to blame the school, or other factors. They will state 'they don't care.'

Students who are achieving strongly tend to be involved in all of the aspects of high school. They join clubs, they start clubs, they participate in different events, activities and athletics on site.

They get **THE HIGH SCHOOL EXPERIENCE.**"

- female principal verbatim

High school principals say that the most common approaches their school takes in driving school spirit among students include:

Awarding students for academic performance	Engaging faculty, administrators and staff	Promoting clubs and organizations	Holding social events	Promoting graduation events and caps and gowns	Graduation announcements	Yearbook events
94%	**93%**	**90%**	**87%**	**83%**	**66%**	**50%**

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Spirit Means Pride

Letter jackets and sporting school colors during pep rallies were once the hallmarks of school pride. Today the definition of pride is much more expansive than singing the school's fight song.

To many students, school spirit is a ***sense of pride*** shown by those who feel a **strong connection** to their place of learning and the people in it. When asked what school spirit means, some specific student responses included: "Having pride in your school's academics, athletics, and participating in opportunities that your school offers," and "It's being proud to represent your school and the values it stands for."

Better SPIRIT, Better STEWARDS

Just how Google is known for its culture in the business world, achievement is linked to spirit in the educational realm. It seems that many principals would agree that students who demonstrate spirit/pride in their school will also want to do well for their school. One principal put it simply: "**Positive feelings towards school lead to positive attitudes toward work.**"

Achievement

Most high school principals (92%) feel that school spirit is tied to student achievement. And their reasoning makes perfect sense; one principal stated: "**Achievement allows you to celebrate; celebrations naturally increase school spirit.**"

Another principal believes that school spirit "**motivates students to achieve** because there is a **sense of 'one for all.'**" And this principal goes on to say, "Generally, students strive to excel when there is a sense of unity and healthy competition." Along those lines, a female freshman defined school spirit as "promoting unity with fellow students."

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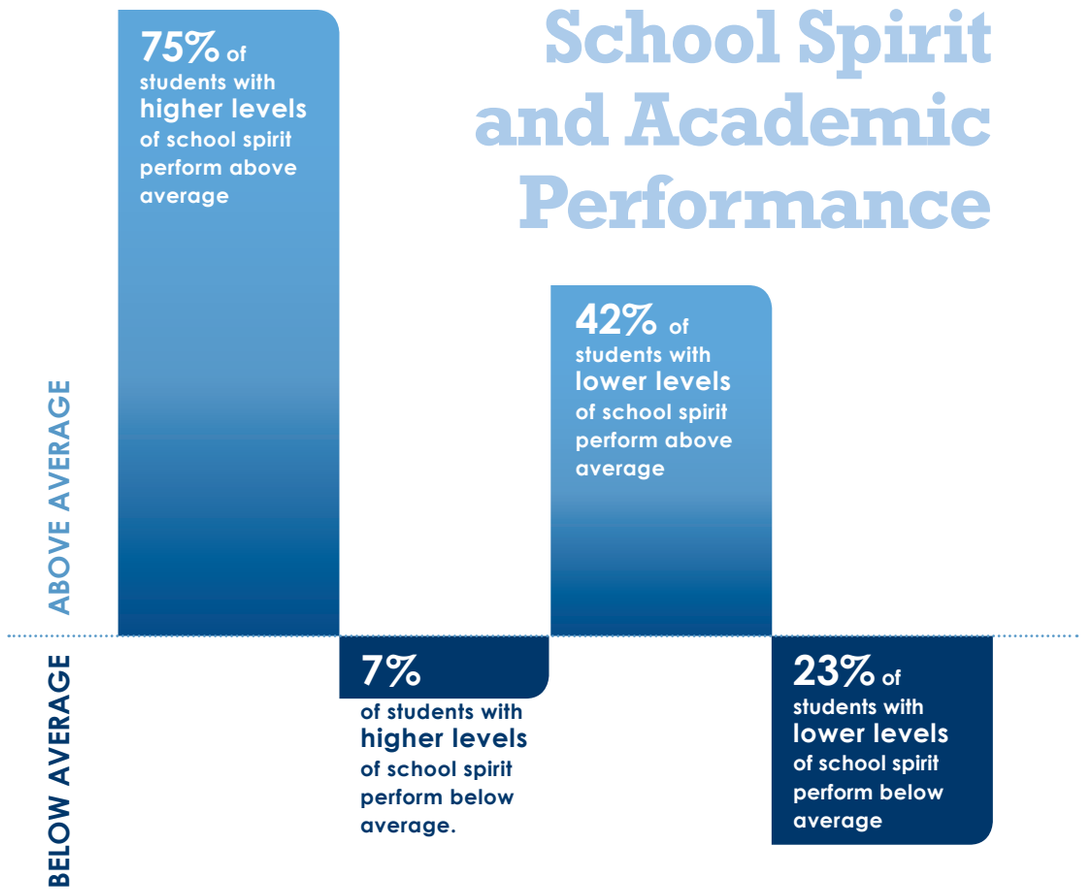
Above Average

Students with high levels of school spirit are significantly more likely than students with low school spirit to say that they **perform well above average in school academically** compared to other students (32% vs. 13%, respectively). "School spirit means to support your school no matter what," said one student, "and to take pride in your achievements knowing your school has helped you to reach your goals."



These findings are supported by principals. "Students take pride in their school's name as a high-achieving high school," said one principal. "**The busier students are in school activities, the better they usually perform academically.**"

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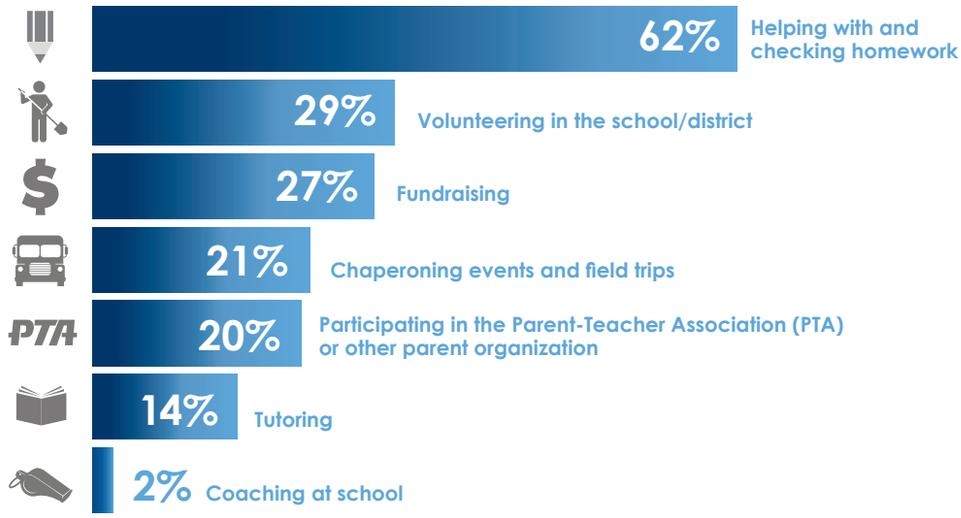
Parent Engagement

When it comes to spirit, it's all in the family—and not just among former student body presidents, bandleaders or football quarterbacks. Nearly all high school principals (93%) say that parents are more involved in their child's education when their child has a strong sense of school spirit.

How are Parents Engaged?

When asked "In what ways are you involved in your son's or daughter's education?" parents said by:



Honor Roll

Whether taking first place in the science fair or working to defend the debate team's championship record, those who have a great deal of school spirit are generally better academic stewards. In fact, students with higher levels of school spirit are significantly more likely than students with low school spirit **to get mostly As or mostly As and Bs in school** (75% vs. 45%).

To be spirited is to "put your best foot forward to make your school a better learning experience," concluded one ninth-grade female. And an 11th-grade male responded that school spirit means "to care about what I learn."

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Continuing Education

It's been reported that students with college degrees earn about a million dollars more over their lifetimes than those without secondary education.[2] Not only do high-spirited students perform better academically, but they are also more likely than students with low school spirit to **expect that they will receive a four-year degree or more** (84% vs. 51%).

A principal agreed that school spirit has a domino effect on secondary education and future goals:

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Skin *in* the Game

In many communities, school spirit is most visible during the pageantry of Friday night football or basketball games and during Homecoming Week. But these days, students with notable school pride are also more collaborative and participatory throughout the year and beyond.

Three in four (75%) students who self-report that they have a lot of pride in their school plan to come back to their school for special events after they graduate. "Successful students tend to be more highly engaged in all aspects of the school," concluded one principal.

Successful students tend to be more highly engaged in all aspects of the school. - male principal verbatim

Whether achieved through sports, clubs, special events or volunteering, students who value school spirit appear to be **involved on many levels in their school's brand and legacy**. School spirit equates to "supporting not only the sport teams of the high school, but performing community service and the intangibles that make a great high school," said a male 12th-grader.

Return on Effort

It appears that students who are proud to be part of something will give more effort in all they do. In the words of one student, school spirit means "**putting forth my best effort** to show that I am giving everything that I have towards being a part of my school's activities and studies." In fact, students with a high level of school spirit are substantially more inclined than students with low levels of school spirit **to like school** (94% vs. 42%).

And the return on effort doesn't end there. Nearly two-thirds (65%) of students with higher levels of school spirit like school a lot compared to

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only 7% of students with low school spirit. It follows that students with high levels of school spirit are more likely than their counterparts **to say they put a great deal of effort into school** (62% vs. 20% of students with low school spirit).

Parents who say their child has a lot of school spirit are also more likely to say that their child likes school than those parents who say their child does not have a lot of school spirit (86% vs. 25%).

Connectivity

Being connected today is about more than a strong Wi-Fi signal and a Twitter account. Students who have higher levels of school spirit tend to be **more invested in school**. To one particular student, school spirit signifies "**feeling connected to the school, its history and the student body**, including the sports teams."

Students with higher levels of school spirit are also notably more apt **to feel extremely/very connected to their school** (89% vs. 4% of students with low school spirit). The vast majority of high spirited students (92%) also feel extremely/very connected to other students at their school – much more so than those with low school spirit (28%).

> **"Students who feel *confident* and *competent* throughout their school day tend to identify with the school and the school's co-curricular activity."**
>
> - female principal verbatim

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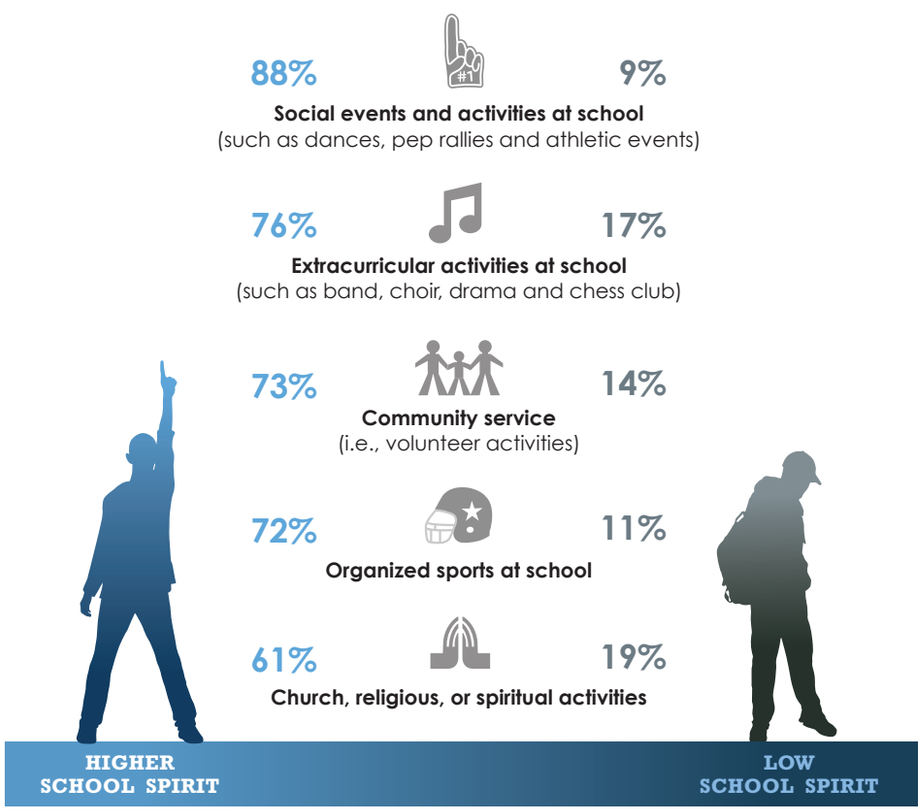
Involvement

Today's students are busier than ever in their communities with extracurricular activities and work, in addition to the academic load. During the 2013-2014 school year, high school students indicate they were involved in an average of eight extracurricular activities! And among those who do participate in any extracurricular activities, about half (51%) say the reason that they are involved in these activities is so that they can be involved in their school and 34% said getting involved is a way to show their school spirit.

According to a student surveyed, school spirit entails "**caring** about your school, being a good citizen, **supporting** teams and clubs," and another student said school spirit means "putting forth the effort to make a difference for your school and surrounding community."

Higher School Spirit Equals Higher Involvement

Students with higher levels of school spirit are also more likely to be **involved** in each of the following than students with low school spirit:



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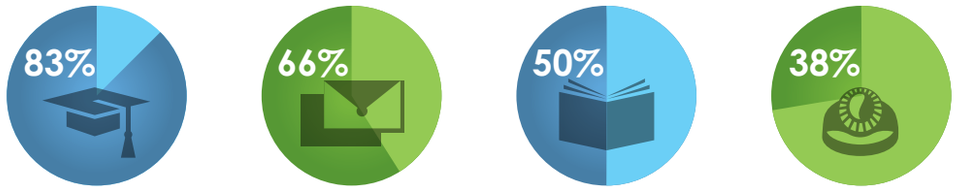
Showing True Colors

When it comes to school spirit, traditional gauges are still very much in play. Students with higher levels of school spirit often take their expressions to the next level, with one student saying school spirit means "**wearing spirit wear**, going to the assemblies, supporting the clubs and teams." Another student said school spirit means "being juiced about our school. **Brag about it. Defend its honor,**" and another said that students should "be proud to represent our mascot; that we should not be afraid to stand out." This female senior went on to say, "We should radiate our confidence to our competing schools and to our community."

Principals said their school drives school spirit by promoting the following:



Graduation Events and Caps and Gowns

Graduation Announcements

Yearbook Events

Class Ring Programs

95%
The number of high school principals who feel that school spirit is reinforced when students wear school colors, logos and accessories.

More Likely to Show Up and Succeed

In addition to showing more ties to overall achievement, those who demonstrate higher levels of school spirit are **less likely** than students who have low school spirit **to have ditched/skipped school in the past year** (7% vs. 26%).

To that end, it's not surprising that most students with higher levels of school spirit are vastly more likely (90%) to find school activities extremely/very enjoyable compared to students with low school spirit (5%).

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To one principal, school spirit means "**being present while engaged** in your studies, your athletic contests, and in positive interactions with your peers, instructors, students, etc." In the words of a female 12th-grader, school spirit involves, "positive thinking, being a good example for other students to follow."

SUCCESS Through SATISFACTION

The term "in high spirits" has never carried more weight. Students who have pride and commitment for their school on the whole are also more social and confident than those who sit quietly on the sidelines. Students use phrases like, a 'sense of belonging', a 'positive optimistic attitude', 'togetherness, toughness' and 'innovation' to describe "What does school spirit mean to you?"

Parents of children with a lot of school spirit are more likely than those who don't to say their child:

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Be Happy

Students with higher levels of school spirit are substantially more likely to say that they often felt happy during the past school year than those students with low school spirit (76% vs. 13%). Students who embody school spirit take the time to "**promote positivity, compassion, responsibility and empathy**," one principal summarized.

Furthermore, students who have higher levels of school spirit are also more inclined to say that they often felt fulfilled during the past school year (44%) than students with low school spirit (5%).

Parents who say their child has a lot of school spirit are more than twice as likely than other parents to say that during the past school year, their child was **happy** (70% vs. 32%), **confident** (60% vs. 30%), **satisfied** (58% vs. 22%), and **fulfilled** (34% vs. 9%). They are also *less likely* to say that their child was stressed (28% vs. 58%), overwhelmed (16% vs. 35%), lonely (4% vs. 30%), sad (6% vs. 25%), or angry (4% vs. 26%) when compared to those parents who said their child did not have a lot of school spirit.

Foster Friendships

As one might expect, shared experiences go hand in hand with building strong, long-lasting relationships. Perhaps that's why students with high levels of school spirit have a greater likelihood than students with low school spirit to **have a close group of personal friends** (96% vs. 78%) and to say they **feel satisfied** with their group of friends (96% vs. 78%).

Student suggestions of the meaning of school spirit varied from "participating in band and drama [-] the arts" to "supporting my school at events like athletics and music competitions" to "rooting for your peers, even if they're losing," and another student response indicated that school spirit "is all about the relationship with your school and classmates." One principal echoed, school spirit means "a sense of pride, **camaraderie and community** which pulls a group of people (students, staff, parents, etc.) **together for a common purpose.**"

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More than half of students who have low school spirit (52%) wish they had more friends compared to 37% of students who have high school spirit.

Have High Self-Esteem

Students with higher levels of school spirit are more likely to **have normal self-esteem** than students with low school spirit (94% vs. 77%).[3] "When students feel positive about their school, they feel positive about themselves and **gain self-confidence**," concluded one principal.

Parents who say their child has a lot of school spirit are more apt than parents who don't to say that their child is **responsible** (78% describes completely/very well vs. 44%), **ambitious** (70% vs. 29%), **motivated** (72% vs. 24%), and **a leader** (61% vs. 22%), among other positive attributes.

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CONCLUSIONS and IMPLICATIONS

School spirit is a powerful reflection of pride, achievement and determination. It goes hand in hand with positivity and is a benchmark of a school's holistic success. As one principal summarized, school spirit equates to a "sense of community with students, parents, teachers and administrators working together with a common purpose and with activities for all segments of the school population."

Indeed, school spirit is greater than the sum of its parts, and it's important for all stakeholders to leverage its capabilities. The following are common practices that can create, engage and retain school spirit with staff and student bodies alike:

- **Promote the positive.** Assemblies and school dress-out days can be used throughout the year, not just on homecoming or field days. These can be used to promote non sporting related activities as well. These impromptu gatherings can energize students and staff alike.
- **Reward readily.** Whether it's recognizing the swim team captain for making the honor roll, celebrating choir or band performances or offering a note thanking a student for their input, creative ways to bestow small gestures of appreciation for personal and team achievement can bolster school spirit across the student body.
- **Encourage parental involvement.** Actively involved parents raise more involved students. Look for more ways for parents to get easily plugged in to school activities to encourage family participation.
- **Community engagement.** Students that are more engaged and connected to their communities can be ambassadors for the school and take their pride off-campus. Encourage students to become involved in community organizations and spread their school pride.
- **School spirit and pride go hand in hand.** Students responded with a consistent voice that spirit means having pride in their school. Place an emphasis on school achievements, history and lore to further drive a sense of pride in the institution.
- **Spirit sets the stage for success.** Research indicates that students with self-reported higher levels of school spirit have greater aspirations for success. Creating a culture of spirit in the school can help students achieve later in life.

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Footnotes:

[1] The groups shown throughout the report are those students with high and low school spirit. It is important to note that there is a "moderate" group that makes up over 40% of the student population. Data from this group was not shown within the white paper as their results were generally in the middle/between those of the high and low groups.

[2] Bureau of Labor Statistics, **Earnings and unemployment rates by educational attainment** *2013*

[3] Self-esteem is a measure of the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Score.

Survey Method

The survey was conducted online by Harris Poll on behalf of Varsity Brands. The survey was administered within the United States among 1,016 high school students, 315 parents of high school students and 150 high school principals between April 30 and May 16, 2014. Among students, data has been weighted where necessary by gender, race/ethnicity, region, parent's education (if under 18), and school urbanicity to bring them in line with their actual proportions in the population. Among parents, data has been weighted where necessary by gender, race/ethnicity, region, education, income, and propensity to be online to bring them in line with their actual proportions in the population. Among principals, data has been weighted by necessary by gender, school enrollment, school region and school type (public/private) to bring them in line with their actual proportions in the population.

For more information on Varsity Brands, visit varsitybrands.com.

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