

# Experiential Learning in Education

A Poll By:

**Signal Hill Group, Inc.**

Education Consultants

For:

**Junior Achievement Inc.**

**Summary Report**

February 26, 2004

## **Experiential Learning in Education**

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### **About This Poll**

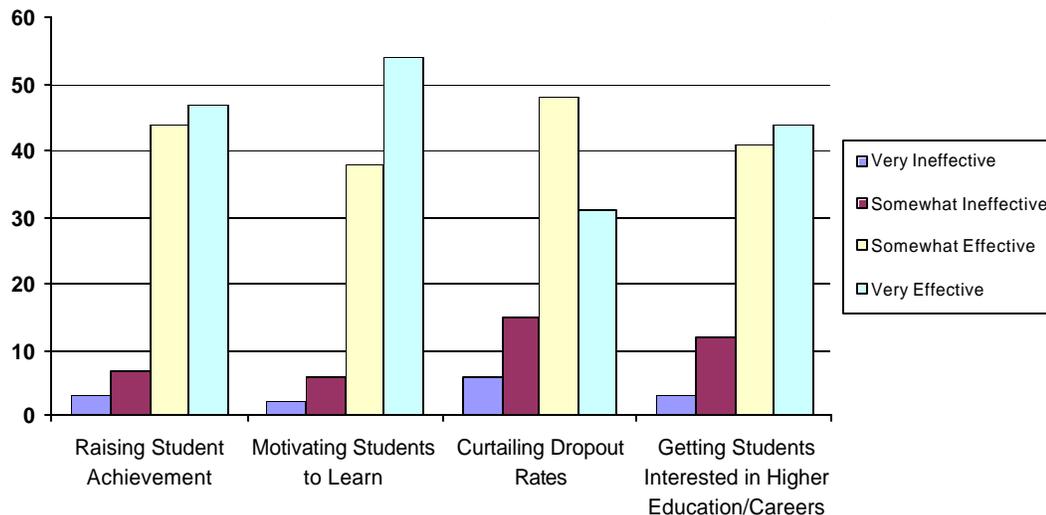
This report is the summary of a poll conducted by Signal Hill Group on behalf of the non-profit education organization Junior Achievement Inc. to gauge educator perceptions regarding “experiential learning” in the age of *No Child Left Behind*. The goal of the poll is to better clarify teachers’ ideas about experiential or “applied” learning at a time when academic rigor and state-mandated standards/testing are taking precedent in American classrooms. The poll was created, essentially, to find out what kind of value high school educators place on these programs, and to determine what role they play in this new era of school reform.

To do this, Signal Hill Group, an independent Virginia-based consulting firm, developed a questionnaire which was distributed through the research firm Quality Education Data to 5,000 high school business and social studies teachers across the country. Specifically, the poll was distributed to 2,500 Business Education teachers in grades 9 through 12, including Vocational Education teachers. Additionally, 2,500 Social Studies teachers for grades 9 through 12 received the poll. A total of 399 teachers responded to the poll, producing a margin of error of approximately +/- 4.9%.

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1. In your view, how effective is experiential learning (hands-on activities, projects, internships, job shadowing) at...



Participants were asked how effective they thought experiential learning (such as job shadowing, internships, etc.) was at improving various aspects of student performance.

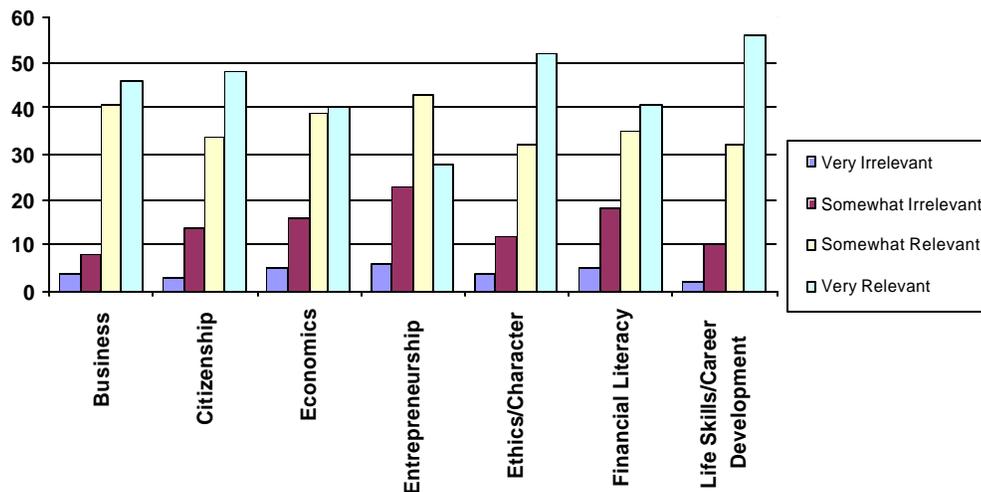
Respondents felt strongly that experiential learning was "Somewhat Effective" or "Very Effective" at motivating students to learn (92%), at getting students interested in higher education and careers (85%), and at curtailing dropout rates (79%). Additionally, 9 out of 10 respondents (90%) also felt strongly that experiential learning was "Somewhat Effective" or "Very Effective" at raising academic achievement.

This last response is somewhat surprising because there has been a great deal of discussion in the education community that while experiential learning may be effective at teaching "life skills," such activities are not always seen as promoting "academic skills." In fact, a couple of respondents made the contention that experiential "project" learning could hide the academic deficiencies of students. Overall, though, there appears to be a belief that making academic skills more relevant to students, through experiential learning, is one way of improving academic achievement.

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### 2. Which of the following topics are relevant to your students?



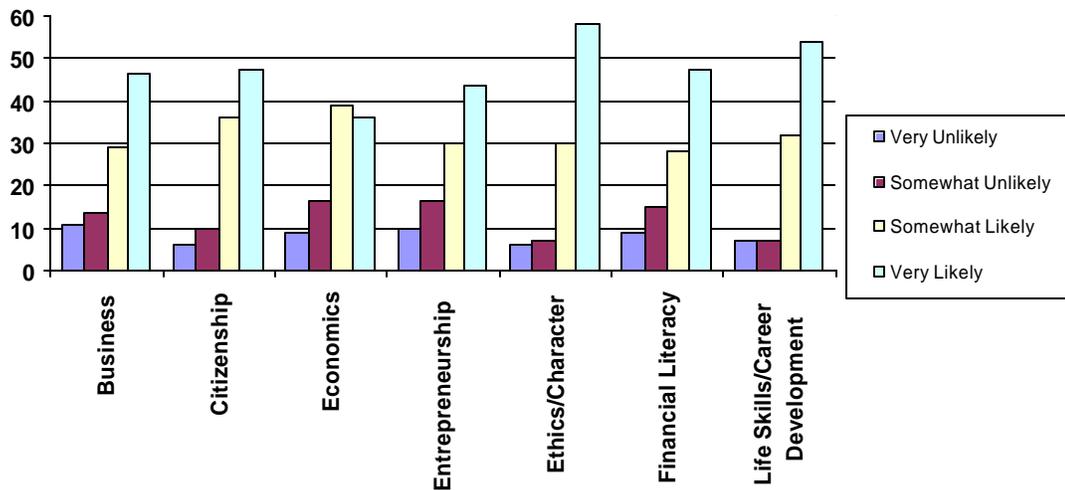
Respondents were then asked to gauge the relevance of certain topics to their students. Specifically, seven areas were identified. More than three-quarters of respondents felt all seven of these topics were relevant to their students, with “Life Skills/Career Development” being rated the highest in the “Very Relevant” category (56%), while “Entrepreneurship” was lowest (28%) in this category. However, all subjects; Business, Citizenship, Economics, Entrepreneurship, Ethics/Character, Financial Literacy, and Life Skills/Career Development; were seen as important by most teachers.

It was noted by several participants, though, that there is not much emphasis placed on these topics in the typical school day due to test-preparation requirements. In contrast, a few educators expressed the opinion that these types of topics should be covered by parents, not the schools.

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3. If you had the opportunity to have a community volunteer present information about the following subjects in your classroom, how likely would you be to accept that opportunity?

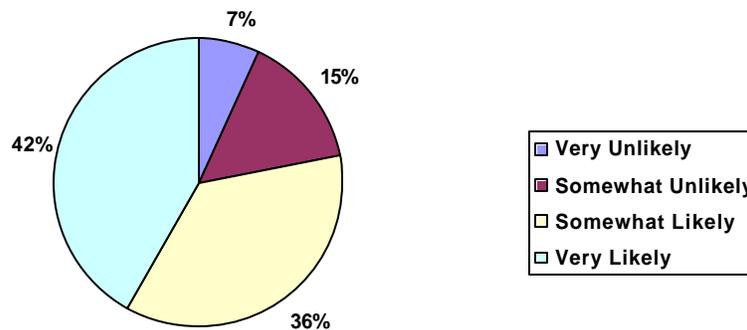


While the majority of teachers felt these “life skill” topics were relevant, participants were also asked if they would welcome a community volunteer into the classroom to present on these subjects if the opportunity were made available. The response rates for Question 4 were about the same as Question 3 for all subjects except “Entrepreneurship.” Though about one-quarter (28%) of respondents felt the topic was “Very Relevant,” nearly half (44%) said they would be “Very Likely” to welcome a volunteer into the classroom to discuss the topic. There was no additional feedback provided that might clarify why this was the case, though it does imply a favorable perception of entrepreneurs as classroom volunteers.

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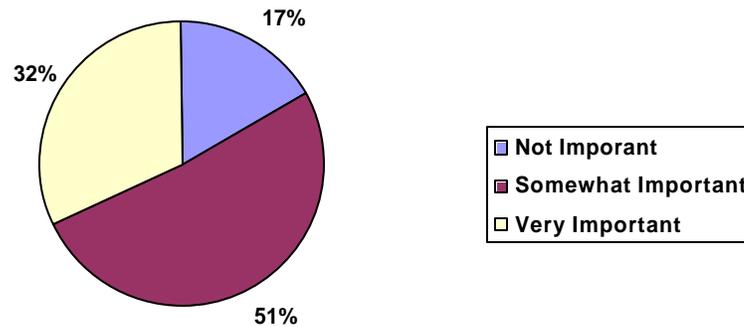
4. How likely would you be to use free online programs that not only increase students' computer skills, but also help them learn about business, financial literacy, entrepreneurship, ethics, citizenship, and related life skills?



Participants were next asked how likely they would be to use free online programs to teach these "life skill" topics. More than three-quarters (78%) responded that they would be "Somewhat Likely" or "Very Likely." In the comments section, some respondents complained about having inadequate computer facilities to take advantage of this type of opportunity. The inference is that if teachers had the time and the access to the computers, they would use the programs if they were aware of them.

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5. How important is it to have a volunteer from the community in the classroom?

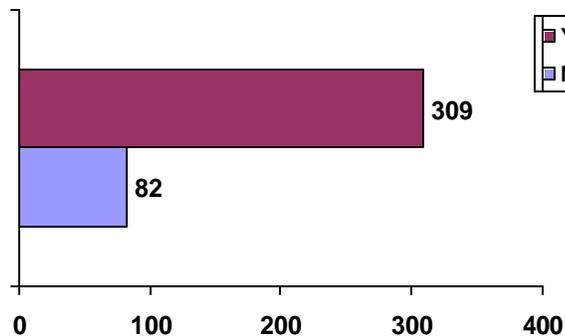


Respondents were then asked how important they believed it was to have a volunteer from the community in the classroom. Once again, consistent with the responses to Question 4, a pronounced majority (83%) thought it was "Somewhat Important" or "Very Important."

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6. Should state-mandated testing/standard requirements include more emphasis on assessing applied learning and life skills development?

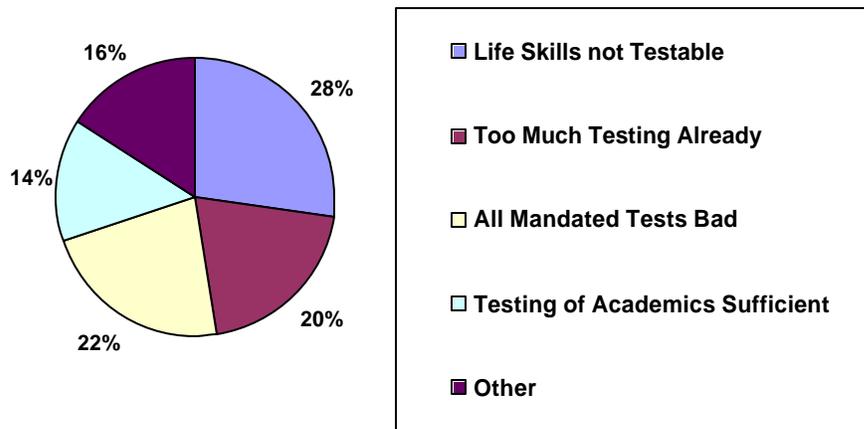


When asked, "Should state-mandated testing/standard requirements include more emphasis on assessing applied learning and life skills development?" more than three-quarters (79%) of respondents said "Yes" while about one-fifth (21%) said "No."

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7. If you answered “No” to question 7, let us know why



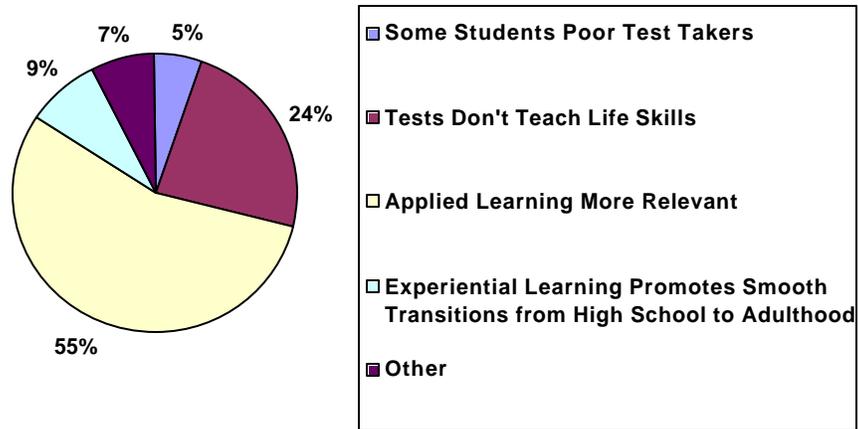
To ascertain why respondents said “No,” participants were asked to offer comments to better explain their answer. The responses were broken down into five categories; Life Skills not Testable, Too Much Testing Already, All Mandated Tests Bad, Testing of Academics Sufficient, and Other.

“Life Skills not Testable” was the most frequent response (28%). While many participants felt these skills were important, they also thought they were too subjective to test objectively. Next in responses (22%) was “All Mandated Tests Bad.” Respondents in this category simply believed state-mandated tests do not help students learn, no matter what they are testing. One-fifth (20%) replied that there was “Too Much Testing Already.” Teachers in this category believed schools were already overburdened with tests and that adding “Life Skills” would add to that burden. Then there were those respondents (14%) who advocated leaving state-mandated testing as-is. These were arranged under the category of “Testing of Academics Sufficient.” Finally, about one-in-six (16%) provided various responses, which were grouped under the “Other” category.

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8. If you answered "Yes" to question 7, let us know why



For those participants who answered "Yes" to incorporating "Life Skills" measurements into state-mandated standards/testing, the most overriding reason was the belief that "Applied Learning is More Relevant" to students (55%). Most of these respondents felt that testing of basic skills as it stands now is too abstract to be of much help to students.

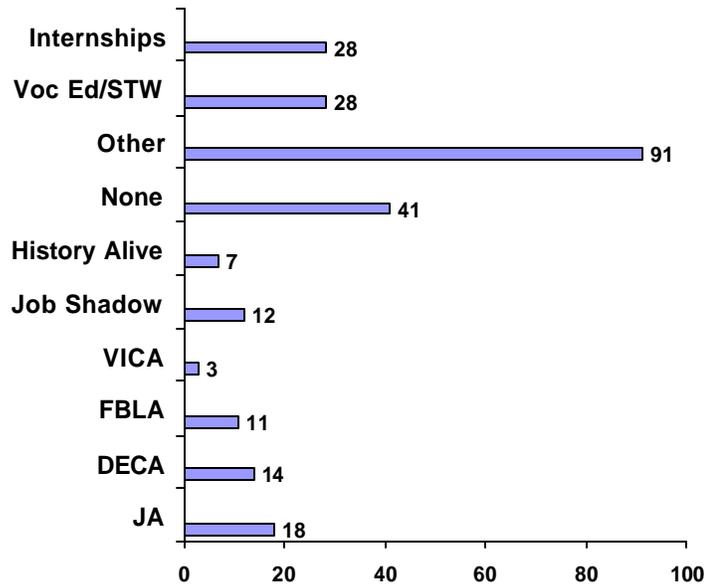
Some teachers also commented that mandated testing is really meant for college-bound students and that most students who are not going to college will be ill-prepared for the workplace if they do not learn "Life Skills" while in school. About one-quarter (24%) of teachers backed this notion suggesting "Tests Don't Teach Life Skills," at least not the type of skills, like decision making, critical thinking, interpersonal communications, that many students will need if they are to get a job.

On the other side of the college question, a percentage (9%) of teachers contended that "Experiential Learning Promotes Smooth Transitions from High School to Adulthood," even in those instances where students are considering college. Finally, a small group (5%) felt "Life Skills" questions would help students who were poor test takers while the rest of the group (7%) noted a variety of other reasons why they supported adding "Life Skills" to state-mandated standards/tests.

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9. When you think of experiential learning, which programs or organizations – if any – come to mind?



For a final question, participants were asked to name, without prompting, programs or organizations that deal with experiential learning. Excluding “Other” and “None,” which received the most responses, “Internships,” which included apprenticeships and work-study, tied with “Vocational Education” with 28 responses each. These were followed by “Junior Achievement,” with 18 responses, “DECA,” with 14 responses, and “Job Shadow,” with 12 responses.

Organizations that came up once or twice in the “Other” category included “JumpStart,” “NFTE,” “Boys & Girls Clubs,” “4-H,” “FFA,” and “National Council on Economic Education.”

### **Conclusions**

Based upon this particular poll, there appears to be a great deal of support from teachers for experiential learning programs in the classroom that focus on "Life Skills," especially if they are free, involve a volunteer, or are available on the Internet. Additionally, despite recent scandals in the world of business, educators still appear to be open to introducing young people to the positive aspects of business, entrepreneurship, economics, careers, and finance.

However, this poll also identifies several issues that are potentially negative for experiential learning programs. Based upon the 300+ comments that were submitted, it is apparent that teachers are finding less and less time to incorporate non-test-related subject matter into their lesson plans. While many educators value these programs and feel, at least anecdotally, that they address issues such as dropouts, secondary to post-secondary transitions, and motivating students to learn, it appears that as testing becomes more prevalent, teachers may become less inclined to spend time on experiential and volunteer-driven programs.