

## **ENGAGING YOUTH IN SCHOOL**

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There is general agreement that engagement is important for learning and achieving success in school. What exactly is engagement and how can it lead to success in school?

As defined by a recent publication from the National Research Council (2004), engagement in school work includes cognitive behaviors (such as paying attention in class, problem solving, using meta-cognitive strategies), observable behaviors (such as trying hard, persisting in the face of challenge, completing work, asking for help when needed), and emotions (such as enthusiasm, interest, and pride in one's accomplishments). Levels of cognitive, behavioral or emotional engagement can vary from paying minimal attention (e.g., appearing attentive when actually thinking about last night's date) to actively processing information (e.g., making connections to previously learned material, critically analyzing new information); from dozing to dutifully doing the work; from being minimally interested to feeling excited and enthusiastic.

Students can also be socially engaged in school by participating in extracurricular activities or feeling a sense of loyalty to their school. However, we are focusing on cognitive, behavioral and emotional engagement rather than social engagement because students can be full participants in school sports, clubs, and other social activities without being academically involved in their learning.

An abundance of research indicates that higher levels of engagement in school are linked with positive outcomes such as improved academic performance. In fact,

student engagement has been found to be one of the most robust predictors of student achievement and behavior in school – a conclusion which holds regardless of whether students come from families that are advantaged or disadvantaged economically or socially. Students who are engaged in school are more likely to earn higher grades and higher test scores, and have lower dropout rates. In contrast, students with low levels of engagement are at risk for a wide range of long-term adverse consequences, including disruptive classroom behavior, absenteeism, and dropping out of school.

Students from disadvantaged backgrounds in high-poverty are particularly susceptible to the negative consequences associated with being disengaged from school. Compared to their more advantaged peers, these youth are less likely to graduate, dramatically increasing their risk of unemployment, poverty, poor health, and involvement in the criminal justice system.

While schools cannot control all of the social and economic factors affecting disadvantaged youth, they can provide more engaging educational environments with high expectations, skillful instruction, and the social support youth need to graduate and pursue post-secondary education or careers. Unfortunately, creating such environments has challenged educators for decades. Many studies show that students become more disengaged from school as they progress from elementary to middle and high school.

By high school as many as 40 to 60 percent of all students – urban, suburban, and rural – are chronically disengaged from school, not counting those who have already dropped out. There are, however, schools and districts that have managed to

create more engaging educational environments for youth, and, ultimately, increase the percentage of their students who graduate and go on to college.

The remainder of this entry will discuss the kinds of experiences that these successful schools and districts have created for their students including both the psychological precursors of engagement and the educational environments necessary to produce those precursors. We will conclude with a discussion of current education policies and how they hinder or support schools' ability to create opportunities for their youth to become engaged in the learning process<sup>1</sup>.

## **Psychological Precursors of Engagement**

There is an abundance of evidence that suggests that the relationship between student's experiences in school and their level of engagement is mediated by three sets of psychological variables – (1) beliefs about competence and control, (2) values and goals, and (3) a sense of social connectedness.

1. *Competence and Control.* Students' beliefs about how "good" they are at school and how well they believe they can do in school have a direct effect on their engagement. These beliefs also lead to emotions that promote or interfere with engagement in schoolwork. The simple fact is that students enjoy academic tasks more and learn more when they feel competent and expect success. Feeling competent gives them a sense of personal control, which has been shown to be critical for enjoying the learning process, exerting effort, and learning itself. In contrast, students who believe they are not competent and who don't expect to be

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<sup>1</sup>This discussion is drawn from chapter 2 of *Engaging Schools*, a 2004 National Research Council and Institute of Medicine report summarizing the precursors and outcomes of engagement in high school, and strategies for fostering high school students' motivation to learn.

successful are more anxious in learning situations and afraid of revealing their ignorance. These students are often reluctant to ask questions or offer opinions – even when confused or think they know the answer – because they anticipate embarrassment and humiliation. These students would rather not try at all, than try and not succeed.

2. *Values and Goals.* Even if students believe they can succeed in school, they won't exert effort unless they see some reason to do so. There are many reasons for doing academic work: enjoying learning, trying to get a good education, avoiding parental disapproval or punishment, or trying to stay eligible for the basketball team. Levels and qualities of engagement depend both on being motivated to do academic work and on what kind of motivation is involved. Internal sources of motivation – the work's intrinsic interest to the student and/or its importance to achieving goals important to the student – are more strongly associated with all three types of engagement – cognitive, emotional and behavioral – than are external or extrinsic goals – such as avoiding disapproval or receiving a material reward. These latter goals tend to dampen emotional and cognitive engagement in favor of compliance and getting the work over with. It is interesting to note that both feelings of competence and one's educational values and goals are intricately intertwined. A longitudinal study of children from grades 1 through 12 found that not only do students value academic work less as they progress through school, but also that those declines can be accounted for by corresponding decreases in competence beliefs.

3. *Social Connectedness*. Students who feel socially connected to school are more likely to be engaged. Being socially connected means that students feel they are (a) respected, (b) they and their opinions are valued, and (c) someone cares about them and how they do in school. Students who report such caring and supportive interpersonal relationships have more positive academic attitudes and values and are more satisfied with school. They are also more engaged in their academic work attend school more, and learn more. Although feeling psychologically connected to school is not sufficient for meaningful engagement in academic work. Students without such feelings may not stick around long enough to be successful. Youth who feel that nobody cares about them are much more likely to drop out.

### **Environmental Precursors of Competence, Values, and Belonging**

Because a large percentage of adolescent's time is spent in school, a great deal of attention has been paid to the schooling environments that promote perceptions of competence, encourage positive values and goals, and feelings of social belonging. After all, knowing what psychological conditions promote engagement in school is only useful if we know what educational practices promote and undermine those conditions as well.

As mentioned above, students with caring and supportive teachers are more likely to feel connected to school. When teachers try to make class interesting, talk and listen to their students, show concern for them as individuals (e.g., making sure they understand what is being taught), and are honest and fair, students are more likely to reciprocate with good behavior in class. Students with caring teachers are more likely

to feel a sense of responsibility toward those teachers by showing up, and actively participating in class.

Providing choices within the context of clearly stated, high expectations creates an environment that enhances student learning. Students are more likely to want to do schoolwork when they have some choice in the courses they take, the material they study, and the strategies they use to complete tasks. However, that autonomy must exist within a structure. Students still need teachers to keep track of and care about whether they attend class, turn in homework, and understand the material. In contrast, students have been found to express a sense of dissatisfaction and disconnect from schools that have policies which discipline authoritatively and limit their academic options or freedom to make decisions. Students also tend to disengage from classes in which teachers are rigid and distrustful or do not encourage students to express their perspectives and opinions.

High expectations are also essential in promoting perceptions of competence and control over achievement outcomes. Academic tasks that are challenging though still achievable allow youth to develop confidence in their intellectual ability. Schools with students who achieve high levels of performance have high expectations for student learning and hold all students to those high standards.

In addition to a supportive environment and high standards, students need to experience meaningful and engaging pedagogy and curriculum to be engaged in school. According to the National Council for Research (2004), the aspects of schooling that have been found to best engage students in their learning include:

- *Challenging Work.* Such work asks them to wrestle with new concepts, explain their reasoning, defend their conclusions, and explore alternative strategies and solutions.
- *Active Involvement.* Involvement in learning includes conducting experiments, participating in debate and role playing, or completing projects.
- *Collaborative Work.* Collaboration includes working in pairs or small groups on activities that require sharing and meaningful interactions. Students are also more receptive to challenging assignments when they can put their heads together rather than work in isolation.
- *A Wide Variety of Activities;* and
- *Work that is Meaningful to the World Outside of School.* Topics that are personally interesting and related to their lives make learning more enjoyable and better enable students to integrate new information into their preexisting knowledge.

There is a general consensus in the literature that schools that provide high expectations, meaningful and engaging pedagogy and curriculum, and personalized learning environments are more likely to have students who are engaged in and connected to school. There is further agreement that schools need to develop a professional learning community among staff to ensure that teachers develop the skills they need to provide these conditions.

Is it realistic to believe that schools can create these conditions? Absolutely. Individual schools and districts across the country have embarked upon reform initiatives designed to improve student engagement and performance. In some cases,

comprehensive school reform models such as Coalition of Essential Schools, First Things First, Talent Development High School, and High Schools That Work have been utilized to help guide whole school – and occasionally whole district – efforts to improve student learning.

Although they vary in approach, all comprehensive school reform models use a single school-wide vision as a focus for redesigning curriculum, student assessment, professional development, governance, management and other key functions. These reform models are designed to raise expectations for student academic performance and ensure equity of opportunity to meet these higher standards; they provide organizational structures that offer ongoing assistance for implementation. Research suggests that when schools successfully implement these comprehensive models, the results are positive including increased levels of personalization, higher levels of attendance, improved test scores, increased persistence and graduation rates, and more parent involvement. There are also fewer disciplinary problems and lower dropout rates in these schools.

### **Policies Influencing Student Engagement**

While it's clearly possible to create conditions to improve student engagement and learning, policies at the school, district, state, and federal levels are likely to undermine teacher's efforts to provide those conditions. The choices schools and districts make about how to organize students into learning groups, how long classes last, and whether to provide common planning time for staff impact how students and

staff interact with each other. For instance, according to the National Research Council (2004):

“...tracking diminishes students’ choices and the access of relatively low-skilled students to peers with positive academic values. Highly competitive school environments in which only high-performing students are recognized publicly undermine many students’ sense of competence. Students are not likely to develop a sense of belonging in schools that are organized in ways that make it difficult for teachers to know and develop personal relationships with students, or in schools that tolerate racism or bullying. Schools that do not promote a sense of community and shared purpose among teachers are not likely to provide clear expectations and goals or to promote a sense of connectedness and belonging among students. If teachers spend all of their work day engaged directly with students, they will not have sufficient time to prepare appropriately challenging and culturally meaningful instruction and activities that involve collaboration and higher order thinking. Teaching that engages students takes much more time to plan than the repetitive textbook teaching that many teachers resort to because of the other demands on their time (p. 36).”

Other school policies can impact whether students feel supported and part of a community. Some schools have begun to provide additional help for students who are working below grade level such as after school tutoring or an extra daily period of reading or math. Other schools match students with advisors/advocates act as a bridge between students, parents, and community resources needed to meet the student’s basic physical and psychological needs. Such efforts are likely to enhance student’s feelings of belonging and help make school feel like a safe place in which to learn.

State and federal policies that promote higher levels of accountability may also influence student engagement in school. Many states now require – or will soon require – that students pass an exit exam to graduate. A growing number of states now require students to pass an annual examination for grade promotion. Even more

notable, a large proportion of states have begun to link certain privileges, such as the right to have a driver's license, to school attendance and performance.

In addition to these state level accountability requirements, the federal No Child Left Behind Act requires states to annually test their students and expects a certain percentage of students to achieve proficiency each year. By 2014, every student in the United States – including minorities, low SES students, special education students, and English Language Learners – is expected to demonstrate proficiency on state reading and math tests. Otherwise, schools and districts will face severe consequences.

Unfortunately, high stakes tests have not been found to positively impact engagement in most students. The risk of being retained in grade or denied a high school diploma may lead some students to exert more effort on schoolwork than they otherwise would. However, they will only exert such efforts if they believe they have the capacity to succeed. Simply asking students – especially low achieving students – to meet higher standards without providing them with the extra instructional resources they need to meet those standards is likely to be counterproductive. In fact, such experiences are more likely to encourage students to give up and even go so far as to drop out of school.

In conclusion, with the era of accountability showing no evidence of waning, it is of even greater importance that schools and districts work to provide the kind of educational environment that inspires all students – advantaged and disadvantaged alike – to delve into their education and strive to learn and perform at levels that guarantee success on high stakes tests. More specifically, shouldn't we have high stakes assessments of whether educational systems are providing engaging learning

environments before we begin punishing individual students in those systems for not making the grade?

***Recommended readings:***

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Newmann, F. (1992). *Student engagement and achievement in American secondary schools*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Steinberg, A. & Almeida, C. (2004). *From the Margins to the Mainstream: Effective Learning Environments for Urban Youth*. Boston: Jobs for the Future.