



Engagement Drives Achievement

Students won't achieve if schools don't engage them in learning

John Kostouros
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THE CENTER
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DESIGN

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Academy Award winning actress Jennifer Lawrence made headlines when during a “60 Minutes” interview she confessed somewhat sheepishly that she was a middle-school dropout, saying “I struggled through school; I never felt very smart.”

Lawrence's confession drew lots of attention. What didn't draw much attention was that Lawrence's dissatisfaction with her schooling isn't that unusual. While most students don't actually quit, a high percentage do the next worst thing: They tune out.

- According to a 2004 National Research Council study, 40 to 60 percent of students are disengaged from learning and don't put much effort into school.
- A Gallup Student Poll of nearly one million students found that only half of adolescents reported feeling engaged in school, and one-fifth admitted to being “actively disengaged.” The poll also found a consistent decline as students get older, bottoming out in 11th grade.
- Multiple studies have shown that low student motivation is a major problem in America's schools, and that it declines rapidly through middle and high school. To put it bluntly: The longer students are in school the less they find what they are being asked to learn worth learning.

Teachers know it. A 2013 study found that 69 percent of teachers consider low student motivation a big problem in their classrooms, a bigger problem than student discipline or bullying.

And the public seems to have noticed. The 2015 national survey of public attitudes toward education done for the Kappan magazine found a strong majority—about eight in 10 respondents—saying that “the effectiveness of their local public schools should be measured by how engaged the students are with classwork and by their level of hope for the future.”

The question for boards and superintendents is obvious. If engagement is a requisite for achievement, what is your strategy for maximizing engagement?

The concern about district response is obvious, too. Most in public education will concede that student achievement is unacceptably low. Schools struggle with the misbehavior of students who are disengaged. *Yet district plans for improving achievement, and for ‘restoring discipline’, rarely include asking students what ‘school’ could do to convince them to put more effort into their learning.* Ask your local school board members what is their strategy; see what they say.

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DISTRICTS' DIFFICULTY WITH CHANGE

For all of the myriad of school reform strategies implemented over the past three decades, the typical high school looks in most cases like it did when this era of education reform began: with teachers spending less than an hour a day with any individual student; curriculum divided into subjects taught with little connection to other subjects; memorization used as the primary measure of student learning, and students left largely on their own to bring meaning to the material they are asked to learn.

The vast majority of high school students are subjected to an environment of little autonomy, little personal support by teachers, and a system of rewards and punishments that lead to a gradual decline in interest.

“Despite the fact that surveys have repeatedly shown that teachers and other educators say student motivation is a huge challenge in their schools, there have been few serious and sustained efforts to strengthen the academic motivation of the students who need it most,” according to Kent Pekel, president and CEO of Search Institute, a Minneapolis-based research and professional development organization.

Ron Newell and Steve Rippe of Saint Paul-based EdVisions say the literature suggests that “the vast majority of high school students are subjected to an environment of little autonomy, little personal support by teachers, and a system of rewards and punishments that lead to a gradual decline in interest.”

Perhaps the problem of student disengagement is best summed up in a recent Stanford University study: “No major reform has prioritized students psychological experience in school or motivation to succeed, despite the fact that ultimately it is students themselves who must capitalize on learning opportunities.”

Research shows that the erosion of motivation is especially severe for boys and for students from low socioeconomic, minority and immigrant backgrounds, the fastest growing segment of the school-aged population.

And things could get worse. Research has found that children between the ages of 8 and 18 now spend an average of seven and a half hours a day using electronic devices, what one author called “an unprecedented experiment.” The long-term question is what that will do to young people’s brains and their ability to learn.

Why this failure to change school? Three things come to mind.

- Since the 1980’s legislatures and education policy makers have been focused on making the curriculum more rigorous and imposing costly standardized testing to pressure schools and teachers to make students work harder.
- Schools and districts have been reluctant to ask students how they feel about their learning and what could be done to improve it. Ron Newell attributes that reluctance to fear of criticism that negative findings might generate. Another reason might be fear of resistance from school staffs, parents or school boards to changing how their schools operate.
- Some influential voices in the education policy discussion insist it is wrong to begin with what interests students. Their attitude is: We (meaning usually adults who see themselves in charge of the education policy discussion) say what young people should know and be able to do. Teachers should teach that. Students should learn that.

The results have been disappointing, with test scores rising little and the persistent achievement gap between white students and students of color a national embarrassment. Minnesota, despite its ranking as having some of the better results on the National Assessment of Educational Progress and other national assessments, has one of the largest gaps.

The failure to move the needle on student achievement has led a strong majority of the public to sour on the strategy of tougher academic standards and more standardized testing, to the point

that a large and growing number of parents are choosing to opt out of having their students take their state's standardized tests.

A STRATEGY FOCUSED ON ENGAGEMENT

An effort to improve engagement ought not to be difficult. Engagement can be observed. Engagement can be measured. Engagement can be enhanced.

OBSERVING ENGAGEMENT

Researchers tend to agree that engagement is not something students have or do not have. It's "an alterable state of being that is highly influenced by the capacity of school, family and peers to provide consistent expectations and supports for learning."

That conclusion appears in *The Handbook of Research on Student Engagement* (2013), which presents the thinking of the nation's top education researchers. It says researchers' thinking about the subject has evolved over the past decade:

"Engaged students do more than attend or perform academically, the authors say; 'they also put forth effort, persist, self-regulate their behavior toward goals, challenge themselves to exceed, and enjoy challenges and learning.'"

A teacher in White Bear Lake undertook, a few years ago, individualizing his third-grade class; he brought in a variety of electronic devices to 'gamify' students' work on reading and math. Visitors to this class of eight-year-olds had a common reaction: They had never before seen children so engaged.

Engagement is visible to teachers and schools in its absence; in 'quits', in students 'ditching' school for the rest of the day and in those who stay, disrupting class.

MEASURING ENGAGEMENT

The authors of the Handbook said that *student engagement is now considered "the primary theoretical model for understanding dropout and promoting school completion*, defined as graduation from high school with sufficient academic and social skills to partake in postsecondary educational options and/or the world of work.

Ron Newell is co-author of *Assessing What Really Matters in Schools: Creating Hope for the Future* (2009), an effort to review the latest thinking on student learning and what can help increase student engagement.

EdVisions learned much of what it now advocates for by listening to students and correlating what they learned with student achievement. EdVisions developed with the help of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation a measure of student engagement, the HOPE Survey, a tool schools can use to assess school climate from the student's viewpoint and develop strategies that increase student engagement and commitment.

The HOPE Survey, which students take online, measures:

- Student hope for their future
- Behavior and attitudes toward school
- Academic press, defined as consistently high expectations on the part of teachers that students will do their best work
- Goal orientation
- Autonomy, defined as the opportunity for self-management and choice
- Belongingness, defined as a measure of the depth and quality of the interpersonal relationships in the student's life

“Hope can be developed, we’ve proven that,” Newell and co-author Mark Van Ryzin write. “Creating educational processes with sound relationships and relevant learning experiences leads to higher levels of student engagement in learning...”

The question for boards and superintendents is obvious. If engagement is a requisite for achievement, what is your strategy for maximizing engagement?

Across town from EdVisions the Search Institute has developed its own instrument to gauge student engagement. The REACH Survey, designed for middle and high school students, measures “students’ character strengths that are essential for motivating them to become self-propelled young adults.”

The REACH survey focuses on five areas:

- Relationships
- Effort, defined as how students perceive their own intelligence and ability to use learning strategies
- Aspirations
- Cognition, defined as how students think about their own thinking and specifically their ability to defer gratification
- Heart, defined as student’s capability to identify and understand what they love to do

The Institute says it has used data it has collected over 25 years of working with students and schools, including a 2015-16 project with four middle schools in Minnesota to develop a set of strategies it believes can increase student

engagement resulting in higher student achievement.

(*The Handbook of Research on Student Engagement* identified at least 11 other instruments designed to gauge some aspect of student engagement or motivation in use around the country.)

ENHANCING ENGAGEMENT

Handbook researchers concluded “There is an emerging intervention database that suggests evidence-based or promising strategies for educators to apply to enhance student engagement.”

Search Institute says that the good news in the otherwise discouraging picture of American education is that “a growing body of research is demonstrating that motivation — along with other character strengths that are sometimes called non-cognitive skills, can be significantly improved when effective interventions are put in place.”

Newell and Ryzin say they have come to believe that two things matter most if you want to get more students engaged in their learning. “Student voice and personalized learning are what make the difference.”

Student voice means simply that students have a say in how their schools operate and what they have to learn to progress. Personalization means the teacher, knowing each student as an individual, adapts the learning to the student’s aptitudes, attainment levels, abilities and interests.

“We know what works, and it’s not reflected in the way most middle and high schools are set up to deliver,” say Newell and Steven Rippe, EdVisions Director of Development.

Student voice and personalized learning are what make the difference.

Some of those strategies involve attempts to build supportive, productive relationships between students and teachers and with community based mentors. Among others, the authors reviewed the Check and Connect Program developed at the University of Minnesota, which uses structured mentor support to students deemed to be academically disengaged, or at risk of failing.

Minnesota, which in 1991 created a second, charter, sector of public education in an effort to spur development of innovative approaches to schooling, has produced a number of examples of schools based on student focused learning and teacher leadership, strategies that are increasingly seen as effective in increasing student engagement. But chartered schools enroll only about six percent of the state’s public school students, and many are traditional schools.

IMPLICATIONS

The effort to improve achievement by increasing student engagement not only changes what students do in school, it also implies and requires a change in the definition of ‘achievement’ itself.

Newell and co-author Ryan Ryzin point out that “the Twenty-First Century demands that all children be able to do more complex problem solving, be effective communicators and collaborators, display creativity and individual initiative, and exercise independent judgment in order to participate in the new economy” and be engaged citizens.

They argue that to get that out of our schools, “We need a clearer definition of learning. If we as a society are merely testing students on information and few skills, grading them for their academic endeavors, and creating factual standards and high stakes tests, then we are missing deeper elements of rigor.”

Multiple applications of the survey convinced the Gates Foundation, one of the major contributors to the nation’s efforts to raise student achievement, to substitute new meaning for the Three R’s – which most Americans think of as “reading, writing and ‘rithmetic”. Gates says the new Three R’s should be rigor, relevance and relationships.

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The effort to get teachers the skills and authority to personalize student learning faces a big challenge in America’s highly regimented secondary schools, where teachers often have little time with students, little control over what’s taught and how it’s taught, and where student progress is measured by performance on standardized testing on a few subjects.

In the new view: Higher achievement requires greater engagement, which requires personalizing learning, which requires delegating real authority to schools and their teachers.

PROMISING EFFORTS

While the current picture about student engagement is mostly discouraging, there are some glimmers of hope. Some examples:

In 2013 the **Minnesota Department of Education (MDE)** for the first time included questions concerning student engagement to the Minnesota Student Survey it conducts every three years, saying “Many research studies show that engaged students have higher academic outcomes.”

The statewide survey of 169,000 students in grades 5,8,9 and 11 provides data on student health and attitudes statewide and by school district. School level data is not provided, limiting its value to teachers. MDE cautions against drawing conclusions about the engagement questions after only two applications.

The 2016 survey found a drop since 2013 in the percentage of students who think things they learn in school are useful (from 78 to 71%). Perhaps as notable, was the percentage of students who agreed that “being a student is one of the most important parts of who I am”, which drops from 81% in grade 5 to only 64% by grade 11.

The Saint Paul-based **Bush Foundation** is devoting a significant element of its grantmaking and event-hosting to a project designed “to make our region the national leader in providing individualized education that meets the needs and ambitions of all students.”

The Bush initiative has three focus areas:

- Create learning environments that welcome and support students from all cultures and backgrounds
- Customize learning to help students learn in a manner and at a pace that meets their individual needs
- Help students imagine a career and provide them with supports tailored to get them where they want to go.

The **Teacher-Powered Schools Initiative** was begun in 2014 to encourage the development of schools that allow teachers more authority to determine how the school operates and to design curriculum teachers believe will be most effective at engaging their students in learning. The program, a joint effort of Minnesota-based Education Evolving and the Center for Teaching Quality, based in North Carolina, currently supports a network of more than 120 schools across the country.

Big Picture Learning, based in Rhode Island, promotes a school design strategy it says has one primary mission, “putting students directly at the center of their own learning. The organization, formed in 1995, currently supports a network of 65 mostly high schools around the country, including Big Picture Learning, a middle school in Brooklyn Center. The program describes its model as: “a student-centered learning design, where students are actively invested in their learning and are challenged to pursue their interests by a supportive community of educators, professionals, and family members.”

Some discussion is beginning, stimulated by a recent policy paper (*How the State Can Deal With the School Board’s Inertia.*) which argues that greater delegation of authority to schools and teachers is essential for personalization to happen. Only if the independent special districts, the centralized public corporations that handle elementary/secondary education in most of America, are de-centralized can innovation begin to flow, from the bottom up.

RESOURCES

Kappan Poll: Public Attitudes on Public Education. PDK Foundation. (2015)

A Split Screen Strategy: Creating the Capacity for Teachers to Innovate. A video from Education|Evolving. Go to <http://www.educationevolving.org/pai>

Assessing What Really Matters in Schools: Creating Hope in the Future – Ronal J. Newell, Mark J. Van Ryzin. Rowman & Littlefield Education. (2009)

The REACH Strategies Guidebook: Approaches and Activities to Strengthen Academic Motivation. Search Institute (2017)

A Guide to the Charter Sector of Minnesota Public Education. Center for Policy Design (2018)

Handbook of Research on Student Engagement - Sandra L. Christenson, Amy L Reschly, Cathy Wylie editors. Springer (2013.)

Ensuring Fair and Effective Measures of Effective Teaching. Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. (2013)

"Mind-set interventions are a scalable treatment for academic underachievement" Paunesku, Walton, Romero, Smith, Yaeger & Dweck. Psychological Science. (2015)

Evidence for Student Centered Learning. Krista Kaput. Education Evolving. (2018)

How the State Can Deal With the School Boards' Inertia; Ted Kolderie, 2018. Available at <http://bit.ly/SelfImprovingSystem>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John Kostouros has been involved in the discussion about how to improve America's public schools as a teacher, journalist, communications consultant to business leaders, school district superintendents and teacher union leaders, and as a community volunteer for more than 40 years. He began his career as an elementary school teacher in Illinois, then spent 25 years as a Twin Cities newspaper reporter, editor and editorial writer.

He spent the remainder of his career as a communications consultant to business leaders and elected officials, education policy makers and to the Minneapolis Federation of Teachers. His last position was as Communications Director for the Minnesota Judicial Branch. As a community volunteer he served on the leadership council at Minneapolis South High School and as an advisor to several innovative public schools.

He is a former adjunct instructor for the University of St. Thomas Education Department and is a Senior Fellow at Education Evolving. His most recent work is *A Guide to the Charter Sector of Minnesota Public Education*.

ABOUT THE CENTER FOR POLICY DESIGN

The Center for Policy Design (CPD) is a Minnesota based non-profit, non-partisan policy design organization that focuses on designing, and redesigning, important large systems to achieve the goals society has set for them.

The usual policy approach blames system performance on the failings of the people and organizations comprising the system. Such strategies often prove ineffective; they fail to recognize that organizations perform as dictated by the incentives that the larger system places on them. Too often the cause of chronic poor performance is that these incentives reward the undesired performance and punish the desired performance.

The Center's policy recommendations, therefore, do not aim at changing an organization's performance directly but rather seek to alter the structure of the larger system itself to replace incentives rewarding poor performance with strong incentives rewarding desired performance.

This type of system design and redesign leads organizations and people in the system to improve their performance in their own interest far better than any direct policy approach could do or coerce.

The Center develops state and federal policy recommendations, including enabling legislation. It also actively assists those who want to advance the Center's policy recommendations.

KEY IDEAS IN THIS REPORT ON STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

- Students seriously engaged in their learning do better.

- High-quality schools are schools that get their students seriously engaged

- The American public is concerned about the level of engagement—which declines steadily through the secondary-school years.

- Eight of 10 Americans want schools held accountable less for test scores than for getting their students engaged.

- Ask your board of education: What is your strategy for maximizing students' motivation to learn?

- It's a hopeful sign that districts now are talking more about personalizing learning.

