NDTAC Brief- Promising Uses of At-Risk Funding: Focus on Engagement, Relevance, and Meaning

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INTRODUCTION

When school is engaging, relevant, and meaningful, students returning from correctional facilities and those at-risk of dropping out are more likely to achieve educational success. This brief is intended to assist district leaders and school administrators -both at the district and school level- who are seeking to implement strategies designed to help students find meaning and build a lasting connection to their education. NDTAC is focused and committed to engagement in the classroom so every student can find educational success and acceptance.

This brief highlights three key approaches to making schools engaging, relevant, and meaningful:

1. **incorporating creative and performing arts**

2. **emphasizing culturally responsive materials, instruction, and experiences**

3. **acknowledging real -world problems and empowering students to solve them**

Additionally, this brief highlights six foundational strategies for educators implementing the above three approaches:

- **Student Choice and Voice**

- **Real Audience**

- **Gamification**

- **Acknowledge Achievement**

- **Technology Integration**

- **Personalization and Differentiation**

These approaches are not exhaustive but offer clear, widely supported examples of practices that are proven to work. These strategies can be implemented using the at-risk funding from Title I, Part D, Subpart 2.

PATHWAYS TO USE OF FUNDING FOR AT-RISK STUDENTS

Two pathways that State Coordinators (SCs) can consider incorporating a focus on engagement, relevance and meaning are through: the Subpart 1 and 2 application process; and State Coordinator technical assistance.

In the application process, funding for Title I, Part D programs require that a State Agency (SA) and Local Educational Agency (LEA) applying for funds describe the programming and services that will be offered to eligible youth. State Coordinators can determine an appropriate description of programs and services and emphasize the want for certain program components such as a focus on engagement.

Similarly, through technical assistance, State Coordinators can incorporate focused activities based on the three recommendations for a particular program through data reviews and conversations with subgrantees.

Foundational Strategies

Below are six foundational strategies that can support educators with the implementation of the three recommended approaches. In the discussion that follows are examples for each of the three approaches, along with icons to indicate which of the strategies are used in each example. Additional information on each of these strategies can be found on the resource page at the end of the brief.

STUDENT CHOICE & VOICE

Including student choice and voice in the classroom offers students a chance to take ownership of their education. Incorporating choice and voice can be as simple as allowing students multiple options for submitting work or allowing students to become involved in the process of designing a lesson plan.

REAL AUDIENCE

Providing students with a real audience, beyond their teacher, to give feedback on their work encourages a higher level of engagement throughout the lesson. A real audience can include other classmates, families, or members of the community.

GAMIFICATION

Incorporating gamification in a classroom attracts students to the lesson content and may boost engagement, increase motivation, and provide opportunities for students to collaborate. Through these activities, students share a common goal and will often turn to one another as a resource or for support.[iii]

ACKNOWLEDGE ACHIEVEMENT

Acknowledging achievement begins by providing frequent positive and constructive feedback to students. Teachers may offer feedback to students in multiple ways to support student engagement and to support a positive learning environment.

TECHNOLOGY INTEGRATION

Integrating technology into the classroom through well-designed lessons not only allows students to become more engaged but also allows students to take ownership of their learning in a positive and purposefully crafted environment.

PERSONALIZATION & DIFFERENTIATION

Creating an environment that personalizes and differentiates instruction for students leads to more customized learning experiences. These individual learning environments are tailored to the strengths, weaknesses, and interests of each student, and lead to a successful learning environment for all.
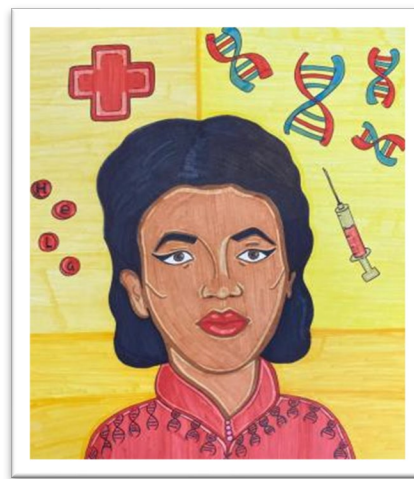
Approach 1: Incorporate the Creative and Performing Arts into the Life of the School

Simply stated, students who have arts-rich experiences in school do better academically and become more active and engaged in the community[iii]. Art-based programming serves as a reason to continue to attend school for many students returning from correctional settings and those at-risk of dropping out. For some, art-based programming is what gives school meaning and purpose.

Connecting school arts-based programming with afterschool and weekend programs creates opportunities for a student's education to be relevant, offering them the chance to share their talents, build upon culturally meaningful experiences, and develop lifelong skills.

Bringing the arts into the lives of students can be accomplished in a variety of ways. Arts programming can be school-based or community-based; it can be skill- or medium-based; it can be offered as a stand-alone course or integrated with other subjects; it can be therapeutic or just for fun; it can be scaffolded and focused on mastery or drop-in and exposure oriented; it canbe centered around broader themes such as justice, identity or inclusion. Schools could also partner with local nonprofit organizations to provide arts-based programming. Regardless of the approach, the inclusion of arts in education offers opportunities for students to engage and succeed.

Student portrait of Henrietta Lacks, submitted to BreakFree Education.

Below is an example of incorporating the creative and performing arts in education:

The Arts for Healing and Justice Network[iv] includes a range of art-based providers, partnering with schools and youth correctional agencies to offer arts-based programming in community-based schools, in secure settings, and at community-based nonprofits.

- In another example, ArtworxLA[v] partners with schools to offer long-term, sequential arts programs that creatively links overlooked alternative high school students withprofessional artists, cultural institutions and communities to imagine, produce, and present new work
- Other organizations, like the Inside Out Writers[vi], may offer creative writing classes inside juvenile detention facilities and provides a range of art-centered support to students upon release

Foundational Strategies found in these examples

Approach 2: Emphasize Culturally Responsive Materials, Instruction, And Experiences

Implementing culturally responsive materials, instruction, and experiences ensures that core content subject matter includes a rich and wide array of perspectives. It is important to represent viewpoints of the cultural, racial, and ethnic diversity that make up the school or community. This approach is often termed "Culturally Responsive Teaching and Learning". This approach also includes expanding the range of cultural materials, resources, and experiences available to young people during the school day or during before- and after-school programs. Integrating a culturally responsive curriculum into schools and school-related programs has been shown to increase student attendance[vii], improve student success at school, and reduce dropout rates[viii].

In addition, the inclusion of coursework that explores students' racial and ethnic heritage has been shown to increase students' sense of belonging and self-identity.[ix] Further, including culturally relevant texts in school increases student reading engagement[x]. For young people returning from correctional facilities and those at-risk of dropping out, culturally responsive teaching strategies and culturally relevant extracurricular experiences may give students a reason to stay in school.

Developing a school-wide approach to more culturally responsive teaching can seem daunting. However, across the country schools have successfully taken initiative to make learning more welcoming and inclusive, with small yet intentional steps over time. Guides[xi] and case studies[xii] are available to assist in this transition. In addition to building more culturally responsive classroom curricula, developing a diverse library and set of reading materials for students is both critical and manageable even for small schools located in secure settings. Librarians and teachers have written 'how to' guides intended to assist school personnel initiate and maintain changes that will lead to a diverse[xiii] and more frequented library[xiv]. Further, many schools partner with local nonprofits to build speaker series, mentoring programs, art classes, and music programs that bring culturally responsive programming to students outside of their core content and traditional school day.

Below is an example of emphasizing culturally responsive materials, instruction, and experiences:

In 2010, Oakland Unified School District launched the African American Male Achievement (AAMA) project. A central component of AAMA was regularly scheduled classes exclusively for Black male students, taught by Black male teachers who focused on social-emotional training, African American history, culturally relevant pedagogy, and academic support.

For schools looking to develop diverse and culturally responsive classroom libraries, the Center For the Collaborative Classroom offers a step-by-step approach in this videotaped panel titled Classroom Libraries as Windows and Mirrors: Ensuring Diverse, Representative Books for Our Students, July 24, 2018.[xv]

Foundational Strategies found in these examples

Approach 3: Acknowledge Real-World Problems and Empower Students to Solve Them

Although project-based learning (PBL) may vary in how it is implemented, at its core it includes framing student learning around tackling realistic problems as they would be solved in the real world; increased student control over their learning; teachers serving as coaches and facilitators of inquiry than as direct instructors; and students often working in pairs or groups[xvi]. Schools do not need to implement PBL in all content areas, or across all content areas at once. Often, schools implement PBL for one unit or in one class, as a part of a multidisciplinary project, or in conjunction with an extracurricular activity (for example, with a field trip or community service project). All of these approaches offer a chance for students who may not have found school relevant or meaningful to engage in learning. Incorporating real-world problem solving into the fabric of a school's curriculum and approach to teaching makes school more meaningful for all students. There is substantial evidence to support the use of PBL as making a positive impact on school attendance for "economically disadvantaged students" [xvii], including young people returning from correctional facilities and those at-risk of dropping out. PBL has been shown to increase long-term retention of content, improve student problem solving, and improve students' attitude toward learning[xviii], all of which are critical for disengaged students struggling to find success and reason to attend school. Students who are behind, or who may be re-entering high school significantly below grade level need "avenues for short-term success through projects, performances, and experiential learning" [xix], which are essential elements of PBL.

Numerous resources are available to school administrators and teachers looking to implement real-world problem solving and PBL in their classrooms. In addition, a range of local and national nonprofit organizations as well as government agencies partner with schools, offering opportunities for teachers to design PBL units tied directly to local and community needs[xx]. There are a plethora of PBL resources that support teacher training and provides teacher-ready tools available for classroom use. Some examples of acknowledging real-world problems and empowering students to solve them are included below:

The Buck Institute[xxi] offers a range of PBL resources to schools and teachers, including teacher-ready projects aligned with common core standards, that address topics of interest to high school-age students. Examples include their:

- Planning for the Future Initiative[xxii] where students partner with a 'financial advisor', interview families, learn and use math concepts related to saving, interest, and compounding, and offer real-world advice to clients. Students put algebra, data analysis, and graphing to work in ways that are tangible and real.
- Marking History, Making History Initiative[xxiii], students research the history of their home community or region, using primary source materials to learn about the experiences and perspectives of multiple community members in relation to a particular event or events and, in doing so, may uncover perspectives and histories not fully covered in history textbooks.

High Tech Highschool[xxiv] operates a network of schools and provides training and resources to schools and teachers looking to implement PBL. Students from diverse backgrounds design and implement PBL units with support from teachers and peers. Two examples are:

- Love and War[xxv] – The creation of an integrated unit that incorporates high school humanities, chemistry, and math--and includes reading WWI novels, news writing, understanding the chemistry of warfare and the math of destruction.
- Got Maps?[xxvi] – The creation of an integrated unit that incorporates biology and humanities content. It includes students asking big questions about how environmental changes impact their local community, doing fieldwork, and then presenting their findings in visually engaging ways using story mapping technology.

Foundational Strategies found in these examples

Linked Resources

Approach 1

- Arts and Achievement: Four Longitudinal Studies
- The YouthARTS Development Project
- Troubled Youth and the Powers of ExpressivePainting
- Importance of Fine Arts Education
- The Role of the Arts in Juvenile Justice
- Create Justice
- Arts Seen as Crucial to Healing Youth
- BreakFree Education: Unsung, Voices of Youth Justice Initiative, Words Unlocked National Poetry Initiative

Approach 2

- Classroom Libraries as Windows and Mirrors: Ensuring Diverse, Representative Books for Our Students, July 24, 2018
- Culturally Responsive Teaching: Understanding Culturally Responsive Teaching
- Edutopia's Why Diverse Classroom Libraries Matter
- What Makes a High-Quality Diverse Text and How to Get These Texts Into Your Classroom - Peers and Pedagogy
- Building a Diverse Classroom Library in Middle &High School

Approach 3

- High-Quality Project Based Learning
- Empowering Kids to Be Part of the Solution
- 7 Tips for Exploring Environmental Science ThroughProject-Based Learning PBL Teaching Design Camp |Project-Based Learning Workshops

Student Choice & Voice

- Improve student engagement with choice & voice
- Getting started with student choice
- How to make student choice work
- What student choice looks like in the classroom

Real Audience

- The value of an authentic audience
- Empowering students shifts learning

Gamification

- Tips for adding gamification to your classroom
- 5 ways to gamify your classroom
- Gamification for intrinsic motivation

Acknowledge Achievement

- 20 Ways to Provide Effective Feedback for Students
- Providing Effective Feedback to Students
- Feedback for Students by Students

Technology Integration

- [Importance of Incorporating Technology in theClassroom](#)
- [Benefits of Technology in the Classroom](#)
- [4 Tips for Better Lesson Planning](#)
- [Closing the Digital Divide](#)
- [How to integrate technology](#)

Personalization & Differentiation

- [Improve Student's Long-term Learning](#)
- [Turn Your Classroom into a Personalized Learning Environment](#)
- [What is Personalized Education?](#)
- [Examples of How to Differentiate Instruction](#)
- [What is Differentiated Instruction?](#)

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Note

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