Getting Students Engaged in Learning

Targeted interventions and savvy classroom practices, coupled with supportive state policy, can draw disengaged students back in.

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Before COVID, 40 to 60 percent of students were showing signs of disengagement in learning, according to national surveys. The signs included lack of participation and effort, acting out and disrupting class, disaffection and withdrawal, and reliance on superficial learning strategies that do not lead to deep learning.[1] The pandemic exacerbated students' disengagement, especially among the most vulnerable youth. In a November 2020 survey by EdWeek Research Center, over 80 percent of teachers said that student motivation and engagement had declined since the pandemic.[2]

Although researchers do not yet fully know the extent of disengagement during COVID and the long-term consequences of this disengagement on academic outcomes, early research is concerning. Moreover, this research shows the pandemic's disproportionately negative impact on low-income and minority youth.[3]

One of the biggest impacts of the pandemic has been on attendance. Among enrolled K-12 students, attendance was substantially lower in 2020–21 than in prior years.[4] Chronic absenteeism also increased during the pandemic. National data from the U.S. Department of Education showed that over 10 million students were chronically absent during the first year of COVID, compared with approximately 8 million in previous years.[5]

The pandemic also widened the achievement gap. Research from Brookings shows a sizable drop in achievement for all students. This drop is significantly larger than drops in achievement after other large-scale school disruptions, such as Hurricane Katrina. Even more concerning is the widening achievement gap between students in low- and high-poverty elementary schools.[6]

Several factors may explain the decline in student engagement, including variations in students' ability to access virtual learning, limited contact with teachers, staffing shortages, a reduction in overall instructional time, lack of hands-on learning opportunities and time with peers, increases in students' mental health challenges due to social isolation, and students' limited access to academic enrichment, special education services, and other social and emotional supports. For many of these students, physical school closures meant literally no school, for days and even weeks. These challenges were most evident in schools serving minoritized and low-income student populations.[7]

The better news is that an explosion of research, policy, and practitioner work has led to greater understanding of student engagement (see box 1) and has uncovered practices that get students actively engaged in the classroom.[8] By adopting them, schools can help all students develop the skills, competencies, and values they need to graduate and transition to adulthood. Students can thus avoid a host of problems related to disengagement: low achievement, high dropout rates, alienation, and lack of motivation. And state policymakers can create the policy environment that makes engaged classrooms a reality for all students.

How It Happens

Many common classroom and school practices are contributing to high levels of disengagement.[9] Most classrooms still emphasize teacher-directed instruction, in which students are passive recipients of knowledge. Students work individually on tasks that tend to stifle engagement. Most of these tasks require students to reproduce knowledge that is shared only with their teacher. They must wait to get feedback, and they have limited opportunities to drive what and how they learn.

Another reason some students disengage is that they have not developed strong relationships with their teachers, or worse,

Box 1. Student Engagement Defined

Engagement is a multidimensional construct with three distinct, yet interrelated dimensions: behavior, emotional, and cognitive.[a] Viewing engagement as multidimensional gives us a richer picture of how students act, feel, and think in the classroom.

Behavioral engagement is defined in terms of involvement and participation in classroom and school contexts, school-related conduct, and the absence of disruptive behavior. Students who are behaviorally engaged participate in classroom tasks and school activities, put forth effort, pay attention, concentrate, complete work on time, and exhibit positive conduct.

Emotional engagement describes students' positive and negative reactions to class and school, the quality of their relationships with peers, and their attachment to school. Students who are emotionally engaged are interested in what they are learning, happy at school, and perceive that their peers accept, include, and respect them.

Cognitive engagement focuses on students' psychological investment in learning. Students who are cognitively engaged go beyond what is required, direct effort at learning and mastering content rather than completing the task or getting the highest grade, use self-regulated behaviors such as planning and monitoring when solving a task, and persist when a task is challenging.

Researchers have identified patterns of engagement across these three types.[b] One is the fully engaged student, who exhibits high behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement. Such students are easy to teach. They actively participate, are interested in school, and use deep learning strategies to help them master content. This pattern is associated with the most favorable academic outcomes.

Another common pattern, especially in schools in middle- and upper-class communities, is found in students who are highly engaged behaviorally but less engaged emotionally and cognitively. These students are compliant. They go through the motions of doing school but are often bored or stressed and are more likely to cheat and report that they do not learn or retain the material.

Finally, there are students who have begun to disengage behaviorally, emotionally, and cognitively. These students are at a higher risk of dropping out of school. Their attendance is often inconsistent, they get in trouble at school, and they find school an alienating, unsupportive place.

[a]Jennifer Fredricks, Phyllis Blumenfeld, and Alison Paris, "School Engagement: Potential of the Concept, State of the Evidence," *Review of Educational Research* 74 (2004).

[b]Jennifer Fredricks et al., "Profiles of Student Disengagement: Not All Disengaged Students Are Alike," in Jennifer Fredricks, Amy Reschly, and Sandra Christenson, eds., *Handbook of Student Engagement Interventions: Working with Disengaged Students* (San Diego: Academic Press, 2019).

have developed relationships that can be characterized as conflictual. In such relationships, teachers and students are angry, show little warmth, do not communicate, and appear disconnected. Students who are at risk for disengagement are the least likely to develop positive relationships with teachers. Other students disengage because they do not feel connected to their peers, respected by them, or included. Low peer acceptance or being actively rejected by peers leads to behavioral problems, negative school attitudes, and school avoidance.[10]

Demographic factors put some students at greater risk for disengagement. These factors include being male; Latinx, Black, or Native American; lower socioeconomic status; an English language learner; and in an older grade. Individual factors that put students at higher risk of disengagement include having a history of grade retention, substance abuse, mental health challenges, low academic achievement, low parent-school involvement, and a history of behavioral problems.[11]

Why It Matters

Researchers have linked higher levels of student engagement to positive outcomes for students and teachers. Further, a disengaged student can become engaged: Levels of engagement are neither fixed nor predetermined.

Positive student outcomes. Student engagement is predictive of academic success. Engaged students have better grades, academic achievement test scores, and school completion rates than students who are not engaged. Student engagement can also protect against risky behaviors. Students who are engaged have lower rates of delinquency, substance use, and depression.[12]

Impacts on teachers. Teachers rate student disengagement as one of their biggest stressors and as a factor in teacher burnout.[13] Many teachers report spending much of their time dealing with behavioral problems and with students' boredom and nonparticipation, which limits other students' opportunities to learn and interferes with teachers' ability to teach effectively. Conversely, having highly engaged students makes teaching more intrinsically rewarding.

Engagement is malleable. Changes to classroom and school practices can increase engagement.[14] For this reason, increasing engagement is a key goal of many prevention and intervention strategies, especially in secondary school. As an explanatory variable for achievement, deep learning, and school completion, student engagement offers more insight into the

effectiveness of these strategies than unalterable demographic and individual characteristics do.

What Increases Engagement?

Engagement reflects the interaction between individual and contextual factors in students' learning experiences. While individual predictors of engagement are less malleable, changes to the academic and social environment can increase engagement.

Individual predictors. Several student characteristics make it easier or harder to create an engaging classroom: prior achievement, self-efficacy, goal orientation, a focus on learning and understanding, and perceptions of the importance of school.[15]

Classroom predictors. Where students have developed strong relationships with their teachers and peers, feel connected, and have a say in decision making, and where tasks are varied, challenging, interesting, and relevant to their lives and experiences, classrooms are more engaging. In engaged classrooms, teachers hold high expectations and give consistent, clear feedback; have consistent and fair discipline practices; establish classroom routines and procedures; create opportunities for students to work with and get to know their classmates; and provide opportunities for deep understanding, critical thinking, and problem solving.[16] Table 1 presents practical strategies teachers can use to increase behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement in the classroom.

School-level factors. Engagement is higher in smaller schools, where it is easier for students to develop relationships with their teachers and peers; where students can participate in a diverse array of extracurricular activities; where there is fairness and flexibility in school rules; where there are high standards and enriching, diverse learning opportunities in and out of the classroom; where there are opportunities to personalize learning; and where there is a collective responsibility for increasing student engagement.[17]

Table 2 lists sample engagement interventions, highlighted because they have been evaluated using rigorous methodological techniques; there

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Table 1. Teachers' Role in Promoting Behavioral, Emotional, and Cognitive Engagement

Behavioral Engagement	Emotional Engagement	Cognitive Engagement
1. Establish classroom routines and procedures to increase time on task	1. Show interest in students as individuals	1. Incorporate authentic, real-world activities
2. Provide consistent feedback	2. Support students' social and emotional needs	2. Ensure that learning is relevant to students' lives and experiences
3. Provide clear and consistent rules and expectations for behavior	3. Demonstrate caring and empathy	3. Provide optimally challenging tasks that build on students' prior knowledge
4. Implement fair and consistent discipline	4. Incorporate opportunities for students to collaborate with their peers on tasks	4. Provide adequate time to complete tasks
5. Use noncontrolling informational language	5. Provide opportunities for students to get to know their classmates	5. Model higher level thinking and reasoning
6. Provide clear praise that focuses on effort and mastery	6. Promote a sense of belonging at school	6. Assess students' understanding frequently and in different ways
7. Model asking questions	7. Develop classroom norms regarding social behavior	7. Encourage students to self-question and self-monitor
8. Provide students with opportunities to have a role in decisionmaking	8. Display enthusiasm	8. Provide prompt, task-focused, and specific feedback
9. Incorporate varied and interesting tasks	9. Listen to students' points of view	9. Press students for justification, explanation, and meaning through questions and feedback
10. Provide opportunities for students to experience success	10. Encourage students to take responsibility for their learning	10. Provide opportunities for deep understanding, critical thinking, and problem solving
11. Maintain high expectations for learning and behavior	11. Help students feel emotionally and physically safe	11. Adjust teaching to meet students' needs
12. Provide help to students who need it	12. Demonstrate respect for all students	
13. Model appropriate behavior		
14. Reframe deficit thinking and beliefs about disengaged students		

is evidence that these interventions increase behavioral, emotional, and/or cognitive engagement; and they include multiple components to increase engagement at both the student and school levels.

How to Assess Engagement

The most feasible methods for educators and policymakers to assess engagement are student surveys, teacher ratings, observations, and administrative data. To help schools select measures that are appropriate for their needs, my colleagues and I compared 21 self-report surveys, teacher ratings, and observational measures of student engagement.[18]

Self-report methods are the most common assessment technique because surveys can be administered to large, diverse groups of students at low cost, making it possible to compare results across settings. Another method is to have teachers rate individual students on items about their behavior, emotion, and cognition. This technique is particularly useful with young children and with students who have limited literacy skills. Practitioners extensively use teacher rating scales to screen children for social and behavioral problems and to inform intervention-related decisions.

Another way to assess engagement is to directly observe individuals, targeted students, or a whole classroom, mostly on indicators of behavioral engagement. Because students can hide their emotions and thinking, it is more challenging to assess emotional and cognitive engagement through observational techniques.

Administrative data that schools already collect—on attendance, truancy, problem behaviors, credits earned, graduation rates, and course enrollment and completion—can also be used to both assess engagement and disengagement. These data can form part of an early warning system to identify students who are showing signs of disengagement and to direct appropriate interventions to these students.

State policymakers should establish clear, measurable goals for increasing engagement.

Implications for State Policy

There are also tasks at the state level to prioritize student engagement.

Support a shared vision on equity and increasing student engagement. It is critical that all stakeholders work together to develop and communicate an equity-oriented, shared vision of student engagement that assumes all students can learn, teachers and schools can increase engagement for all students, and that there is a collective responsibility to support student engagement and learning. Such a vision will require a shift from a deficit perspective that blames students, families, and poverty for low engagement to a strengths-based approach that builds on students' individual and cultural assets and is framed by the belief that, with the appropriate support, it is possible to reengage even the most disengaged students. State policymakers should establish clear, measurable goals for increasing engagement, align resources to support these goals, and collect data to see how well schools are meeting these goals.

Invest in robust data systems. Data can help identify students at risk for disengagement and ultimately dropping out of school. Many schools collect data on attendance, behavior, and academic performance as part of early warning systems. Data on student engagement are also important in identifying, designing, and evaluating effective interventions. They help identify students in need of additional interventions as well determining the types of and levels of support that are required.[19]

Invest in holistic interventions. There is evidence that investing in holistic intervention support leads to higher behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement.[20] Some examples include individual and group counseling, tutoring and extended summer learning programs, attendance monitoring, family support and parent training, afterschool activities, social and emotional learning programs, bullying prevention, instructional reforms, teacher training on strategies to increase engagement, and mentoring. States should partner with community stakeholders who work in mental health, family support, and social services to coordinate both school and community resources for the most disengaged youth.

Invest in hiring, retaining, and supporting teachers. State policymakers play a key role in recruiting, training, and setting compensation levels to encourage a diverse group of new teachers to both enter and stay in the profession. Retention is especially important for student engagement in urban districts, where student

Table 2. Sample Engagement Interventions

Intervention	Components	Population
Seattle Social Development Project	Proactive classroom management Interactive teaching Social skills training Teacher training Parent training	Grade 1–6
Achievement for Latinos through Academic Success (ALAS)	Attendance, behavior, and achievement monitoring Mentoring Counseling Social skills training Parent training Community collaboration	Latinx high school students
Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS)	Schoolwide expectations for social, emotional skills Social and emotional training Academic supports Changes to disciplinary practices Individualized interventions Family-school partnerships	K–12
Check and Connect	Mentoring Systematic monitoring of engagement Individualized interventions Family support	K–12
Diplomas Now	Instructional reforms and support for teachers Early warning system Small learning communities Social and emotional learning Targeted academic support Counseling Family support and case management	Middle and high school
Career Academies	Technical and academic curriculum around broad theme Partnership between school and industry Small learning communities	High School
Caring School Community	Social and emotional learning Teacher training Changes to disciplinary practices Family involvement Schoolwide community programs to build community	K–8
My Teaching Partner	Teacher training on teacher-student interactions One-on-one coaching Engagement monitoring through observations	Preschool–high school

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and teacher turnover is greater, resources are fewer, and poverty and racial isolation is more concentrated. In particular, it is hard for students to develop strong relationships with their teachers in schools where turnover is more frequent. It is also important to improve the recruitment and retention of teachers of color, who tend to be better able to connect with and relate to students of color and their families, which in turn leads to higher engagement.

Invest in professional development. Building teacher capacity is essential for increasing student engagement. State policymakers should invest in professional development that will help teachers learn how to create engaging classrooms. Such training will encompass how to strengthen relationships with students, support effective peer learning and build community, provide support for students who are at risk for disengagement, and implement motivationally and cognitively complex tasks.

Increase support for social and emotional learning. States should support social and emotional learning programs and practices, which help students manage emotions, set positive goals, feel and show empathy, form and maintain peer relationships, and make responsible decisions. When implemented effectively, these practices strengthen relationships between students and teachers, and they improve students' attitudes, social behavior, and academic performance. They also lessen problems with student conduct and emotional distress.[21] Relationships can also be strengthened through structural changes: for example, smaller schools, schools within schools, and advising and mentoring programs.

Support cognitively and motivationally rich curricula. Many students are disengaged because school tasks bear little resemblance to how learning happens elsewhere. Engagement is higher when students work on meaningful and authentic tasks that are connected to their personal interests and needs in their school and communities. States should encourage policies and structures that support authentic learning through internships, career academies, and project-based instructional approaches, where students work over an extended period to investigate a complex question, problem, or challenge. ■

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