

Weaving Student Engagement Into the Core Practices of Schools

Student engagement is an effective element in dropout prevention efforts and has the potential to be part of a comprehensive strategy to help youth fully develop their academic, social-emotional, civic, and career knowledge and skills. The report *Silent Epidemic* (Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morison, 2006) presented a study of high school dropouts in which 47% reported that they had dropped out of school because they were bored, unmotivated, and disengaged. Students identified several ways that would have allowed them to feel more engaged, including more real-world, active learning projects and having a voice in the selection of what and how they learn.

When young people are engaged in their work, they internally understand that their presence matters.

Several issues are barriers to real progress in increasing youth engagement in learning, and yet there are clear steps educators can take to move along a continuum toward real engagement. Since the topic is so closely aligned to dropout prevention, the NDPC/N, NDPC/N Research Fellows, and the authors of this issue brief are focusing on this topic with a position paper (see link at right), monthly tips in the *Update* eNewsletter, and through work on a tool kit for school and community leaders and practitioners.

Through strategies and a straightforward action framework, youth can move from participation to engagement, from externally driven work to internally owned youth action.

Bridgeland, J., Dilulio, J., & Morison, K. (2006). *The silent epidemic: Perspectives of high school dropouts*. Civic Enterprises, in association with Peter D. Hart Research Associates for the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

Student Engagement Defined

Paying attention. Listening. Following along. This is how many teachers and even students describe student engagement when asked. In reality, it is something far different. Student engagement occurs when young people

have invested themselves, their energy, and their commitment to the learning environment, both within and outside the classroom. They willingly put forth the required effort to find a level of personal success academically, socially,

Key Ideas for Practice

In moving along the continuum of youth involvement, youth move from participation to voice to leadership to engagement. Adults move from management to coordination to partnership to coaching.



At full engagement, youth are the primary drivers of their own work and learning, from conceptualization to implementation and reflection. Youth “own” and understand their work deeply. They are the ultimate decision makers with the inclusion of adult input and facilitation.

For More Information

For a full-length position paper on this topic, see www.dropoutprevention.org/resources/major-research-reports/student-engagement/

Student Engagement Defined (continued)

and emotionally. They care about others' successes as well, including both their peers and the adults around them. They contribute meaningfully to the school and classroom climate. They internally understand that their presence matters.

True engagement happens when students discover that learning is a personal endeavor. When the learning environment shifts its focus to personal growth, students understand that it is the learning and growing that matters. This personal commitment to learning will encourage persistence in students when they encounter difficulties. Engaged students develop a higher level of autonomy, self-reliance, and commitment. This type of engagement is cultivated by an environment where

students feel safe, valued, and supported by those around them.

The prefix "inter" plays a role central to understanding student engagement. Interrelationships are key in all settings throughout the school. Interconnections among various curricular content and between knowledge and skills and students' life experiences make learning richer and more meaningful. An interdependent environment of collaboration and mutual reliance fosters skills and abilities that support each student as a vital member of the community. Intersections throughout the school in student-centered policies and practices enhance and nurture the engagement of each student as a meaningful contributor to the life of the school.

Implications for Education Stakeholders

Student engagement doesn't just happen consistently and in a sustainable way without stakeholder effort and intentionality. The full report at www.dropoutprevention.org/resources/major-research-reports/student-engagement/ identifies four key elements to address in order to support sustainability of student engagement over time and across an organization such as a school or school system. **Shared leadership** will lead to high-quality student engagement practices across grade levels and classes so that students' experiences and competencies build consistently. Carefully enacted **policies** will provide sufficient infrastructure

and support for student preparation to participate in decision making, adequate professional development for understanding and implementing student engagement practices, and the means for diverse stakeholders to be involved in student-centered learning activities. **Research and evaluation** by students themselves is an important component. And developing and maintaining a safe and supportive **school climate**, aligned with efforts to increase student engagement, is crucial. In short, sustainability is both about content and context (organizational climate), intentionally focused to ensure each student is effectively engaged throughout his or her school career.



Students and staff, Valencia High School Open Mic Club. Photo from Customink.com

Authors

Teri Dary and Terry Pickeral, Cascade Educational Consultants

Rob Shumer, University of Minnesota

Anderson Williams, Educational Consultant

Scan this QR code to read the full-length position paper

