

# Weaving Student Engagement Into the Core Practices of Schools

A National Dropout Prevention  
Center/Network Position Paper

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# WEAVING STUDENT ENGAGEMENT INTO THE CORE PRACTICES OF SCHOOLS:

## A NATIONAL DROPOUT PREVENTION CENTER/NETWORK POSITION PAPER

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### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This position paper on student engagement is organized in response to major questions on how student engagement aligns with dropout prevention. Through a set of questions and responses, the *Weaving Student Engagement Into the Core Practices of Schools* position paper on student engagement

- defines the term “student engagement” and identifies key elements,
- examines key findings from the research,
- shares effective practices and sustainability strategies from the field,
- articulates the implications for stakeholders, and
- provides resources to inform and influence education stakeholders in support of student engagement as a dropout prevention strategy.

A major theme woven throughout the position paper is that student engagement is an effective dropout prevention strategy but has the potential to be part of a comprehensive strategy to engage students to fully develop their academic, social-emotional, civic, and career knowledge and skills. Such an approach requires schools to focus on individual student engagement, group and social collaborations, family and community engagement, and the school’s climate to ensure congruence among activities and stakeholders in support of student engagement.

This position paper provides specific context and strategies to engage all education stakeholders to successfully integrate and sustain student engagement as a core expectation and experience of each student to assist them to stay in school and fully develop their knowledge and skills.

The National Dropout Prevention Center/Network values student engagement as an effective approach that aligns directly with many of its 15 Effective Dropout Prevention Strategies and indirectly with others. Through a series of questions and answers, this position paper makes the case that creating an integrated educational system that engages students in teaching and learning strategies, classroom and school deliberations and decisions, leadership development, leadership, evaluation and assessment, data analysis, strategic planning, and advocacy leads to student attributes aligned with staying in and succeeding in school and in life.

## OVERVIEW

It seems common sense that the more students are engaged, the more they will see the relevance of their experiences, feel connected to their school experiences, and develop more positive attitudes and attributes both inside and outside of the school walls. There are several studies addressing student engagement as a dropout prevention strategy. One report, the *Silent Epidemic* (Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morison, 2006), details a study of high school dropouts and provides important clues from their experiences as to what is necessary to address the dropout problem more broadly. In that study, 47% of students who drop out of school report that they do so because they are bored, unmotivated, and disengaged. The students identified several key learning criteria they felt would engage them:

- Active learning projects that connect them with meaningful learning. According to these young people, active and meaningful learning engages them in real-world problem-solving now, prepares them for engaging in their world after high school, and prepares them for productive lives in the workforce.
- Learning that allows them to have some voice in the selection of the subjects studied and provides them with activities that connect academic learning with practical settings.

These findings illustrate the importance of student ownership and involvement in relevant decisions in their overall engagement in school. This is not a new idea or one that is unique to the study highlighted in the *Silent Epidemic*. Student engagement is an essential component of ASCD's Whole Child Initiative (<http://www.ascd.org/programs/The-Whole-Child/Engaged.aspx>), several national civic development initiatives, many character education programs, major school climate networks, campaigns for social-emotional development, career preparation, equity and inclusion in schools throughout the nation. Despite the prevalence of the research and organizations working on the issue, however, there are real barriers to making student engagement a core strategy to dropout prevention:

- There is not a clear national leader organization/network that provides overall direction and guidance for systemic youth engagement specific to work in schools.

- No agreement on the best clear and comprehensive resources exists.
- There is little professional development specifically to increase teacher knowledge and skills.
- Teacher preparation programs rarely or barely focus on student engagement and youth development.
- Few policies encourage, support and reward integrating student engagement into schools.
- While there are schools that incorporate some principles of student engagement, schools that embrace youth engagement principles as a core strategy for their success are uncommon.

Even more importantly, very few resources provide guidance in how to develop an integrated approach to student engagement within the school setting, aligning policies and practices across the school and community. Although there are a number of high quality resources that provide this guidance outside of the school realm, schools have generally failed at applying the same developmental principles in the educational context. To be successful, schools need to commit to fully understanding and applying the necessary core attitudes, beliefs, and expectations, deploying them in a way that is appropriate to the setting and sustainable for the system.

Core to our commitment to student engagement as an essential element of dropout prevention is our belief that schools should focus on developing youth to be well-rounded, active, wise, and principled human beings, and not just knowledgeable in content areas (Sternberg, 2003).

Existing frameworks, strategies, and research defining high-quality student engagement are tapped into throughout this position paper in response to questions that are critical to assisting schools and education stakeholders in considering, adopting, and adapting high-quality practices, policies, and partnerships. Responses to the questions address barriers and challenges that too often lead to resisting change, offering guidance in effecting positive change. This position paper demonstrates how student engagement can become part of the way schools can more effectively “do” education, weaving these strategies throughout the infrastructure and modus operandi.

*Weaving Student Engagement Into the Core Practices of Schools* utilizes the framework developed by Anderson Williams, titled *Understanding the Continuum of Youth Involvement* (2008), and highlighted in a recent NDPC/N topical newsletter (Cheatham, 2015). It focuses on both the roles and responsibilities of adults, as well as students, as a defining relationship too often missing in student engagement advocacy. This framework, found in part in Figure 1, outlines the distinctions between various strategies for involving youth from the practitioner’s perspective, moving from participation to engagement, from externally driven youth activity to internally owned youth action.

## Understanding the Continuum of Youth Involvement

<div> <div>PARTICIPATION</div> <div>➡</div> <div>VOICE</div> <div>➡</div> <div>LEADERSHIP</div> <div>➡</div> <div>ENGAGEMENT</div> </div>				
YOUTH ROLES	Youth are involved in the "doing" of the activity but not in the planning, development or reflection.	Youth are part of conversations regarding planning and implementing an idea. Their input is considered, but they may or may not have an official "vote".	Youth are involved at all levels of idea or project development and have formal and informal leadership roles in the process.	Youth are the primary drivers of the work from conceptualization to implementation and reflection. Youth "own" and understand the work deeply.
	Adults develop the idea, plan and organize all aspects of the activity or event which a cadre of young people will actually carry out.	Adults develop and set the agenda and facilitate the process. Adults include the input of youth in this process. This can be through consideration of youth input via focus group or meeting or through youth being involved in and having a formal vote.	Adults are involved in the full process and support the development of individual youth and the flow of the process, but in a way that balances power and leadership with youth. Adults allow youth to struggle and make mistakes in a safe environment.	Adults provide a support role and share ownership and commitment but with some deference to the youth. Adults hold one "vote" on the team.
ADULT ROLES	Adults make all decisions.	Adults ultimately make the decision with the consideration of youth input. If youth have a vote, they are typically outnumbered or adults have ultimate veto power.	Youth and adults share decision-making power often requiring a specific and mutually agreed upon decision-making process.	Youth ultimately make the decisions with the inclusion of adult input and "vote".
	Adults are accountable for all aspects of the process and/or activity including whether or not young people are present.  Youth have some secondary accountability to participate in the activity.	Adults maintain accountability for decision-making and actions. Youth may have specific accountability for smaller roles and activities that involve youth specifically.	Youth and adults share accountability at all levels of the work.	Youth have primary accountability at all levels of the work.  Adults have secondary accountability for ensuring that youth are prepared and supported in a way that they can achieve success.
DECISION-MAKING	School leadership is holding a student assembly to raise awareness about how the school engages students with disabilities. A group of students is asked to pass out flyers and to serve as hosts and to introduce the special speaker for the assembly.	School leadership wants to improve how they engage students with disabilities in the classroom and broader school activities. They have invited two youth to <u>participate</u> on a task force of faculty and staff to develop a list of ideas for action.	Students want to raise awareness about challenges for students with disabilities in their school. They get an adult sponsor who gets the OK for them to have school assembly on the issue and have an expert speaker come. Youth <u>participate and have voice</u> in the planning and development of the assembly by serving on committees, as a committee chair, introducing the speaker, promoting the event etc.	Youth plan, organize all aspects of, and host a student assembly focused on more equitable schools for students with disabilities. They ask a supportive teacher to serve as an advisor. They know the issue deeply and have talked with their peers including students with disabilities to garner insight. They have developed ideas for school improvement that they message to their peers and to school leadership directly.
ACCOUNTABILITY				
EXAMPLE				

Figure 1. Understanding the continuum of youth involvement (Williams, 2008). For more on this, visit [www.andersonwilliams.com](http://www.andersonwilliams.com) or contact Anderson Williams at [andersonwilliams@gmail.com](mailto:andersonwilliams@gmail.com).



## QUESTION #1: WHAT IS STUDENT ENGAGEMENT?

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, 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.

While most believe they can recognize student engagement when they see it, concretely defining the expression is another matter. Significant variations are found in the formal definitions that abound across the educational realm:

- Engaged students “show sustained behavioral involvement in learning activities accompanied by a positive emotional tone. They select tasks at the border of their competencies, initiate action when given the opportunity, and exert intense effort and concentration in the implementation of learning tasks; they show generally positive emotions during ongoing action, including enthusiasm, optimism, curiosity, and interest” (Skinner & Belmont, 1993).
- “Student engagement refers to the degree of attention, curiosity, interest, optimism, and passion that students show when they are learning or being taught, which extends to the level of motivation they have to learn and progress in their education” (Hidden Curriculum, 2014).
- Students are engaged when they “devote substantial time and effort to a task, when they care about the quality of their work, and when they commit themselves because the work seems to have significance beyond its personal instrumental value” (Newmann, 1992).
- “Students who are engaged exhibit three characteristics: (1) they are attracted to their work, (2) they persist in their work despite challenges and obstacles, and (3) they take visible delight in accomplishing their work” (Schlechty, 1994).

Despite the distinctively different depictions, student engagement is considered to be a driving factor both in the process of learning and in adult accountability for ensuring students are successful. If we are to do these things well, it is critical that we focus our efforts on common understandings that can shape and enhance effective policies and practices. There are a number of central threads that emerge in the multitude of resources on the topic:

***Sustained energy and commitment to achieve goals is exhibited for the purpose of personal growth rather than for a measure of student achievement or other external outcome.*** While external reinforcement can be a powerful motivator for some students, true engagement happens when students discover that learning

is a personal endeavor. One does it because of what is hoped to be achieved, what activities or understandings one hopes to be able to partake in, and what doors the skills and abilities open. All too often, an unintentional consequence of current educational practice is to train students to be dependent on adults, participating in a task because of the grade or praise they will receive if they do it, or the negative consequences they will face if they don't. When students cross the threshold of true engagement, they understand that tasks are worthwhile because they help them meet personal goals they have set for themselves, not the teacher's goals for them (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

***Students who are engaged continue performing a task until the desired outcome is achieved, not just until the task is completed.*** When the learning environment shifts its focus to process and personal growth, young people understand that it is the learning and growing that matters. Their personal goals make the shift to what it is they want to know and be able to do. Effort becomes less about putting forth only what is necessary to complete a task and more about whether they have reached their goal. Goals aren't about checking off items in a list of "to dos," but rather continuing the process of learning until the goals have been accomplished.

***Engaged students demonstrate a willingness to persist even in the face of obstacles.*** With the level of personal commitment that is achieved when young people are engaged, encountering difficulties along the way may present challenges, but they do not halt progress. Students in a supportive community find themselves within an environment that encourages them, offers resources for overcoming hurdles, and continues to drive them forward alongside their peers.

***Positive emotions are exhibited during the learning process when students are meaningfully engaged.*** Because student engagement puts ownership in the hands of young people, a higher level of autonomy, self-reliance, and commitment follows. Authentic opportunities to make meaningful choices create a thriving environment where students demonstrate higher levels of positive emotions related to taking pride in their work, feeling confident in their abilities, and understanding their roles in sustaining interdependent relationships with both their peers and adults.

***Student engagement happens within the context of a supportive environment.*** To be truly emotionally, socially, and academically engaged, young people need to feel safe, valued, and supported by those around them. Fully committing oneself to growing and changing requires risk, which is both inherent in the engagement process and necessary for students to achieve new levels of success. This risk is mitigated by knowing youth are surrounded by peers and adults who will support and nurture them in making progress, even if failure is encountered in the process.



From all of this, it is clear that engagement is a function of relationships with peers and with adults, and is informed and colored by the institutions within which those relationships function. Engagement is complex and cannot be reduced to a concept like student voice, a term commonly misunderstood as synonymous. While student voice is an important component of the engagement process, it falls far short of the level of engagement described above. As noted in Figure 1, *Understanding the Continuum of Youth Involvement*, student engagement requires a symbiotic relationship between youth and adults, with young people being given an authentic role in shaping the learning and the school environment in which they thrive.

The prefix “inter” becomes a central concept to understanding student engagement. Interrelationships are key in both formal and informal settings throughout the school. Interconnections among the 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, where the success of one is critical to the success of all, fosters skills and abilities that support each young person 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. Like threads in fabric, the tighter we interweave sound principles of student engagement, the stronger the fabric (and our success) becomes.

## QUESTION #2: HOW CAN SCHOOLS SUCCESSFULLY IMPLEMENT THE KEY ELEMENTS OF STUDENT ENGAGEMENT?

Schools striving to graduate each student fully prepared will be more likely to be successful if the following four elements are supported and expected throughout their policies and practices:

1. meaningful learning with authentic choice,
2. supportive environment,
3. suitable pedagogy and expectations for each student, and
4. systemic focus.

If we are going to achieve these elements, we must first understand how they emerge from the interactions and relationships between and among peers and adults, and in the context of the school and community settings. We also must be honest about where we are and what we are committed to when it comes to engagement. We can’t just commit to using the language. We have to commit to changing practices and the very nature of our relationships with students. Looking back at the *Continuum for Youth Engagement* depicted in the overview of this paper, we can see a clear path to how we can actively engage young people, distinguishing between efforts that move students from being

participants in opportunities that are designed and implemented by others, to being engaged in actions that are created, owned, and sustained by youth in partnership with adults.

When schools involve young people at the participation level, students are clearly part of the “fabric” of the school. However, their individual involvement has little to no impact on the strength of the fabric, as all control is in the hands of adults. Think of this fabric as a loose piece of burlap. Each fiber in the burlap exists, but pulling out one strand doesn’t significantly change the shape or dimension of the fabric. The interweaving of fibers is loose and relatively unconnected. Each strand is somewhat inconsequential to the whole. The focus of the school becomes about the whole, but the individual student never sees or understands or is valued for his individual strand.

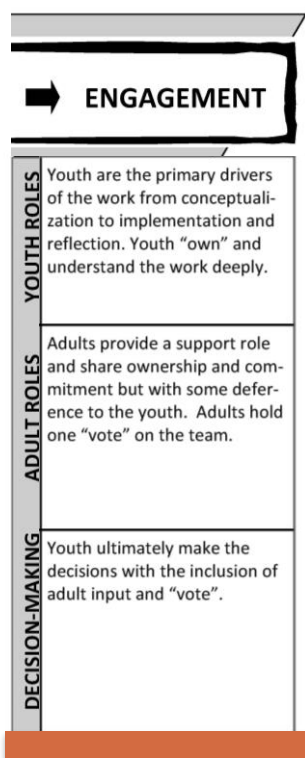


Figure 2. The engagement column of understanding the continuum of youth involvement (Williams, 2008).

As we move toward the engagement column in *Understanding the Continuum of Youth Involvement*, we see that the connections become more interdependent. Youth and adults work closely together to create and achieve shared goals. Relationships are supportive and result in mutual decisions that reflect the needs and priorities of each. Like a piece of finely woven linen, each fiber touches on another to create a fabric that is difficult to pull apart. One snag impacts the look, feel, and performance of the whole because of the strength of the connections. Individual snags get immediately addressed because they are seen as important to the collective. Each thread within the school, from policies to procedures and classroom practices, integrate the philosophies and beliefs of effective student engagement. Within this context, the school climate reflects the efforts of each member of the community, young people and adults alike.

Using this framework, we can envision a school where youth and adults work together to establish learning goals, where students are provided opportunities to make authentic decisions in how they learn and demonstrate proficiency, and adults serve a facilitative role in fostering that learning, offering support where needed and shaping the instructional process within a caring environment that nurtures and expresses high expectations for each student.

The *Continuum of Youth Involvement* helps us to understand the difference between authentic choice and adult-driven decisions. Rather than simply providing students with opportunities to express their opinions on decisions, authentic choice means their opinions matter—to the students and to the whole school community. They have a

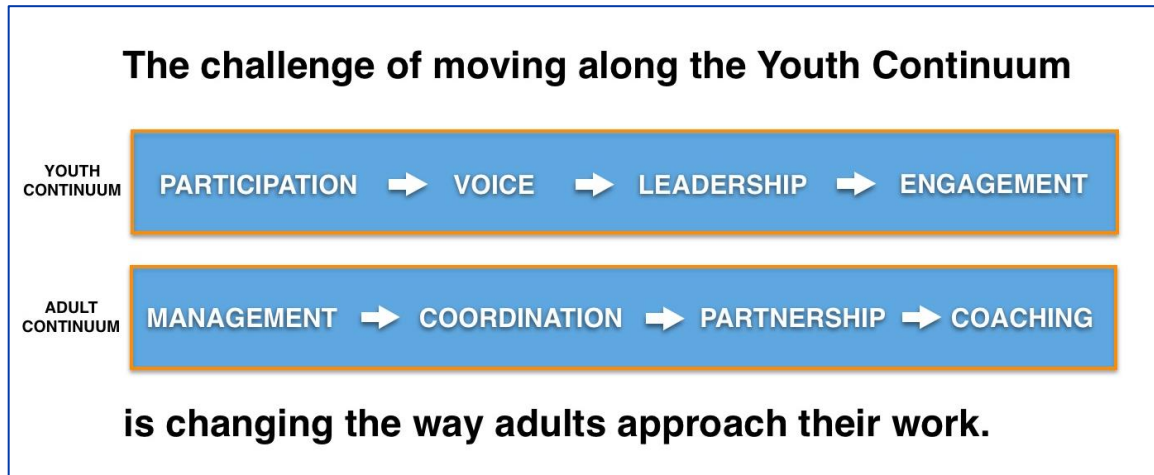


Figure 3. The challenge of moving along the youth continuum is changing the way adults approach their work.

meaningful role in making decisions that impact them, and they can tangibly see the results of their decisions in the way their educational experience plays out. To achieve engagement, school staff need to structure classrooms and the wider school environment as equitable student-centered places of learning. Each student should be afforded these leadership experiences in formal and informal settings, including such responsibilities as determining how to achieve learning goals, self-assessing progress, and collaborating with others to measure and create change in the school climate.

Practices that will help schools successfully interweave these principles include the following:

- Provide staff development to help teachers learn how to better support the emotional, social, and academic needs of each student in culturally responsive ways.
- Adopt policies that support equity and inclusion throughout the school environment.
- Develop structures that ensure each student has caring adults that support and nurture their growth and development.
- Include measures of school engagement in accountability systems.
- Emphasize student-centered learning and engaging students as partners in the instructional process.
- Develop caring and trust between teachers and students.
- Allow students to have an appropriate degree of control over learning,

- Ensure course materials relate to students' interests and experiences, highlighting ways learning can be applied in their daily lives.
- Integrate projects and activities that offer young people opportunities to use knowledge and skills in meaningful, real-life situations.
- Help students feel that schoolwork is significant, valuable, and worthy of their efforts.
- Assign challenging but achievable tasks for each student. Tasks that seem impossible and those that are rote and repetitive discourage learners.
- Provide opportunities to work collaboratively as a community of learners that require sharing and meaningful interactions in a cooperative rather than competitive environment.

It is critical that each student feels that she or he is a respected and valued member of the community. We accomplish this by ensuring that the skills and abilities within each student are utilized in making a meaningful contribution to not only his/her individual success, but also the success of the entire community. Each of us needs to be needed in order to feel valued. This is no less true for young people, and is perhaps even more critical given their stage of social, intellectual, and identity development.

### **QUESTION #3: WHAT ARE THE KEY RESEARCH FINDINGS ALIGNING STUDENT ENGAGEMENT WITH DROPOUT PREVENTION?**

The importance of student engagement to success in school is not a new concept in the educational realm. Research dating back to Dewey (1956) underscores the critical need for schools to increase their ability to motivate and engage every student. Despite this and other research pointing to the same conclusion over the course of the past 60 years, we have persistently failed to focus on engaging students as a core educational strategy.

The recent concentration on accountability and standardized testing has further blurred focus on engagement and motivation and often distracts schools from attending sufficiently to student success, even as they look to perhaps more easily measured outcomes such as test scores, grades, and disciplinary incidents. Students, however, will be more likely to do poorly on these educational and disciplinary outcome measures if we don't adequately engage them in their own education. Many researchers and educational leaders have also expressed concern that a focus on accountability, implemented without ensuring that each student is actively engaged in the learning process, will result in increased disengagement in school (Futrell & Rotberg, 2002; Sheldon & Biddle, 1998) and will negatively impact students' successful school completion and ultimately, their ability to be successful in college, work, and civic life.

Research clearly substantiates the need for integrating the four critical elements, identified earlier in this paper, to student engagement.

## **Meaningful Learning With Authentic Choice**

Billig (2006) reports, “In 2004, the National Research Council published a summary of the research on high school engagement with the recognition that without engaging students more actively, schools cannot be effective at teaching and learning.” Not surprisingly, a variety of research shows students have high levels of engagement in student-centered classrooms. This is in part because students in these classrooms are viewed as partners in the learning process and given greater control and choice as a result. These conditions have been reported to result in reductions in dropout, student absences, and disruptive behavior (White, 2007).

Autonomy has been demonstrated to be an instrumental attribute to ensuring motivation and engagement in the learning process (Deci & Ryan, 2002; Grolnick, Gurland, Jacob, & Decourcey, 2002). When students participate in a classroom that is interlaced with shared leadership, respectful discourse, and real choice in meaningful decision making, levels of engagement soar. Behavioral traits such as persistence, effort, sustained attention to tasks, and a greater propensity to take on challenges and achieve mastery are exhibited with greater frequency when students are engaged in the educational process (National Research Council and the Institute of Medicine, 2004).

By contrast, Davidson and Phelan (1999) found high levels of disengagement in educational contexts dominated by authoritative discipline, lack of choice and involvement in decisions, and an absence of respect and trust toward students, their opinions, and their perspectives.

## **Suitable Pedagogy and Expectations for Each Student**

Studies consistently show that holding students accountable to high standards is critical to success (Baker, Terry, Bridger, & Winsor, 1997; Evans, 1997; Lambert & McCombs, 1998; Lee, Smith, Perry, & Smylie, 1999). However, to reach optimal levels of student engagement, classroom expectations need to be challenging but achievable for each student. This is further supported by a study conducted by Turner, Thorpe, and Meyer (1998), which found students were most engaged when completing work that provided a high level of challenge, as long as they possessed sufficient skills to enable them to be successful. The existence of achievable challenge is the key to “optimal learning” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 1988).

Students are predictably more likely to be engaged when content is relevant and personally meaningful in their lives. Research demonstrates student engagement is highest when students are active participants and when they see their learning as reflective of their culture and related to their daily life. McLaughlin (2000) also found school becomes more personally meaningful when students are engaged in learning activities which they believe contribute in meaningful ways to their community.

Research also highlights a strong interplay between teacher expectations, student self-perception of competence, and commitment to learning. To be engaged, students must

believe they can successfully do the work. This perception is heavily influenced by their perception of others' expectations and belief in their ability. It also has a direct effect on the level of responsibility students display for their work, their motivation and desire to learn, and their level of interest in class (Wentzel, 2002). A negative self-perception of abilities and expectations for success often results in increased anxiety and fear about failure, which in turn inhibits the level of engagement (Abu-Hilal, 2000; Bandalos, Yates, & Thorndike-Christ, 1995; Harter, 1992).

The way students interpret teacher behaviors can undermine their self-perceptions of competence. Graham (1994), for example, found that under certain conditions, when teachers expressed pity or sympathy toward students, it caused young people to perceive they were not sufficiently competent to perform an expected task. This can play itself out in students' unwillingness to engage in a task or project in order to display their perceived incompetence. Across multiple studies, it has become clear that high expectations coupled with a supportive learning environment and belief in students' competence is critical to student engagement. Yet surprisingly, a national survey conducted by MetLife (2001) reported only 36% of high school students conveyed that their teachers encouraged them to do their best.

### **Supportive Environment**

There is an interdependency between high levels of engagement and positive support from teachers and peers. Being surrounded by a supportive community in the form of nurturing relationships from peers and adults is predictive of student motivation and engagement in the learning process (Akey, 2006; Cohen & Ball, 1999). Young people who feel supported by important adults in their lives are more likely to be more engaged as learners (Bundick, Quaglia, Corso, & Haywood, 2014). Students' beliefs about themselves and their abilities are shaped by the extent to which they perceive that the adults in their lives care about them and are involved in their lives (Blum, McNeely, & Rinehart, 2002).

School connectedness has been reported to be extremely important to student success, leading to better grades and test scores, improved attendance, and reduction in student dropouts (Barber & Olsen, 1997; Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Blum, 2005; Klem & Connell, 2004; McNeely, 2003; Morse, Anderson, Christenson, & Lehr, 2004). High levels of student engagement rely heavily on strong relationships with both peers (Perdue, Manzeske, & Estell, 2009) and adults (Tucker et al., 2002). In providing a contrasting example, Wong, Eccles, and Sameroff (2003) demonstrated that when students perceive racial discrimination at school, their achievement levels predictably decline.

A study by Corrigan and Chapman (2008) made a connection between gains in teacher effectiveness and sharing responsibilities with students. Personal growth is enhanced in contexts where learners have a sense of ownership and control over the learning process. Being able to learn with and from each other in safe and trusting environments is critical to this process (McCombs, 2004).

Further evidence demonstrates that academic competency and resilience are closely related to students' level of engagement. The cyclical pattern of poor academic performance often feeds a decrease in motivation and student perception of competence, which yields less success academically. This pattern is tightly linked to an increase in a student's likelihood of dropping out of school. In fact, Yazzie-Mintz (2010) reports, "Poor academic performance is the single strongest predictor of dropping out of school. Poor grades and low test scores, regardless of ability, may increase student frustration and reduce motivation to stay in school." Another study conducted by Finn and Rock (1997) provides evidence that student engagement is critical to academic resilience, even when comparison groups are controlled for background and psychological characteristics. Finally, several studies in recent years point to student engagement as a critical factor to students' academic success (Akey, 2006; Heller, Calderon, & Medrich, 2003; Garcia-Reid, Reid, & Peterson, 2005).

### **Systemic Focus**

Student engagement needs to be intricately tied to how the school functions, supported in the context of a positive, safe, caring, and equitable school climate. Effective school climates tend to foster stronger connections to school and higher levels of student engagement (Blum, McNelly, & Rinehart, 2002; Goodenow & Grady, 1993; Lee et al., 1999; Osterman, 2000; Wentzel, 1997). Research conducted on school climate reveals a strong correlation between addressing risk factors related to dropouts and characteristics of an effective school climate, including connectedness, engagement, empowerment, and self-efficacy (Duckenfield & Reynolds, 2013).

Schools will find greater success in their efforts by ensuring student engagement is interwoven throughout the fabric of the school—by implementing policies which promote shared leadership among staff, students, families, and the community; by setting challenging expectations within an environment that supports learning and innovation for each student and staff; and by maintaining a culture that supports high levels of connectedness and belonging. No matter the approach, dropout prevention work will be most effective when schools and districts weave together initiatives and address student engagement in a systems approach to reaching a shared vision among all stakeholders.

Research on student engagement is clear: Graduation rates are likely to increase if schools adopt and support policies and practices that increase students' perception of competence, control, and connectedness and appropriately challenge youth with rigorous, meaningful instruction. Ample evidence exists to support creating and sustaining dropout prevention efforts that are grounded in interweaving proactive strategies that change the conditions at school to increase student engagement and success.



Yet, increasing graduation rates is not sufficient if we want young people to succeed beyond the academic environment. As stated by Anderson, Christenson, and Lehr (2004),

An orientation of preventing dropout does not necessarily mean anything other than keeping students in school. On the other hand, ***promoting successful school completion*** implies that when students leave school, they have the academic and interpersonal skills necessary for success after high school.

## QUESTION #4: HOW DOES STUDENT ENGAGEMENT FOCUSING ON DROPOUT PREVENTION CONTRIBUTE TO OTHER EDUCATION ISSUES?

The focus of this position paper is how student engagement decreases dropout rates in schools throughout the U.S. The student engagement definitions, research, and best practices have implications for and align with other education issues. In fact, to ensure that student engagement is a core component of students' experience and supported and sustained, it needs to contribute to student development across multiple initiatives and strategies. Therefore schools need to ensure:

- A consistent expectation that student engagement will be implemented schoolwide;
- A set of beliefs and practices that are aligned with the principles of student engagement;
- High levels of support to make certain that efforts are consistently practiced across all settings; and
- That accountability for student engagement happens throughout planning, implementation, and assessment of learning.

Student engagement organized as an independent school focus, initiative, priority and/or strategy greatly reduces its impact on each student and the school as a whole. There certainly are school traditions supportive of “stand-alone” initiatives (often the function of funding streams and corresponding expenses/investments) but they fail to be woven into the fabric of schools. Looking at social inclusion as an example, schools that create an interwoven process rather than a “stand-alone” initiative demonstrate the following characteristics:

- Each student is a contributing member of their school in both formal and informal settings, with their unique set of skills and abilities being utilized, nurtured, and celebrated.
- Classrooms are organized to include each learner from a strengths-based perspective.

- Students collaborate and have frequent leadership opportunities within and outside the classroom.
- Teachers are expected to and are held accountable for designing instructional and social experiences that enhance the skills and abilities of each learner.
- Sports and extracurricular activities embrace diversity of all kinds and welcome each of their peers as important to the whole.
- Professional development is provided to teachers, and students are adequately prepared to be socially inclusive in their beliefs and habits.
- Diverse opportunities are offered to ensure each student is meaningfully included throughout the life of the school.

Like in the social inclusion example above, for student engagement needs to become a habit that is expected and practiced throughout the school, student engagement needs to be seen as a major contributor to student development and a positive school climate, and be a core strategy for every aspect of how the school functions. As such, it is critical to understand the alignment between student engagement and other common school issues.

There are a number of common education strategies and initiatives that can be effectively and efficiently aligned to lead to enhanced student development, the quality and character of the school, and interactions with education stakeholders. Figure 4 depicts ten specific education issues that benefit from and contribute to schoolwide student engagement. Each of these issues is deeply interconnected with student engagement, serving as both a contributing factor to and a result of schools' successes with becoming engaged centers of learning.

## **QUESTION #5: WHAT ARE THE MOST EFFECTIVE INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICES FOR STUDENT ENGAGEMENT?**

We know that student-centered educational environments provide rich opportunities to increase student engagement. Practices such as asking students to set personal learning goals and identify essential questions that make content relevant and personally meaningful, incorporating self-assessment of skills and proficiencies, and utilizing self-pacing to accommodate varying learning styles and developmental progress can help create a student-centered classroom.

Young people need modeling, practice, and successive experiences with making decisions and growing an internal locus of control. If we continue to foster teacher dependency with all decisions being outside of students' control, we minimize the opportunities for them to develop critical skills that will enable them to be successful in school and in life. From deciding how to look up needed information to when it's

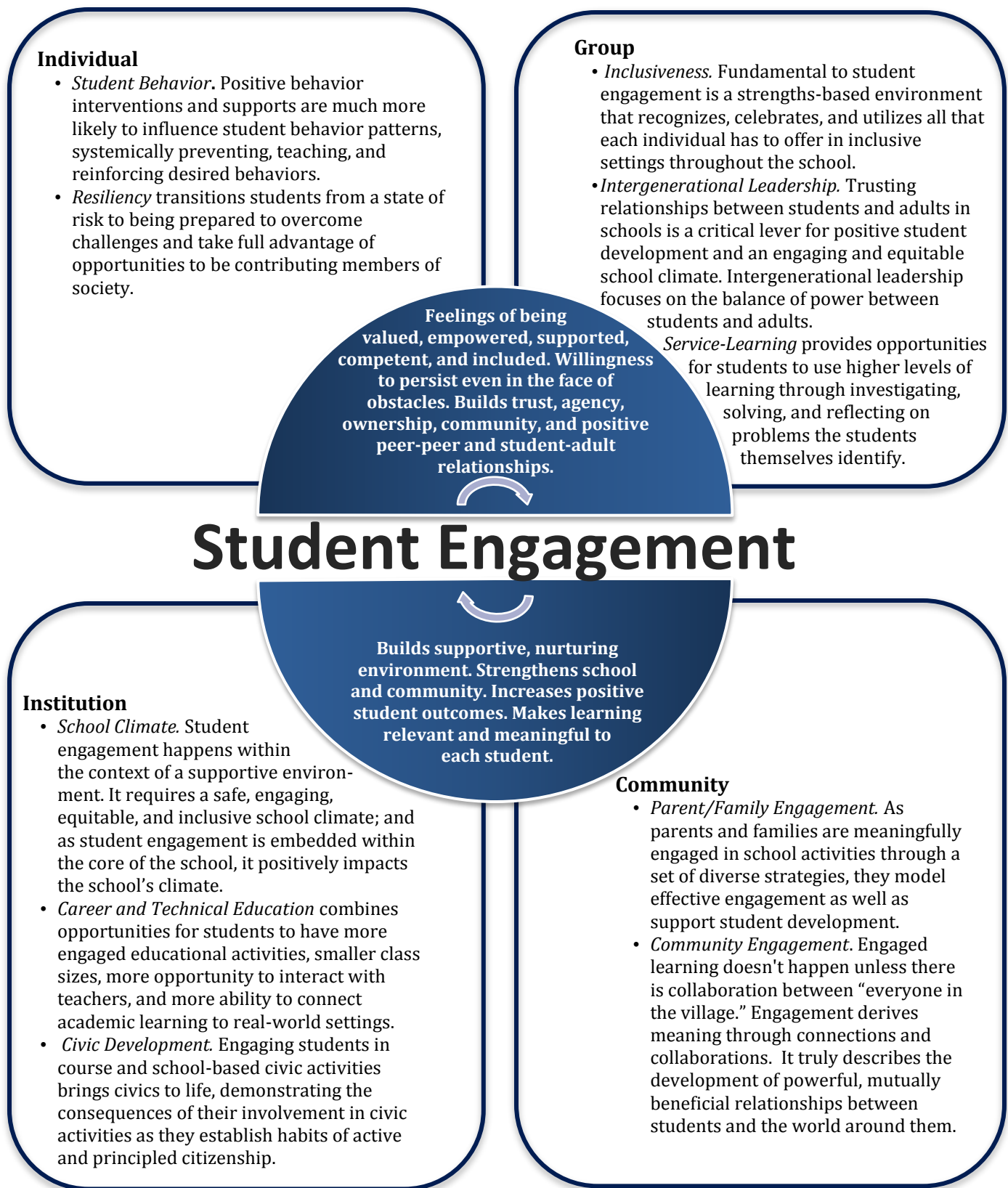


Figure 4. Ten education issues that benefit from and contribute to schoolwide student engagement.

appropriate to use their cell phone, students will become more proficient when we allow them opportunities to develop these skills.

Three of the 15 effective strategies developed by the National Dropout Prevention Center/Network directly affect student-centered instructional practices: service-learning, active learning, and career and technical education (or work-based learning). All three of these strategies can be particularly effective in allowing young people to actively participate in their own learning, explore the world of work, and to gather knowledge and skills through community engagement (Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Wulsin, 2008).

Service-learning is the process of strategically connecting academic instruction with problem solving and application of skills through addressing issues in the community that are identified by students. When done well, service-learning is more than simply providing a service to the community that also provides learning experiences for students. It is application of learning in its finest sense, driven by course content with student investigation of related challenges in the community, student-designed and implemented solutions, assessment of progress and process, and meaningful reflection imbedded throughout. It is important to note that the drivers of this process are students, not teachers. The teacher's role is to facilitate, partner with students in identifying and assessing instructional needs, and scaffold skills, as noted in the adult roles depicted in *Understanding the Continuum of Youth Involvement*. Done poorly, with the teacher at the helm planning, organizing, and managing the project with students carrying out adult-driven tasks, does little to increase student engagement at best and can even be detrimental to the process (Billig, Root, & Jesse, 2005).

We learned as babies that experience is the essential element of learning. Experience, together with reflective practices, constitute the essence of lifelong learning. In order to learn, people need to do something. One of the overall conditions of student engagement is that the learner be in active mode, actually doing something.

Research conducted by Kahne and Sporte (2009) demonstrated that doing service-learning and/or other classroom practices that connect academic study with community or civic work have some of the largest impact on student engagement. This, along with connections through career education and work-based learning, provide strong evidence that students stay engaged in school when they perceive the activities to be relevant and meaningful in their lives.

Stephen Hamilton wrote about the development of young people in *Apprenticeship for Adulthood* (1990), stating that it was the ability for young people to serve in "apprentice" roles, in all areas of life, that prepared them to become engaged, lifelong learners who learn about being an adult by being involved in the adult world. Thus, adult activities such as learning to have a job, being a member of the community, managing money, and being independent require actually doing these kinds of activities. And being active is the number one antidote to being bored, the reason many young

people give up on school. Regardless of the particular pedagogy, active learning as a dropout prevention strategy needs to be a process of engagement, with students taking an active part in the planning, execution, reflection, and assessment of their own learning.

### **Community as Classroom as Community**

Critical to doing “something” is ensuring that each student is provided with equitable opportunities to be meaningful contributors to their learning and their community. Classrooms should be structured to build on the skills and abilities of each individual in equitable, culturally responsive ways. Teachers who are successful in engaging each student are deliberate in creating a collaborative environment that is strengths-based. They differentiate instruction such that each student is adequately challenged, feels safe and comfortable in taking risks, and is able to contribute in meaningful ways no matter their ability level.

Fostering a classroom community based on interdependent relationships between peers as well as between students and adults (and in the context of a world outside the classroom) is an essential component to creating this nurturing environment. Incorporating collaborative learning projects, deliberative dialogue, and opportunities to rely on classmates as instructional resources increases students’ sense of community. It is important to build a foundation that emphasizes that the success of the individual is essential to the success of the whole. This interdependency creates connectedness and belonging, critical to high levels of student engagement.

Engaging classrooms offer shared leadership in making decisions that are relevant to the learning process. At its best, students and teachers form a partnership that is grounded in shared goals, high expectations, respect, and trust. As students have greater control over how they learn and demonstrate progress, their sense of personal responsibility for their learning increases.

Doing things that allow youth to see impacts from their efforts helps them to feel more efficacious, more self-sufficient, and more empowered to interact and collaborate with others. It is important to note that the impacts students see from their efforts need not all be positive impacts; in fact, it is imperative that they be allowed to fail safely, reflect, and learn. Young people need to experience accountability for what went wrong not just praise when it goes right. If the ingredients of trust and support and the understanding of the process are in place, then failing becomes a learning process. If we want resilience in students, we need to give them the opportunity to practice it, which means they have to fail.

In the process, it is imperative that students are taught how to be reflective learners, gaining skills in understanding how they learn, why they are learning, and what resources they need to become more proficient. Reflection affords students opportunities to understand what they did so they can learn how to do more and better things in the future. This reflection, either as a teacher-led or an independent process,

should be woven throughout instruction, occurring before, during, and after the learning experience.

As important as the instructional environment described above is to effective student engagement, it is important to recognize that classroom practices don't happen in isolation. An adequately engaging context is necessary, one which nurtures high levels of both youth and adult engagement, offering each opportunities to contribute meaningfully to decisions and be a needed member of the school community. Strategies for creating an interconnected school climate and culture that nurtures each individual within its realm will be addressed in the Implications section of this position paper.

## QUESTION #6: HOW DO WE GET OTHERS TO UNDERSTAND, IMPLEMENT, AND SUSTAIN STUDENT ENGAGEMENT THAT REDUCES DROPOUT RATES?

As advocates for student engagement, we understand the characteristics, research findings, implementation, and sustainability strategies as well as the responsibilities of education stakeholders to encourage, support, and reward student engagement. To ensure student engagement is valued and nurtured as a core strategy for schools, it is helpful to become familiar with a set of talking points that can be used to inform and influence others of the critical role of student engagement in dropout prevention. The talking points below are organized into the following commonly asked questions.

1. Why do students need to be engaged?
2. Why should schools integrate and sustain student engagement?
3. What does student engagement do for students and the school?
4. How will student engagement assist students to fully develop?

The answers to these questions provide a foundation for messaging key student engagement concepts to others.

1. **Why do students need to be engaged?** Research shows that student engagement is an effective strategy for students to develop academic, social-emotional, career, and civic competencies. Student engagement will respond to the challenges many students identify as reasons they dropout: being bored, unmotivated, and disengaged.
2. **Why should schools integrate and sustain student engagement?** Education stakeholders want to create the conditions and align strategies to support student development and reduce dropouts. Student engagement provides a comprehensive set of strategies that students need to succeed in school and life.
3. **What does student engagement do for students and the school?** Student engagement nurtures students' full development and creates a school climate

that is safe, built on trusting relationships, implements active teaching and learning strategies, and establishes a physical environment appropriate to acquiring knowledge and building skills. When these conditions are in place, schools will be more effective in achieving their goal of preparing young people for success in school, work, and civic life.

4. **How will student engagement assist students to fully develop?** Well-implemented student engagement assists students to fully develop by combining subject-based and skill-building activities in relevant, meaningful, and impactful ways. Student engagement integrates course content with mission driven expectations that successful graduates will be critical thinkers, good decision makers, effective communicators, and involved global citizens.

These questions and their answers can be prepared for various education stakeholders to ensure they are relevant and meaningful with their responsibilities. In our upcoming Student Engagement Toolkit we will share specific messages oriented to each of the education stakeholders that can be adopted or adapted by student engagement advocates.

## **QUESTION #7: WHAT SUSTAINABILITY STRATEGIES SHOULD SCHOOLS INTEGRATE?**

Student engagement is not an activity; it's not something that happens on Wednesdays; it's not something that happens in one class and not another, or in one grade or another. It is ubiquitous, and needs to be consistent in value even if variable in terms of types of experience. Therefore, student engagement must be sustainable over time and across contexts. There are four key elements to address in ensuring student engagement becomes sustainable over time and across the school.

### **Shared Leadership**

Like other education innovations, student engagement usually begins with a few champions, but ultimately needs to expand beyond the early adopters and be interwoven throughout the school. It needs shared leadership. All education stakeholders need to encourage, support, and implement student engagement across all settings in the school. Unless this integration happens, it remains a marginal program rather than a core school experience, and will fall far short of its potential. This includes ensuring school leaders, staff, teachers, students, families, and community partners understand the characteristics of student engagement, implementation options, professional development opportunities, and alignment with school mission and goals. Shared leadership also focuses on co-ownership of student engagement rather than asking others to “buy-in” to others’ priorities.

Shared leadership leads to the prevalence of high-quality student engagement practices across grade levels and classes so that students’ experiences and competencies build



consistently. However, shared leadership will only lead to these outcomes when students have been prepared to lead, have adequate tools to support their meaningful leadership, and authentic power and choice is provided in making decisions. While there is certainly variation in student engagement classroom and school activities, each is guided by the characteristics of high quality.

## **Policies**

In addition to shared leadership and the prevalence of high-quality student engagement, schools require sufficient infrastructure and support, resulting in policies that ensure student engagement is sustained. Infrastructure and support includes personnel and resources sufficient for student engagement to be a priority and an expected experience of each student. It means adequate professional development is provided to school staff to ensure understanding of how to implement effective student engagement strategies. It means students are adequately prepared to participate in decision making, from school-level decisions to setting personal goals and reflecting on progress in the classroom. And it means administrators create an infrastructure that provides time for diverse stakeholders to be meaningfully involved in decision making, ensure funding to support the growth and development of adults and students, and maintain consistent expectations for each member of the school community to think and act in student-centered ways.

## **Research and Evaluation**

In order to sustain student engagement, short- and long-term research and evaluation are essential. One of the unique benefits of student engagement is the ability to engage students in collecting and analyzing data to continuously improve practice, report findings to education stakeholders, and demonstrate the outcomes and impacts of student engagement.

## **School Climate**

These strategies to effectively integrate and sustain student engagement align with the school's climate. Thus, the quality and character of the school determines the degree of sustainability within the school. There are four essential components of school climate that contribute to student engagement sustainability. They are:

1. **Safety:** ensuring physical and emotional safety for each student to be fully engaged in school activities.
2. **Trusting Relationships:** ensuring relationships between students and their peers, as well as with adults in schools, are built on trust for each student to be confident in engaging with others.
3. **Teaching and Learning:** ensuring pedagogies engage students in decision making aligned with course-based activities for each student to see the relevance of classroom activities to their development.

4. **Physical Environment:** ensuring classroom and school equipment, settings, and walkways are accessible for each student to effectively navigate as they are engaged in activities.

In short, sustainability is both about content and context (school climate), intentionally focused to ensure each student is effectively engaged throughout his or her school career.

## QUESTION #8: WHAT RESOURCES ARE AVAILABLE TO SUCCESSFULLY INTEGRATE AND SUSTAIN HIGH-QUALITY STUDENT ENGAGEMENT?

The following organizational and research/practice-based resources highlight student engagement.

**ASCD** is a global community dedicated to excellence in learning, teaching, and leading. ASCD's Whole Child approach is an effort to transition from a focus on narrowly defined academic achievement to one that promotes long-term development and success of all children. ASCD provides a set of *engaged indicators* and in-depth resources that move schools from a vision for educating the whole child to action that results in successful, well-rounded young people.

<http://www.ascd.org/programs/The-Whole-Child/Engaged.aspx>

The **National Dropout Prevention Center/Network** is committed to increase graduation rates through research and evidence-based solutions. Since inception, it has worked to improve opportunities for all young people to fully develop the academic, social, work, and healthy life skills needed to graduate from high school and lead productive lives. By promoting awareness of successful programs and policies related to dropout prevention, the work of the Center/Network and its members has made an impact on education from the local to the national level.

[www.dropoutprevention.org](http://www.dropoutprevention.org)

The **Nellie Mae Education Foundation** stimulates transformative change of public education systems across New England by growing a greater variety of higher quality educational opportunities that enable all learners—especially and essentially underserved learners—to obtain the skills, knowledge, and supports necessary to become civically engaged, economically self-sufficient lifelong learners. The Foundation's focus on student-centered approaches acknowledges that students engage with learning in different ways, so public schools need student-centered strategies—rather than a top-down, one-size-fits-all approach. Student-centered approaches to learning highlight four key tenets, drawn from the mind/brain sciences,

learning theory, and research on youth development that are essential to students' full engagement in achieving deeper learning outcomes.

<http://www.nmefoundation.org/our-vision>

The **Forum for Youth Investment** helps leaders get young people ready for life. The Forum works with state and local leadership groups to fundamentally change the way they do business for young people. Working with others, the Forum implements field-tested strategies that strengthen state and local partnerships focused on youth, expand and improve learning opportunities for all youth, and align and advance policies and resources to make them more effective.

<http://forumfyi.org/about>

#### **Understanding the Continuum of Youth Involvement.**

<http://www.andersonwilliams.com/continuum-of-youth-involvement.html>

National Coalition for Academic Service-Learning. (2012). ***Engaging Students Through Academic Service-Learning: National Guide to Implementing Quality Academic Service-Learning.***

<http://dropoutprevention.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/Engaging-Students-Through-Academic-Service-Learning-Implementation-Guide.pdf>

Wistar, R. (2009). ***Effective Use of Self-Paced Learning in the Classroom Environment.***

The Knowledge Network for Innovations in Learning and Teaching

[http://tccl.rit.albany.edu/knilt/index.php/Effective\\_Use\\_of\\_Self-paced\\_Learning\\_in\\_the\\_Classroom\\_Environment](http://tccl.rit.albany.edu/knilt/index.php/Effective_Use_of_Self-paced_Learning_in_the_Classroom_Environment).

## **SUMMARY**

Research shows that student engagement is an effective strategy to reduce the dropout rate. To effectively integrate student engagement, schools need to:

- ensure there is a comprehensive definition of student engagement that focuses on the set of individual and organizational relationships;
- support classroom and schoolwide strategies that provide meaningful learning within a supportive environment;
- align student engagement and dropout prevention with other education issues;
- engage all education stakeholders in support of student engagement; and
- focus on shared leadership, supportive policies, and school climate to sustain student engagement.

This paper follows the *Continuum of Youth Involvement* and research as guides to effectively understand, integrate, and sustain student engagement into schools so that each student feels connected and builds competencies to be successful in school and in life.

Student engagement is critical for dropout prevention in that it builds student attributes, creates positive relationships, improves school climate, and strengthens community collaborations. This paper examines effective school and community-based strategies that schools can adopt or adapt to deepen and broaden student engagement with positive outcomes and impacts.

Several national and international organizations focusing on student engagement are identified, which together with the National Dropout Prevention Center/Network, offer resources and strategies to assist schools to effectively engage students.

Following the dissemination of this position paper, a toolkit will be developed to assist schools in developing a comprehensive set of strategies that together will create an engaging center of learning for each student. This toolkit will incorporate effective practices, policies, and procedures to align key education issues with student engagement and ultimately, contribute to increased graduation rates.

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Teri has taught in both general and special education classrooms in grades K-8 and served as a consultant to local districts in grades PK-12. She also served as the program director for Do Something, designing an implementation model for service-learning using backward curriculum design. Nationally, Teri has led collaborative efforts among state-level experts as Co-Chair of the National Coalition for Academic Service-Learning.

At the state level, Teri was the Education Consultant for Service-Learning and the Education Consultant for Emotional Behavioral Disabilities at the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction. Recent projects include serving as a technical assistance coordinator for the U.S. Department of Education's Rural Dropout Prevention Project, consulting with the Waupun Area School District to evaluate and support improvement in behavioral programming, and resource development for Special Olympics International.

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He provides technical assistance and training in the U.S. and foreign nations to teachers, state and district-level policymakers, and education leaders on effective strategies to engage youth, create policies, increase effective school practice, and engage community members to improve education and student success. He also provides professional development to these constituents in service-learning and civic development to ensure that schools achieve their civic mission.

Previously he was the senior education consultant for Special Olympics Project UNIFY, implementing social inclusion strategies in schools throughout the world; executive director of the National Center for Learning and Citizenship at the Education

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### **Rob Shumer**

Robert Shumer has been involved in education for almost 50 years. He has taught students from middle school through graduate school and conducted research in many areas, from service-learning, to teacher education, to character education, to career and technical education, to civic engagement, to participatory evaluation.

He served as the founding director of the National Service-Learning Clearinghouse at the University of Minnesota and internal evaluator for the National Research Center for Career and Technical Education. He also served as Director of Field Studies at UCLA and Vice Chair of the International Association for Research on Service-Learning and Community Engagement.

He has published book chapters; books; and more than 85 articles on service-learning, youth-led participatory evaluation, career and technical education, teacher education, and community-based learning. He also has taught courses and consulted in many countries around the world, including Mexico, Germany, England, Ireland, Morocco, Canada, Japan, Taiwan, Singapore, and China.

He received his Masters in Educational Psychology from California State University, Northridge, and his PhD in Education from the University of California, Los Angeles.

### **Anderson Williams**

Anderson Williams serves as a Product Manager for a mobile communication platform at The Advisory Board Company. He co-founded and served as the Chief Product Officer at Zeumo, which was acquired by the Advisory Board Company in 2015.

Previously, Anderson served as the co-founder and Senior Director of Strategic Initiatives for the Tennessee College Access and Success Network where he led the creation of the organizational strategy, outcomes, and metrics for a statewide intermediary organization. As part of this work, he also helped build a 150-member network and develop a policy platform to increase college access and success in Tennessee.

He also helped design and develop the Nashville College Connection, Nashville's first and only college access resource center.

His early work in youth organizing around college access was recognized as a finalist for the Peter F. Drucker Award for Nonprofit Innovation and is the subject of a

documentary titled *College on the Brain*. In addition to regional, national, and international training and consulting work, Anderson co-authored “The Core Principles for Engaging Young People in Community Change” and “Youth Organizing for Educational Change” with the Forum for Youth Investment, and his writing was published in a special issue of the international *Journal of Community Psychology* on “Youth and Democracy.”

He has worked with schools, local and national nonprofits, and other community partnerships facilitating staff development and strategic planning with an emphasis on more democratic organizations and practices for both youth and adults.

Anderson received his Master of Business Administration at Vanderbilt’s Owen Graduate School of Management, a Master of Fine Arts from Cranbrook Academy of Art, and his BA from Wake Forest University.

Anderson recently published his first book, titled *Creating Matters: Reflections on Art, Business, and Life (So Far)*.



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