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The Progress of Education Reform 2007

Student Engagement

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Educational Engagement: A Successful Strategy for Academic and Civic Achievement and Success

As policymakers and education leaders focus on improving schools, student engagement should be one of the strategies they consider. In our current high-stakes education environment, policymakers and education leaders support strategies shown to contribute to student achievement. Quality student engagement should be considered as an effective intervention that leads to student success.

What is student engagement? It is the connectedness or bonding students feel to school; it incorporates the idea of commitment or investment in one's education; and it can be influenced by relationships with teachers and peers, class work, studying, school behavior and more.¹

When students are engaged in their schooling, they generally have better experiences. Some researchers and policymakers focus on student engagement as an effective strategy to learn and apply academic knowledge; others focus on student engagement in service to their community to acquire and enhance civic competencies; and others focus on student engagement as an intervention to reduce dropout rates.

Significant research focuses on how engagement assists students to create and sustain relationships that matter for academic success. In particular, attention has been paid to how engagement assists "at-risk" students to move from risk to resiliency. Schools can provide support to students, particularly those at risk, through resilience-building experiences that focus on five themes:²

1. Competency (feeling successful)
2. Belonging (feeling valued)
3. Usefulness (feeling needed)
4. Potency (feeling empowered)
5. Optimism (feeling encouraged and hopeful).

Schools can create a climate, integrate programs and sustain pedagogies that lead to these themes and contribute to better academic, social, emotional and civic outcomes. Regardless of the purpose of engaging students, it is important to consider multiple strategies to enhance student engagement. A singular focus on any one of the factors mentioned above can lead to some student gains, but it is only when all these related factors are addressed in a systemic and integrated manner the greatest sense of resiliency leads to achievement and success.



Policy Implications

These studies and others focused on student engagement suggest that policymakers and education leaders should consider student engagement when developing education policies. Policy options include:

- **Consider student engagement as both an indicator and an intervention.** Understanding the current level of student engagement in a school serves as an important indicator of student connectedness in school and the community. Annual (or more frequent) surveys of student engagement should be part of the schools' accountability system. And as a consequence of these measures, schools can adopt interventions that increase the engagement of all students. As a result, student engagement is not only measured but enhanced to lead to greater student achievement and success.

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High school dropouts are significantly less likely than better-educated Americans to vote, trust government, do volunteer work, or go to church, according to a new report that reveals a widening gap in "civic health" between the nation's upper and lower classes.³

In recent years, researchers have focused their attention on issues that contribute to undesirable behaviors and their impact on academic achievement. Beyond question, youth must acquire literacy, numeracy and communication skills to be adequately prepared for adult life. In addition, service to others and to the community is a key element of many dropout prevention efforts.⁴

Academic performance and educational engagement are key factors that can affect a student's likelihood of graduation:

- ⊙ **Academic performance:** Students who struggle in the classroom and fall behind academically are more likely to drop out. Low grades, low test scores, failing grades in English and math, falling behind in course credits, and being held back one or more times have all been linked to lower chances for graduation.
- ⊙ **Educational engagement:** Students who become disengaged from school and develop disciplinary problems are more likely to drop out. High rates of absenteeism or truancy, poor classroom behavior, less participation in extracurricular activities, and bad relationships with teachers and peers all have been linked to lower chances for graduation.

Education-related factors should be important to policymakers and educators concerned with reducing dropout rates both because they are practical and predictive. Such factors describe something that takes place inside of school rather than something that happens in the home or that students bring with them from outside.

This issue of the *Progress of Education Reform* features highlights of K-12 research on student engagement, a civic orientation and building resiliency. Taken together, they provide a useful, up-to-date look at evidence on the merits of engaging students for achievement and success. It also includes policy implications based on the research, as well as links to studies and resources on student engagement in higher education.

Student Engagement In Higher Education

National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE)

- ⊙ This annual survey documents dimensions of quality in undergraduate education and provides information and assistance to colleges, universities and other organizations to improve student learning. <http://nsse.iub.edu/index.cfm>

Engaging Students, Challenging the Odds, Community College Survey of Student Engagement

- ⊙ This report gives voice to community college students, particularly those who have to overcome the greatest odds to complete their education. www.ccsse.org

The Freshman Survey, Higher Education Research Institute

- ⊙ An annual study of over 400,000 entering students during orientation or registration covering a wide range of student characteristics: parental income and education, ethnicity and other demographics items; financial aid; second school achievement and activities; educational and career plans and values; attitudes and beliefs; and self-concept. www.gseis.ucla.edu/heri

Voices of Students on Engagement: A Report on the 2006 High School Survey of Student Engagement (HSSSE)

(Ethan Yazzie-Mintz, Center for Evaluation & Education Policy, Indiana University, 2007)
http://ceep.indiana.edu/hssse/pdf/HSSSE_2006_Report.pdf

This report highlights findings from a survey of 81,499 high school students in 110 schools and 26 states and identifies three dimensions of engagement: cognitive/intellectual/academic engagement; social/behavioral/participatory engagement; and emotional engagement.

The HSSSE “investigates the attitudes, perceptions and beliefs that students have about their work, the school learning environment and their interaction with the school community.” The report highlighted findings of four key questions from the survey:

	<i>Agree or Strongly Agree</i>
<i>“If I could select a high school, I would go to the same school again”</i>	<i>61%</i>
<i>“I care about my school”</i>	<i>70.5%</i>
<i>“I am engaged in my school”</i>	<i>72%</i>
<i>“I am an important part of my high school community”</i>	<i>55%</i>

While responses to these four questions show the majority of students seem content with their current high schools, they also highlight large segments of the high school population who are discontent. Nearly 40% of students would select a different school, and 45% do not feel they are an important part of their high school community.

The survey also found that:

- Two out of three students are bored in high school at least every day; 17% reported being bored in every class in high school; and only 2% of students say they have never been bored in high school.
- When asked “If you have been bored in class, why?,” 75% responded “material wasn’t interesting;” 39% responded “material wasn’t relevant to me;” 32% responded “work wasn’t challenging enough;” 31% responded “no interaction with the teacher;” and 27% responded “work was too difficult.”
- Twenty-two percent of respondents have considered dropping out of high school, either “once or twice” (15%) or “many times” (7%).
- Twenty-four percent of students who have considered dropping out of high school indicated that a reason for considering dropping out was that “No adults in the school cared about me.”

The report reminds readers that the most important aspect when exploring student engagement is “hearing and understanding what students themselves say and believe about their relationship to the school community.” The author suggests that an “Engagement Gap” exists in schools today, and while additional research is needed, a focus on engagement is an important first step toward engaging all students in their school community.

Policy Implications (cont.)

- **Create a systemic approach to engagement.** Creating a systemic approach to student engagement ensures that student engagement is a priority of all adults in the school community, provides the structures to support student engagement and ensures that all students have the opportunity to become engaged in their school community. This systemic approach addresses the multiple reasons students are disengaged, including a reassessment of curriculum and pedagogies to increase engagement with academic content; reconsidering the structure of schools to ensure each student has the opportunity to have a meaningful relationship with at least one adult in the school; and providing professional development to ensure teachers acquire the knowledge and skills to employ quality engagement strategies.
- **Consider ways that student engagement responds to other education and social challenges.** Student engagement need not – and should not – occur as an unrelated effort to other school reform strategies. In fact, it is an effective strategy to increase parental participation, ensure community involvement and decrease the dropout rate. Student engagement therefore becomes a critical characteristic of school improvement, supported by policies, quality practices, professional development and using data for improvement.

The successful adoption of these or similar options requires support for (1) school-wide reforms, (2) individually-targeted efforts for students who need additional supports beyond the school-wide reforms and (3) professional development for teachers and administrators. Student engagement, therefore, becomes an expected component of education that leads to student achievement and success.

Civic Engagement and High School Academic Achievement Progress: An Analysis Using NELS Data (Part I of An Assessment of Civic Engagement and High School Academic Progress)

(The Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, January 2007)

<http://www.civicyouth.org/PopUps/WorkingPapers/WP52Mora.pdf>

This study utilized the data panel from 1988-2000 in the National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS) to test the impact civic engagement has on “educational progress” made after the 8th grade. The initial study, of a nationally representative sample of 8th graders in public and private schools, occurred in 1988, with follow-up surveys in 1990, 1992, 1994 and 2000. Students who dropped out after the 8th grade are included in the follow-up surveys.

The study examined if civic engagement affects academic progress in reading, math, history and science; if voluntary community service affects academic progress as compared to involuntary community service; and if civically engaged teens were more likely to acquire higher education than their peers.

Overall, the study revealed that civically engaged high school students tend to make greater academic progress and are more likely to graduate from college than their peers several years later.

The study revealed:

- A positive relationship between involvement in 8th grade student government and community service four years later.
- Nearly 12% of “uninvolved” students had dropped out of school by 1992, compared to 4.5% of those engaged in community service.
- Almost half of students performing community service in 1992 graduated from college eight years later, compared to a quarter of those who did not.
- Participation in high school student government improved the scores of students in each academic measure.
- With the exception of reading, community service in 1992 also related to a positive effect on academic progress.

¹ National Center for School Engagement, presentation at the 2006 NCSE Summit for Leaders in School Engagement. September 18, 2006. <http://www.schoolengagement.org/TruancyPreventionRegistry/Admin/Resources/Resources/107.pdf>

² Sagor, Richard. “Building Resiliency in Students,” *Educational Leadership*. 1996; Margaret C. Wang, Geneva D. Haertel, and Herbert J. Walberg, *Educational Resilience: An Emergent Construct*. National Education Center on Inner Cities. Philadelphia. 1995.

³ *America’s Civic Health Index: Broken Engagement*. National Conference on Citizenship, in association with CIRCLE and Saguro Seminar. September 18, 2006. <http://www.ncc.org/conferences/2006civichealth.pdf>

⁴ Halperin, Samuel and Nancy Martin. *Whatever It Takes: How Twelve Communities Are Reconnecting Out-of-School Youth*. American Youth Policy Forum. Washington, D.C. 2006.

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