

# Student Engagement and High School Reform

Educators can motivate students to achieve if they fulfill students' needs for competence, extrinsic rewards, intrinsic interest, social support, and sense of ownership.

“What can I do to get students to concentrate, to put more effort into schoolwork, and to take it seriously?” This persistent question, asked by teachers daily, has been largely neglected by the educational reform movement. The problem of disengagement is especially acute for middle and high school students. During adolescence, students begin to develop new patterns of social and sexual relations that absorb a great deal of their energy and attention. At the same time, they also need to master knowledge that they apparently consider foreign to their interests. These forces combine to make serious student effort in school both more important for learning and harder to achieve than in the early years.

## What Is Engagement?

Engagement is more than motivation or the general desire to succeed in school. It involves participation, connection, attachment, and integration in particular settings and tasks. As such, engagement is the opposite of alienation: isolation, separation, detachment, and fragmentation.<sup>1</sup> Persons are engaged to a greater or lesser degree with particular other people, tasks, objects, or organizations. Thus, engagement helps to activate underlying motivation and can also generate new motivation.<sup>2</sup>

Engagement in academic work is the student's psychological investment in learning, comprehending, and mastering knowledge or skills. Students' levels of engagement in academic work can be inferred from the way they complete academic tasks: the amount of time they spend, the intensity of their concentration, the enthusiasm they express, and the degree of care they show.

## The Problem of Engagement

Because learning requires committed effort by each student, engagement is critical; yet it is difficult to achieve. Certain basic elements of schooling inhibit student engagement. For example, teaching is essentially coercive. Society tells children that they have a problem—ignorance—that must be

solved whether or not they want to solve it. Furthermore, the success of a teacher depends largely upon how much effort the student is willing to devote to prescribed tasks whose benefits are rarely evident to the student in the short run. In addition, children are typically taught in large groups (20-35 per class) where individual needs for belonging, attention, and power may not be met.

Of course, disengaged students may get by in school by making a token effort. That is, they can tune out, complete some of the work with minimal concentration, and even cheat. But such behavior will yield only short-term knowledge retention, which is unlikely to be applied or transferred beyond a few school tests. Students simply cannot meet the proper cognitive demands of secondary education through passive listening and reading.

## Factors that Affect Engagement

What do we know about enhancing student engagement in schoolwork? Studies of schooling and research from psychology and sociology suggest the importance of five factors: students' need for competence, extrinsic rewards, intrinsic interest, social support, and sense of ownership.

*Need for competence.* Most people have a powerful need to develop and express competence. This is especially

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true of young people. Achieving cognitive understanding and skill mastery—"getting it right"—are personally rewarding, especially when they enable people to influence the world.<sup>3</sup> When efforts to act competently are successful, the student continues to make a personal investment, and the cycle continues.

**Extrinsic rewards.** Competence can be rewarded by high grades, admission to higher education, attractive jobs, increased income, social approval, and status. Extrinsic rewards that are powerful for some students, however, may have no effect on the engagement of others. Only when students perceive that academic achievement will lead to rewards they value and, further, believe that their own hard work will result in academic achievement, will their engagement increase.<sup>4</sup>

**Intrinsic interest.** Students may invest in or withdraw from learning depending on how interesting they find the material, regardless of its connection to extrinsic rewards. Students naturally find some topics and activities more stimulating and enjoyable to work on than others.<sup>5</sup> However, what a student finds interesting often depends not simply upon the subjects or topics themselves but upon the way the topics are presented and the student's prior experience with those concepts.

Some learners—generally adults—also acknowledge the value of academic study apart from either intrinsic interest or extrinsic benefit. When a learner considers the logic of mathematics, the process of scientific inquiry, or the foundations of culture intrinsically worthwhile, his or her engagement is enhanced, even if these subjects seem less interesting and lead to fewer extrinsic rewards than other subjects.

**Social support.** The messages of support or disapproval from the people and institutions that surround students establish the extrinsic rewards and affect the intrinsic interests and values that, in turn, influence engagement.

But learning involves risk taking: making mistakes and trying again. Un-

less one can trust teachers and peers to offer support for working hard, the learning process may be too punishing to try. Fear of failure, especially in a society as competitive as ours, can suppress engagement in academic work and divert the need for competence to other activities that are psychologically more comfortable.

To build students' confidence and willingness to invest themselves, schools must offer special forms of social support. They must convey that all students are full-fledged members of the school community, entitled to the care and respect of staff and peers.<sup>6</sup> This sense of caring must not, however, be contingent on students' academic achievement alone. Success in academic work is important, but there is more to life than academic achievement. Students' moral worth and dignity must be affirmed through other avenues as well, such as nonacademic contact with staff in athletics, music, outings, and personal advising. Cooperative learning among peers also offers social support to counteract the alienating aspects of competitive learning. (See Smith's description of the Media Academy, p. 38 of this issue, for an example.)

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**Sense of ownership.** Engagement with learning and internalization of knowledge depend to a large degree on the opportunities students have to "own" the work. Rather than always toiling under predetermined routines dictated by school authorities, students must have some influence on the conception, execution, and evaluation of the work itself.<sup>8</sup> At a minimum, this requires flexibility in the pace and procedures of learning, opportunities for students to ask questions and to study topics they consider important, and opportunities for students to construct and produce knowledge in their own words, rather than merely parroting the language of others.

#### **Implications for Practice**

Unfortunately, many proposed reforms neglect the issue of student engagement, and these factors are rarely considered by policymakers. The ideas I have discussed might, however, help to anticipate results of policies, programs, and practices. The reforms' increased emphasis on norm-referenced testing, for example, might improve engagement for the few: those students who strive for high scores, those who value the kind of knowledge tested, and those already likely to succeed on the tests. On the other hand, the use of norm-referenced standardized tests ensures that at least half of all students will score below average. The procedures of standardized testing also prohibit students from working cooperatively to arrive at solutions. Finally, the format of multiple-choice items allows no opportunity for students to produce knowledge in their own words. These features deny large proportions of students the possibility of competent performance, minimize social support, and diminish student sense of ownership. Standardized tests, therefore—and the practice exercises used to prepare for them—can be expected to *undermine* the engagement of many students.

In contrast, consider the proposal to reorganize high school instruction into "charter schools" in which interdisciplinary teams of 4-6 teachers

spend most of the school day with a stable group of 150 students.<sup>9</sup> These teacher teams are free to organize the grouping and scheduling of instruction according to the demands of the topics studied and students' interests and readiness. Such teams may have no effect on extrinsic rewards, but they usually personalize learning and show greater responsiveness to students' learning styles. Personalization builds social support; responsiveness to individual differences builds sense of ownership; and both are likely to enhance students' interest in, and valuing of, what is studied. Therefore, we would expect these reforms to enhance student engagement.

Thus, educators should examine proposed interventions for the extent to which they channel the need for competence toward success in academic work, offer students increased access to extrinsic rewards, cultivate the study of intrinsically interesting and valuable material, provide consistent social support, and maximize student ownership of learning.

Some students are already engaged by the conventional forms of curriculum, teaching, testing, and social relations in high school. If we want to boost the achievement of far more, however, we should pay attention to the ways that conditions of schooling and strategies of reform can enhance or undermine student engagement in academic work. □

1. Newmann (1981) reviewed the implications of alienation theory for high school reform.

2. Brophy (1987) offers a synthesis of research on motivating students to learn.

3. See the original research on "effortance" by White (1959) and the synthesis by Smith (1968).

4. Bishop (In press), for example, claims that job placement and salary levels offer few extrinsic rewards for academic engagement, because they are not tied to students' achievement levels in high school. He also argues that an economic system that provides only a competitive reward structure (a zero sum game where winners emerge only by creating losers) offers no incentive for students in the bottom half to become academically en-

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gaged. Ogbu (1974) also showed how students' perceptions of future economic opportunity affect engagement in school.

5. See Deci (1975) and Maehr (1984) for syntheses of research on intrinsic motivation.

6. Students from minority cultures or low status groups face special threats to self-esteem from the dominant culture. Social support through culturally responsive pedagogy is necessary to transform student opposition into engagement (Erickson 1987).

7. See Wehlage et al. (In press) for an extended treatment of the importance of social support through school membership.

8. The need for a sense of control over one's work has been established in the literature on alienation (Blauner 1964, Braverman 1974) and motivation (Deci and Ryan 1985).

9. See Budde (1988) for the proposal for charter schools.

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