The Engagement Gap
Making Each School and Every Classroom an All-Engaging Learning Environment
A Report on the Spring 2016 ASCD Whole Child Symposium
About ASCD

ASCD is the global leader in developing and delivering innovative programs, products, and services that empower educators to support the success of each learner. Comprising 125,000 members—superintendents, principals, teachers, professors, and advocates from more than 128 countries—the ASCD community also includes 52 affiliate organizations. The nonprofit’s diverse, nonpartisan membership is its greatest strength, projecting a powerful, unified voice to decision makers around the world. Learn more about how ASCD supports educators as they learn, teach, and lead at www.ascd.org.

ASCD Whole Child Approach

Launched in 2007, ASCD’s Whole Child approach is an effort to transition from a focus on narrowly defined academic achievement to one that promotes the long-term development and success of all children. We help educators, families, community members, and policymakers move from a vision about educating the whole child to sustainable, collaborative action. Join us, and together we’ll change the face of education policy and practice.

Learn more at www.ascd.org/wholechild.
Kaya Henderson has served as chancellor of the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) since 2010. Under her leadership, DCPS has become the fastest-improving urban school district in the country and, after decades of decline, has seen four consecutive years of enrollment growth. Prior to joining DCPS, Henderson was a partner at the New Teacher Project, which is responsible for helping urban school districts recruit and retain effective teachers. She began her career in education as a middle school Spanish teacher in the South Bronx.

Bena Kallick is codirector of the Institute for Habits of Mind, an international organization dedicated to transforming schools into places where thinking and habits of mind are taught, practiced, and valued. She is also the program director for Eduplanet21, a company that promotes online professional learning and curriculum development. Kallick is an ASCD author and well-known education consultant worldwide.

Russell Quaglia is executive director of the Quaglia Institute for Student Aspirations and founder of the Teacher Voice and Aspirations International Center. Quaglia has written numerous books and presents all over the world to share his passion for ensuring that the voices of student, teachers, and principals are always heard, honored, and acted on.

Sean Slade serves as director of Outreach at ASCD and moderator of the Whole Child Symposium. He has more than 25 years of experience in education in a career that encompasses four continents and five countries. Slade coauthored the 2014 ASCD Arias publication, *School Climate Change: How do I build a positive environment for learning?*

Kim Thomas is the 2016 Illinois State Teacher of the Year. Currently in her 23rd year of teaching, Thomas is a math teacher at Woodruff Career and Technical Center in Peoria Public School District 150.
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Introduction

Significant time, attention, and resources have been directed toward closing the persistent achievement gap in our K–12 public education system. The same, however, cannot be said about solving the “engagement gap.” Because achievement is unlikely to improve if students are not engaged in their education, finding ways to close the engagement gap is an essential goal to ensure that high school seniors graduate well prepared for the rigors of college and careers—and become well rounded, successful, contributing members of society.

But what exactly is the “engagement gap,” why is it important, and what have education professionals learned about what works in narrowing or eliminating it?

In May 2016, ASCD convened a Whole Child Symposium that brought together education experts with deep knowledge of research, school administration, classroom teaching, and professional development to answer these questions. These educators led a conversation about how each school and every classroom can become an all-engaging learning environment.

The symposium, the fourth in a series, provides a forum for education professionals to discuss today’s pressing education issues. These symposia aim to elicit varied viewpoints and recommend actions that each of us, regardless of our areas of influence, can take to improve education systems, processes, and outcomes.
Education Issues in the Media

Each of ASCD’s Whole Child Symposia distinguishes itself from standard education debates by asking professional educators to lead the conversation. The norm in the media, unfortunately, is for noneducators to be up front and present when discussing educational issues. In 2014, Media Matters analyzed education coverage on weeknight cable news programs over that year to determine how many of the shows’ guests, who appeared to discuss the topic of education, were professional educators. The analysis found that, across MSNBC, Fox News, and CNN, educators made up only 9 percent of guests during education segments.

“That’s part of the problem. Too many people who have never really worked in schools . . . are making decisions . . . talking about education. ASCD’s Whole Child Symposia bring together real educators to talk about real education issues.”

—Sean Slade

VIDEO CLIP

http://bcove.me/h64p92ec
Why This Topic?

In the 2014 Gallup report *State of America’s Schools: The Path to Winning Again in Education*, Connie Rath, vice chair of Gallup Education, summed up well the engagement gap that exists in the U.S. education system:

Right now, our schools are not set up to match students’ talents with college and career paths they find fulfilling and in which they excel. The current focus on standardized testing assumes that all students should have a similar educational experience. We leave little time for students to figure out what they love to do and where their greatest talents lie. We waste time and talent.

Excellent teachers, supported by gifted and visionary school leaders, keep students engaged in the learning process and hopeful about their own future. . . . Students who strongly agreed that their school is committed to building students’ strengths and that they have a teacher who makes them excited about the future are almost 30 times as likely to be engaged learners as their peers who strongly disagreed with both statements. What if schools prioritized these principles of talent exploration and engagement in the learning process? (p. 5)

Students who are engaged in their education do better on a variety of indicators (Gallup, 2014; Jackson & Zmuda, 2014; Quaglia Institute, 2014; Voke, 2002). They stay in school, graduate with the skills and competencies needed for higher learning and the workforce, and develop a greater understanding of how to be successful, contributing members of a democratic society. In short, students who are engaged in learning continue to grow and learn.

And it’s not just the researchers or academics who believe this to be true. Ask any student, and they will speak highly of teachers, lessons, and settings that engage them.
The Future Project is an organization that seeks to turn schools across the country into places that unlock the passion and purpose of everyone inside them. Recently, the organization asked students the question, is school engaging and how would you improve it?

VIDEO CLIP
https://vimeo.com/155339834

Left to right: Kim Thomas, Kaya Henderson, Sean Slade, Russell Quaglia, and Bena Kallick
Making Classrooms More Engaging

Russell Quaglia, the executive director of the Quaglia Institute for Student Aspirations, and founder of the Teacher Voice and Aspirations International Center, makes it his business to transform schools and classrooms into more engaging learning environments by studying, promoting, and putting into practice the conditions that foster student aspirations.

According to Quaglia’s own annual research, which polls thousands of students on how they would rate their schools, 51 percent of them say that school is boring.

“That percentage is not a surprise to anyone. What’s surprising is that we haven’t done anything [about it] yet.”

—Russell Quaglia

Quaglia shared another piece of relevant data revealed by his annual research: Around 70 percent of 6th grade students report that they understand why they are learning what they are learning in school. By the time these same students are high school seniors, that figure can drop as low as 17 percent in some schools.
“And we wonder why we are losing these kids . . . we haven’t made the connection to what matters to them . . . If we want them to get engaged, we have to first let them know that they matter.”

—Russell Quaglia
Teacher-Student Responsibilities

Teachers rarely ask their students what they want from a lesson or from a class, and one of the reasons, according to Quaglia, is that students frequently respond that they don’t know. Rather than assume that the task of asking has been completed, the teacher should instead be questioning why don’t the students know.

“I don’t think kids know what they want unless . . . we share with them why things are important for them to learn.”

—Russell Quaglia

To engage students more fully, teachers need to know what matters to their students, what they are thinking, and how they can improve the learning environment. But the responsibility for creating more engaging teaching and learning extends beyond teachers to students.

Quaglia spends much of his time inside schools conducting leadership trainings, surveys, and focus groups. He said that when students complain to him that their teachers are uninspiring or don’t appear to care about them, he tells them that the responsibility is theirs to “do something about it.”
Student voice and responsibility go both ways. Schools and teachers must provide avenues for student voice, opinion, and ownership in the classroom. But they must also request and expect the students to take responsibility for their views. It's not enough for students to request change and sit back; teachers must encourage students to act on their opinions.

Establishing a system where trust and accountability are shared student-teacher responsibilities ensures that student engagement increases. It becomes a virtuous circle of engagement and ownership. Over-reliance on teacher-led and teacher-driven instruction only reinforces the status quo, with both students and teachers falling back into outdated roles where learning and engagement stagnate.

Additionally, giving students a certain level of ownership doesn’t cost anything. DCPS Chancellor Kaya Henderson has urged administrators and teachers to allow students to take on real responsibilities and to start “believing in our students and allow[ing] them to have [a] voice and opportunity for cocreation.”
Reflect First, Act Second

Well-meaning schools can unintentionally derail student engagement and ownership by making simple mistakes, such as when administrators and teachers act on behalf of their students without involving them in strategic planning. As a result, students become bystanders in their own education or passive recipients of the strategic actions. If educators believe that it’s important to engage and empower students in their own learning, then dismissing, or failing to even ask, their opinions in the strategic planning process sells the process short. Too many schools conduct student surveys and rush to create action plans before reflecting on and questioning the data across all stakeholders, including the students themselves.

Educators, Quaglia said, should review student feedback and ask, “Why are they telling us that?” and then go back to the students and engage them in further, ongoing dialogue.

“As long as our education system is grounded in testing and accountability, the effort to move the needle on student engagement will not increase until we move to a system of trust and accountability. . . . Listen to student voices. . . . What do they have to say? Why are they telling us that? And then resist the urge to rush to create an action plan.”

—Russell Quaglia

VIDEO CLIP
http://bcove.me/b3w417pv
Student surveys become missed opportunities and a waste of valuable human and financial resources if they don’t lead to shared decision making between educators and their students. This takes relationship building and the development of trust that the shared process will lead to increased student engagement as well as academic achievement.

The purpose for surveying students should transcend the mere process of collecting student opinion and reflecting on why students are saying what they are. Educators should be questioning how well student responses correspond with the vision of the school. Changes and improvements to school climate and culture, as well as teaching and learning, must directly align with the school’s overarching mission.

“Data is meaningless unless you connect it to the vision.”
—Russell Quaglia
Relationship Building 101

The common theme throughout ASCD’s Whole Child Symposia, as well as each episode of ASCD’s Whole Child Podcast, regardless of topic, is the importance of building and maintaining relationships.

“If you don’t connect with students, know who they are . . . how can you craft lessons that are engaging and meaningful? . . . The closest thing to a silver bullet in education is relationships.”

—Sean Slade

“Our entire life is predicated on relationships,” Quaglia said, citing the prevalence of customer satisfaction surveys across industries such as hotels, airlines, and restaurants. Standard questions—Were you welcomed? Did staff show that they cared? Did they say good morning?—are all connected to increasing the positive experience of the customer and forging stronger business and return customer relationships.

School systems, certainly the learning environment, should effect a similar service model to ensure greater overall customer satisfaction. Students and their families are the customers that the educational system serves. Likewise, higher education, the workforce, and society are the customers who are well served by strong K–12 systems.
“Kids want to go back to classrooms where they feel comfortable, where people care about them, where there are relationships. . . . We just need to make kids know that they matter.”

—Russell Quaglia

Kim Thomas, the 2016 Illinois State Teacher of the Year and a 23-year veteran educator who teaches math at Woodruff Career and Technical Center in Peoria Public School District 150, said that it’s the “teacher’s responsibility to make those students want to come back to that classroom and learn.”
Creating a positive relationship is the prime factor of effective teaching and something that can be intertwined throughout the curriculum. Thomas urged teachers to ask students what they like, what makes them laugh, what they love. “Use that in any curriculum or content that you are teaching, and [students] will want to be there.”

The same relationship message was highlighted by Milagros de Souza, a student at Eastern Senior High School in Washington, D.C., who questioned what made the panelists different from some other adults and teachers.

“What causes you guys to be different? What fuels you guys to actually think about the children . . . and how can you give that to other teachers?”

—Milagros de Souza
Students as Clients and Partners

In the six years that Henderson has led the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS), it has become the fastest-improving urban school district in the country. After decades of decline, Henderson’s school system has enjoyed four consecutive years of enrollment growth. When Henderson talks about students as DCPS clients and partners, it’s easy to understand why enrollment is on the rise.

Young people spend the vast majority of their time in school, but we “don’t trust them enough,” Henderson said. “We don’t believe in them . . . don’t believe they have valid experiences and opinions. . . . We reject that at DCPS.”

Two years ago, when Henderson and her central office team were determining ways to make high school more engaging for students, they asked the students to rank their budgetary priorities.

The resounding feedback from DCPS students was that they wanted more electives; more money for student government activities; and more art, music, physical education, and AP classes. DCPS then built its budget based on what students clearly shared as their main learning priorities.

Administrative action, said Henderson, “conveys to our students that they matter—when you are willing to put money where the students tell you to put the money. I think we need to get back into the business of trusting our brilliant, amazing young people.”

VIDEO CLIP
http://bcove.me/g8q9uacw
Student voice is essential to student engagement, said ASCD author Bena Kallick, who also codirects the Institute for Habits of Mind, an international organization dedicated to transforming schools into places where thinking and habits of mind are taught, practiced, and valued. She also serves as the program director for Eduplanet21, a company that offers online professional learning. Kallick, a well-respected education consultant, encouraged teachers to view their students as teaching assistants, to give them a voice as to what goes on in the classroom.

“Their ideas matter,” Kallick said. “Are the kids cocreating those projects? They have as many great ideas as we do. So, to what degree do we invite them to the design table?”

—Bena Kallick

Adults, Kallick said, should not be designing for students but designing with them.
DCPS prioritizes student engagement to the point where a portion of its teacher evaluation system now includes a student survey so that students can rate the effectiveness of their teachers. Although the effort has received resistance from some educators wary that these student surveys may become only a measure of popularity, Henderson said administrators should trust their students’ feedback.

These comments were echoed in a recent American University Radio (WAMU) interview with Jason Kamras, DCPS’s chief of instructional practice, who said that student voice and engagement is considered more than just nice words to have as part of the DCPS tagline.

“We believe what our children say is important . . . and that their feedback should be included in the evaluation in a thoughtful way.”

—Jason Kamras

“Students are the primary clients that teachers serve. We trust our college students to evaluate their professors at the end of any course. Why don’t we trust our high school students, our middle school students? Why don’t we trust our upper elementary school students?”

—Kaya Henderson

Audio Clip

http://thekojonnamdishow.org/shows/2016-03-30/dcps-teacher-evaluations-to-include-student-surveys

(Scroll to section 3:19–4:11.)
According to Henderson, when students rate their experiences with the learning environment using objective surveys, the results highly correlate to teacher effectiveness. The DCPS survey asked students to rank their responses (on a 1–10 scale) to meaningful questions, such as, When you are struggling, does your teacher help you over the obstacles? Does your teacher want you to learn? Is the classroom environment a place where you feel supported?

“Our students are very capable of sharing those experiences, and it makes teachers accountable to students in a completely different way.”

—Kaya Henderson
Although the linking of the student survey back to the formal teacher evaluation process has drawn criticism from some educators, it has also won support from others.

Student Voice and Principal Opinion
Jennifer Huff, Principal, Plummer Elementary School, SE DC
via the Kojo Nnamdi Show, WAMU

AUDIO CLIP
http://thekojonnamdishow.org/shows/2016-03-30/
dcps-teacher-evaluations-to-include-student-surveys
(Scroll to section 24:06–25:01.)
Quantifying Student Engagement

What word best describes student engagement?

The responses from the live and online audiences to this question raised the follow-up question, does engagement always equate to fun and excitement? Although it can, it also doesn’t have to. Excitement can be an indicator of increased student engagement, but so can curiosity and wonderment.

“I’m wondering what we really mean by ‘excitement’. . . . What are we really thinking about when we say excitement? . . . We want kids to love school, want them to love the classroom and love subject matter. . . . But whether the main idea of engagement is excitement? I don’t know that I’m always excited about new ideas, but I’m intrigued. I’m curious. I’m interested. I want to know more.”

—Bena Kallick
Kallick is well known for her work in identifying 16 different types of intelligent behavior that she and Arthur L. Costa defined as “habits of mind,” which are intended to aid both students and educators as they encounter problems for which easy solutions are not able to be found.

Student engagement, Kallick asserted, is inextricably linked to the degree to which teachers are engaged every day. This requires that teachers’ professional development take them to new levels and places where they too feel engaged in the teaching and learning process.
“Everything we say we’d like for kids, I’d like to see us like for teachers as well as for administrators. . . . This is an integral part of the solution that cannot be overlooked.”

—Bena Kallick
Doing What Needs Doing

So how can professional educators make districts, schools, and classrooms all-engaging learning environments?

Thomas urged schools to allow teachers to mentor one another—so that one teacher can see how engagement is successfully carried out in a classroom and learn how to incorporate similar strategies in their own. Getting to know the students is also key, she added. “Don’t ever ask a kid, ‘What’s wrong?’ Ask, ‘What I can I do to make you happy?’ When happiness is imminent, learning is infinite.”

The responsibility dynamic in schools needs to be shifted, Quaglia advocated. Together, he said, teachers and students create an engaging classroom. He urged educators to spend less time worrying where their students came from or the challenges they bring to the classroom and instead concentrate on “where they are going” in the future. He acknowledged the mind shift required for making this change, but he urged educators to not be hindered by the past.

Henderson said that she wants to work with teachers and students to make every school and every classroom a place where students love to be. One of DCPS’s top five goals is to have 90 percent of all students say that they “love school”—and currently DCPS is on track to meet that goal.
“When I say that, people chuckle . . . [but] this is not a laughing matter,” she said. “This is incredibly serious. We will only be successful if our schools are places where [students] love being.”

Kallick said we need to have “hard talk about soft skills. Too often we marginalize those skills as if they are so-called ‘soft’. . . . As long as we keep marginalizing those things, [we] cannot really get to the level we’re talking about.” She urged that decision making reside with the education experts who spend the majority of their time working directly with students, rather than with people who are further away from the lives of the kids and “know far less about what they need to succeed.”
Summary

Engagement is more complex than entertainment or excitement, though it can incorporate those emotions and reactions. Engagement is also more complex than just providing student voice, though again that should be a prerequisite.

Engagement is about knowing your students. Knowing what makes them tick, knowing what inspires and motivates them. It is also about knowing your craft as a teacher and being able to adjust methodology to suit needs.

Engagement is also a two-way street. For true engagement, everyone must play a role. It shouldn’t be a passive activity, where the teacher engages the student, but rather an active one, where the students have roles to play. True engagement equates to ownership of learning.

Above all, seeking engagement in education requires teachers to take a step back from the expected and to develop—often spontaneously—responses to the occasion.

The most engaging and creative teachers are often those who are prepared to take risks; to try something new; and to listen, reflect, and engage students in the processes of learning and decision making for schools.

Ironically, focusing myopically on outcomes or benchmarks, while providing a good path, can take us away from making every school and every classroom an all-engaging environment. If we are to make every school engaging and every student an engaged learner, then we must be prepared to let the teacher teach and the learner learn. We must be focused more on the process of learning and a little less on the outcomes.
Recommendations

For the past several years, U.S. education policy has focused on improving students' academic performance and closing persistent achievement gaps. Although these goals are appropriate, the prevailing policy levers used to address them have failed to prioritize student engagement. As a result, engagement has all too often been an afterthought despite its direct influence on performance.

Fortunately, policymakers are showing a growing interest in improving student engagement and supporting the whole child. To translate this interest into action, they should consider the following suggestions.

Student-Teacher Relationships

Students with teachers who care about them and encourage their development are more likely to be engaged in school. To cultivate such relationships, schools and districts can designate advisory periods in the school day to allow time for teachers to meet with small groups of students, advise them on academic and social issues, and help them plan for the future. Additionally, states and districts could allocate resources so that all students benefit from the attention and services provided by support staff, including counselors, mentors, and career coaches. In particular, policymakers should take steps to provide all students with adequate access to school counseling. Although the American School Counselor Association recommends a student-to-school counselor ratio of 250-to-1, only three states meet that benchmark. The national ratio is 491-to-1.

Exciting and Relevant Learning Experiences

Large numbers of U.S. students report that they don't get to do what they are best at in school, according to the Gallup Student Poll. How can we expect students to be engaged in learning if they can't develop their strengths and learn about the topics that interest them the most? Every student should have access to a well-rounded curriculum that includes instruction in social studies, sciences, technology, physical education, and the arts in addition to English and math. One way policymakers can elevate the importance of these subjects is by making access to a well-rounded curriculum a standard for school accountability.
Individual learning plans can help students work with educators to build personalized courses of study that match their interests and postsecondary aspirations. Additionally, state and district policy can support schools and communities in providing opportunities for students to participate in problem-based and experiential learning through internships, co-op programs, and more.

**Student Voice That Matters**

Student surveys are a primary way to collect student feedback and give students a voice in their education. States should measure student perception of school culture and climate, the quality and relevance of their education, the preparation they feel for their next steps, and other key areas. Moreover, districts and schools should administer their own surveys based on their unique needs and priorities. As the symposium panelists noted, however, such surveys are a missed opportunity if they do not lead to further discussions and shared decision making between educators and their students. Thus, schools should be required to include students in strategic planning. Policymakers at the district and state levels can model this by including students on task forces, committees, boards, and other decision-making bodies and by ensuring that student voice is a key component of decision-making processes. Policymakers can also consider adding measures such as student survey results into accountability systems. If school quality was determined, in part, on whether students feel safe and cared for at their schools, engagement would become a much more important part of the equation.

**Engaged Teachers = Engaged Students**

It’s difficult, if not impossible, for students to be engaged if their teachers aren’t. Educators need professional development, career growth, and distributed leadership opportunities that are relevant and engaging and keep them committed to the profession. They also need release time and scheduling options so that they have time to observe their peers, mentor their colleagues, contribute to strategic planning, and even participate in externships that allow them to apply their skills in other settings and gain firsthand knowledge of the various career opportunities available to their students.
References


Whole Child Symposium
The ASCD Whole Child Initiative