Strengthening Student Engagement

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International Center for
Leadership in Education
Rigor, Relevance, and Relationships for ALL Students

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Engagement-Based Learning and Teaching Approach

Simply telling or encouraging students to engage themselves in their class work is seldom enough. The engagement-based learning and teaching (EBLT) approach provides the foundation for developing and strengthening student engagement and the overall learning process. This foundation is built through specific principles, habits, skills, and strategies. All members of the school community can join forces to develop schoolwide practices that cultivate student engagement beliefs, values, feelings, motivation, behavioral habits, and skills that are at the crux of high levels of student engagement.

The three domains of student engagement unfold in EBLT as follows:

- **Cognitive domain** consists of beliefs and values.
- **Emotional domain** consists of motivation and feelings.
- **Behavioral domain** consists of habits and skills.

In the EBLT approach, teachers and parents work systematically across all three domains to ensure an integrated approach to cultivate and support student engagement at the highest level. The core habits of student achievement and other skill sets, such as organizational skills and self-discipline, also will be developed in the student through this approach.

Key Elements of EBLT

The EBLT approach encompasses the following six objectives.

1. **Cultivate one-on-one relationships.** The one-on-one relationship between student and teacher is the critical element that can lead to increased student motivation and higher levels of engagement in academics and school life.

2. **Learn new skills and habits.** Teachers can learn new skills and habits that help them to develop, polish, and enhance their already natural inclination to motivate and engage students.

3. **Incorporate systematic strategies.** Teachers can learn systematic strategies that facilitate student engagement. Students can develop behavioral skills and habits that lead to increased academic achievement and greater involvement with school life.

4. **Take responsibility for student engagement practices.** It is primarily the teacher's responsibility to engage the students, as opposed to the teacher expecting students to come to class naturally and automatically engaged.

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5. **Promote a schoolwide culture of engagement.** The best way to promote high levels of student engagement is to develop and maintain a schoolwide initiative that is dedicated to creating a culture of student engagement, involving students in school activities, and providing a rigorous and relevant education program for all students.

6. **Professional development is an important part of increasing student engagement.** Staff development, combined with staff ownership and recognition, is critical to developing and maintaining a culture of effective student engagement.

Laying the Foundation for Student Engagement

It is easy to observe the lack of student engagement when students are slouched in their chairs and not listening to the teacher or participating in the discussion. Many teachers who constantly see disengaged students put the burden on the student and lament that they could be better teachers and have better results if they had the opportunity to work with a "better" group of students. But classrooms with high levels of student engagement are not simply a result of "student quality."

It is true that, depending on students' prior experiences, attitudes, and perceptions, students can make it easier or more difficult to create a highly engaged classroom. But teachers are not limited to poor learning results because students are not engaged. When educators examine more closely the characteristics of engaging instruction, they can begin to identify the elements that contribute to high levels of student engagement. These elements are a combination of the background of students and the influence and expectations of family and peers, but they also include schoolwide and classroom practices.

For teachers to deal with low levels of student performance, they must begin to reflect on the elements that contribute to student engagement. Teachers can have direct control and make changes instantaneously in some areas. For other changes to occur, it will take time for both students and the teacher to develop new skills. Improvements may depend on planning and seeking out new solutions or making changes at the schoolwide level.

Regardless of the time it takes to make significant changes to improve student engagement practices, educators should become familiar with the two basic elements that together provide the roadmap for teachers to focus on and facilitate student engagement. These elements are preconditions and pedagogy.

Preconditions

Preconditions are the factors that must be in place even before classroom instruction begins. The factors are:

Learning relationships. Most students will not do their best in classes when they feel that teachers do not have an interest in them or care about their future. Students can sense whether the teacher cares or is simply "going through the motions." All of the characteristics that we know about building relationships are essential to contributing to highly engaged classroom instruction. Students show increased effort in classroom activities when teachers take an interest in students as individuals, get to know them by name, and talk to them not only in the classroom but during other activities in the school as well.

Creating the ideal classroom environment. Good instruction can take place in a variety of settings. However, there is no question that well designed and well maintained classroom facilities have a positive impact on student engagement.

Classrooms should be physically comfortable for students with respect to temperature, space, furniture, and structural organization. Classrooms also need to be mentally stimulating, with attractive displays that include samples of student work and colorful designs. Good teachers pay attention to the physical learning environment and do not make changes to that environment that could become obstacles to student learning.

Rewards and incentives. There is much discussion within education communities and by researchers and practitioners about the role that rewards play in stimulating student work. Probably every teacher at some point has used a "bribe" of food, recreation, or some other reward to encourage students to finish a project or to follow a specific procedure, such as being quiet in a classroom.

There is some concern, and rightly so, that if rewards are used routinely, students are only exhibiting the learning behavior to receive the reward. When the reward disappears, the behavior will stop. Rewards and incentives do have their place, but they must be incorporated carefully.

A key to effective use of rewards is whether it is offered in advance of a behavior. A bad use of the reward system is when a teacher says to students, "If you are quiet for the next 30 minutes, you will get a piece of candy." In this scenario, the student associates the behavior with the reward. It is a better practice to give the reward spontaneously after the behavior.

Grades are the big incentive system in schools. Students do the work, but often they do the minimal amount possible in order to receive the grade. Some students even openly avoid doing any work that is not tied to a grade. In this scenario, students see their learning experiences as meaningless activities, but they have to get the good grade to move on toward the next phase of their lives.

Where could students have gotten this gross misunderstanding of the importance of grades? It is the fruition of how we as educators have misguided students as to what is important. We have tried to spur student engagement in otherwise boring and meaningless activities by tying it directly to a grade, by giving a reward in hopes that students would complete their school work.

Also, many students feel labeled as "C" or "D" learners from prior experiences in school and see little reason to improve their efforts. Grades are not a motivation to these students, who are comfortable with completing very little of their work or skipping it altogether. Many schools need to reexamine grading policies both at the schoolwide and classroom level to ensure that this reward system provides a situation in which students are encouraged to work hard.

In general, teachers need to reflect on the appropriate use of rewards in the classroom. The goal should be to build a stronger student perspective on intrinsic motivation as an incentive for student work and student learning, such as the pride of completing a difficult task or the satisfaction that comes from a job well done.

There is no perfect grading system or time to give or withhold rewards. However, schools and teachers need to examine current practices constantly and consider changes that will increase the level of student engagement with respect to using incentives and rewards.

Guiding principles. These are positive character attributes and appropriate behaviors for achieving in school and becoming good citizens as adults. In recent years, however, many schools have moved away from programs that deal with behavioral issues and character education to avoid divisive community debates about whether schools should be teaching anything beyond the old 3 Rs.

The development of a child's character and appropriate behavior is first and foremost the responsibility of the family, but schools can play a strong supporting role. Schools with the highest levels of student achievement do not sidestep the issue of character education. They embrace it. These schools acknowledge that their success is due in large measure to their attention to guiding principles, through which they have been able to create the supportive learning environment that is essential for students to achieve high standards.

Following are some guiding principles used by many schools.

- adaptability
- compassion
- contemplation
- courage
- honesty
- initiative
- loyalty
- optimism
- perseverance
- respect
- responsibility
- trustworthiness

Habits. These are the routines and procedures that teachers create in the classroom. Habits include the way that students enter a classroom or engage in an activity at the start of every class period. Other habits include the ways that students open and organize materials that they need for the day, move from large to small groups for various activities, and work on individual problems.

Teachers can create improved classroom environments and higher levels of student engagement if they focus on appropriate procedures and have students practice those procedures until they become habits. When students fail to follow the procedures, teachers need remind them of the rules and ways in which they can practice them. Good habits help to make effective use of instructional time and reduce the disruption that distracts students from the learning process. It is through practices that these procedures become powerful habits and keep students engaged in learning.

Fundamental skills. These are the basic proficiencies that all students need to be able to participate in class and complete their work. Student need basic reading skills, for example, to be able to understand directions and materials used in any subject area. Students also need to acquire the skills to facilitate discussions and to learn how to listen to the teacher as well as other students in group discussions. They also need basic skills in technology for doing Internet research or preparing PowerPoint presentations. In addition, students need to learn basic social skills. To function in the classroom and workforce and as responsible citizens, they have to

learn how to greet others, respect space, resolve conflicts, and ask questions. Teachers should ensure that students have these skills through pre-assessment and by constantly monitoring student engagement levels.

Pedagogy

The following key aspects of pedagogy help teachers create an environment in which rigorous and relevant learning can take place.

Designing for rigorous and relevant learning. One of the barriers to high levels of student engagement is the lack of rigorous and relevant instruction. While it is essential that students acquire fundamental skills before they proceed to more complex work, teachers should not keep students hostage by requiring that they complete all the isolated basics before they have the opportunity to engage in challenging and applied learning experiences. Relevance is just as critical as rigor. Relevance can help create conditions and motivation necessary for students to make the personal investment required for rigorous work or optimal learning. Students invest more of themselves, work harder, and learn better when the topic is interesting and connected to something that they already know.

Personalized learning. Each student brings a unique set of characteristics to the classroom: different background knowledge, a unique learning style, a variety of interests, and varied parental support and expectations. To anticipate that each student will learn in the same way, at the same speed, and using the same material is an unrealistic expectation.

Some teachers fall into the false assumption that the student is responsible when he or she fails to demonstrate adequate achievement. But often it is the lack of personalizing learning that is the source of failure. There are many individual practices and strategies that contribute to overall personalization. As a start, teachers can create a more engaging classroom situation by getting to know their students and using examples during instruction that relate to students' backgrounds, cultures, and prior experiences.

Parent involvement also is a part of personalizing learning. By reaching out to parents and establishing cooperation and support for learning expectations, teachers are able to achieve greater personalization. Students also need to experience differentiated instruction instead of constant large group instruction moving at the same rate of speed. There should be opportunities for them to do individual assignments, to work at their own speed — to move more slowly on more difficult material and more quickly on concepts or skills in which they have higher proficiency levels.

Active learning strategies. While it may sometimes be efficient to have students listen to a short lecture, view video material, or read a textbook, doing these types of isolating, sedentary activities on regular basis becomes mind-numbing rather than mind-engaging. There are strategies that naturally contribute to a much higher level of student engagement. For example, cooperative learning strategies in which students are organized into structured discussion groups and play specific roles in analyzing problems and seeking solutions are more engaging than listening to a lecture. Moreover, varying instructional strategies adds interest and increases engagement. Even the most exciting activities, if done continually, lose their appeal.

Focus on reading. It may seem as a misplacement to talk about literacy as a key ingredient in student engagement. However, many successful schools emphasize the importance of focusing on literacy instruction for continuous learning in all subjects.

Having a literacy focus means that all teachers, regardless of subject area, know the reading levels of the materials that they are using, whether that material is incorporated in textbooks, classroom directions, Internet-based resources, or other reading sources. They also know the reading levels of their students. They are able to match reading materials with individual students and identify where there are significant gaps that might require a change in instructional strategy.

Teachers also need to incorporate vocabulary strategies as part of their individual course instruction. Paying attention to specific terms related to a topic of discussion and using strategies to gradually introduce and reinforce the vocabulary leads to comprehension and better student engagement in every subject. Teachers need to use comprehension strategies such as pre-reading and summarization that provide an opportunity for students to be more engaged in the required reading for a particular instructional activity. Reading is fundamental and cuts across all learning. If teachers expect high levels of student engagement, they need to pay attention to reading levels and establish instructional strategies with literacy as a primary focus in all they do.

Learning Relationships

Strong positive relationships are critical to the education process. Students are more likely to make a personal commitment to engage in rigorous learning when they know teachers, parents, and other students care about how well they do. They are willing to continue making the investment when they are encouraged, supported, and assisted. Building good relationships complements rigor and relevance. For students to engage fully in challenging learning, they must have increased levels of support from the people around them.

Perhaps what is needed is a taxonomy to help educators identify and quantify relationships that improve learning. The International Center has developed such a tool, called the Relationship Framework, which consists of seven levels of relationships.

Level 0 is **Isolated**. This is the lack of any positive relationships. The individual feels alone and isolated from social relationships that would enhance learning.

Level 1 is **Known**. A person must know someone before a relationship is formed. When teachers seek to develop positive relationships with students, the first step is getting to know them—their families, likes, dislikes, aspirations, and learning styles.

Level 2 is **Receptive**. Often, a learning relationship is described in terms of providing the assistance and support that a student needs. However, a preliminary step is showing that we are interested and genuinely care about developing a relationship. This comes from frequent contact in multiple settings and taking an active interest.

Level 3 is **Reactive.** In this case, one person receives guidance or support from another. This relationship yields emotional support or cognitive information.

Level 4 is **Proactive**. At this level, people have made a proactive commitment to do more than assist when needed and take an active interest in supporting the other person.

Level 5 is **Sustained**. Positive support is balanced from family members, peers, and teachers. It is a relationship that will endure over a long period of time. This is the level of relationship that effective parents have with their children.

Level 6 is **Mutually Beneficial**. Although this is the highest level, it is rare in education, for at this point, both parties contribute support to one another for an extended period of time.

The following chart describes the degrees of student support at each level of the framework.

Relationship Framework	
Learning Relationships — Support for Students	
0. Isolated	Students feel significant isolation from teachers, peers, or even parents. Students lack any emotional or social connection to peers and teachers.
1. Known	Students are known by others and are frequently called by name. Teachers know students and their families, interests, aspirations, and challenges. Students are known by peers with whom they interact in school.
2. Receptive	Students have contact with peers, parents, and teachers in multiple settings. Teachers exhibit positive behaviors of "being there" that show genuine interest and concern.
3. Reactive	Teachers, parents, and peers provide help to students when requested, but support may be sporadic and inconsistent among support groups.
4. Proactive	Others take an active interest in a student's success. Teachers take initiative to show interest and provide support. Students and others express verbal commitment for ongoing support and validate this commitment with their actions.
5. Sustained	There is extensive, ongoing, pervasive, and balanced support from teachers, parents, and peers that is consistent and sustained over time.
6. Mutually Beneficial	Positive relationships are everywhere and commonplace in the way that students, teachers, and parents interact and support the student as learner.

Once teachers make relationships important, they can begin to reflect on current practices and discuss how to improve them. Relationships are not simply good or bad; they exist on a continuum. Furthermore, relationships can change over time.

The Relationship Framework first helps teachers understand that there are degrees of relationships. When they think about their relationships with students, teachers can use the framework to apply a qualitative measure to the relationships they make. This qualitative measure helps teachers reflect on their current levels and allows them to decide if they wish to make changes to improve relationships. When relationships are categorized as a simple dichotomy of good or bad, teachers are not likely to reflect on their practices or make self-directed changes. If relationships are "good," there is no need for change. If relationships are "poor," it is easier to become defensive, blame the other party, or accept things for the way they are. When a specific framework is used for describing relationships, it has a different effect on teachers. Even if relationships are poor, there are at least some positive aspects on which to build. This makes teachers less defensive.

At the other end of the scale, relationships categorized as generally "good" are usually never as good as they could be. There is the potential for growth and further improvement. This motivates even the best teachers to continue to work on improving relationships and strive to reach higher levels. In this scenario, all teachers need to work on improving relationships regardless of their current level of success.

The various levels in the Relationship Framework help to identify the changes that need to be made to improve relationships. If a teacher observes that a student is isolated, the first step is to engage in interventions by getting to know the student and facilitating activities among peers to expand what they know about one another. Just because students "hang out" together does not mean that they really know much about each other. Sometimes a student in a group can be just as isolated as one who sits alone in a school cafeteria.

If a teacher observes that current student relationships are at the "known" level, relationship interventions can focus on frequency of contact and exhibiting behaviors of receptivity. The next level moves to behaviors that provide support to students.

Classroom Management vs. Learning-Based Relationships

The teacher's responsibility for teaching and learning in the classroom often is divided into instruction and classroom management. Instruction refers to the content and pedagogy of what is learned. Classroom management refers to the processes and techniques that teachers use to set the climate for learning. The words "classroom management" create the impression that the classroom is an industrial process rather than a collaboration among people. It suggests that the teacher applies certain management techniques without any emotion to make sure that the classroom runs smoothly and efficiently. The term originates in the industrial model of education, the same model that gives us rigid bell schedules, differentiation of labor, and large school houses.

School leaders have begun to question many of these industrial model characteristics. Perhaps one of the changes schools should make is to abandon the term "classroom management" and replace it with "relationship building." Teachers need to create a climate for learning in the classroom. However, this is not a process to be managed. The classroom is made up of a group of students who desire and deserve high-quality personal relationships with adults and peers. It is the quality of these relationships that drives their behavior and leads to learning. The following charts describes some differences when looking at the instructional climate as relationship building rather than as classroom management.

	Classroom Management	**Relationship Building**
Classroom Rules	Mandated	Negotiated
Power	Without question	Power with respect
Observation of Effectiveness	Students passive and quiet	Students actively engaged
Risk-Taking	Discouraged	Encouraged
Control Mechanism	Negative feedback/punishments	Positive reinforcement
Primary Teacher Role	Absolute attention	Source of encouragement

Relationships in school always can be improved. Schools can engage in specific practices to improve the quality of those relationships that influence student learning and the operation of a school. These practices fall into three categories:

1. **Supportive behaviors** are ways in which teachers act and interact with students to support learning and good relationships.

2. **Supportive initiatives** are school initiatives that contribute to learning and good relationships.

3. **Supportive structures** constitute major organizational changes that contribute to learning and good relationships.

Following are examples of adult and peer **behaviors** that influence learning relationships in a positive manner.

- Showing respect
- "Being there" for students and frequent contact
- Active listening
- One-on-one communication
- Encouraging students to express opinions
- Avoiding "put-downs"
- Writing encouraging notes
- Students praising peers
- Displaying students' work
- Identifying unique talents and strengths
- Exhibiting enthusiasm
- Using positive humor
- Serving as a role model
- Celebrating accomplishments

Following are examples of supportive **initiatives** that influence learning relationships in a positive way.

- Social activities to start the year
- Team building
- Mentoring
- Rewards, recognition, incentives
- Student advocacy
- Advisory programs
- Peer mediation
- Students as teachers
- Character education
- Parent partnerships
- Business-community partnerships
- Service learning/community service
- Extracurricular and co-curricular activities
- Sports programs

Schools also can implement major changes to their **structures** that can make it easier to develop positive learning relationships, such as the following.

- Small learning communities
- Alternative scheduling
- Team teaching
- Teaching continuity
- School-based enterprises
- Professional learning communities

Related resources available from the International Center for Leadership in Education, visit http://www.leadered.com/resources.html for more information.

Resource Kits:

Leadership for Rigor, Relevance, and Relationships
Strategic Reading in the Content Areas — Boosting Achievement in Grades 7-12
Student Engagement — Creating a Culture of Academic Achievement

Handbook:

Student Engagement — Teacher Handbook (available January 2009)

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