Engaging Students for Deeper Learning

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Mr. Persinger’s students at Monroe Elementary
“Student engagement in the classroom is about anticipating how to reach each learner so that she is personally invested in what we are doing in school.”

—Teacher Mike Persinger, James Monroe Elementary

Student engagement is a state priority, measured by student attendance, dropout, and graduation rates. While the focus of these measurements is keeping kids in class and school, student engagement goes beyond that. Engagement can give students the passion, curiosity, and commitment that leads to deeper and more sustained learning.

Educational leader Phillip Schlechty said, “Engagement is active. It requires the students to be attentive as well as in attendance; it requires students to be committed to the task and find some inherent value in what he or she is being asked to do.”

According to Mr. Schlechty, there are five ways that students respond or adapt to school-related tasks or activities. On one end of the spectrum, a student can be in a state of rebellion, with diverted attention and no commitment. This is a student who may be acting out or getting in trouble. A student is engaged when she has both high attention and high commitment: in other words, the task has meaning and value for the student outside of a letter grade. Because of this, she will persist in the face of difficulty and learn at higher levels.

This SCOE Bulletin provides tips, insights, and inspiration from Sonoma County educators who are working to increase engagement in their classrooms, schools, and districts.
Student Engagement: Spreading What Works

Student engagement can feel abstract and challenging to measure. Participants in a fellowship hosted by SCOE are finding very real ways to measure progress so that they can identify—and share—what works.

The program, called the Rooster Fellowship, builds off work done in previous efforts such as the Restorative Culture Collaborative to spread empathy, equity, and engagement in Sonoma County schools. In the 2018-19 school year, teams are specifically focused on increasing student engagement.

Each Rooster Fellowship team consists of several members representing different aspects of the educational system that must all work together to achieve success: A district administrator, a site administrator, a certificated classroom teacher, and either a para-educator, student, parent, community member, or industry partner. Throughout the year, they are testing different ideas to see what works. Then, they are looking for ways to spread these best practices to the larger school community. Following are some stories that highlight how these teams are measuring student engagement—and some examples of where they’ve found success.

“A Student’s Perspective

America, a Windsor High junior, is a member of her school’s Rooster team. She explains that her team is working to find out what at-risk high school students need so that they will want to learn and remember the knowledge they gained when they step outside of class. She shares that being a part of the process has revealed how much educators care about her and her peers.

“Before I got here, teachers would say that they cared but I always felt, ‘It’s not true, they’re just saying that because they’re teachers,’” she said. “But once I got to be here and see what you guys work on, I realized, ‘Oh they really do care and they want the students to succeed. We really are important to them.’”

When asked what is the number one thing a teacher can do to show they care, she says simply, “Just talk to them.”

“A student can be behind on something and the teacher won’t say anything,” she explains. “The student will think, ‘Oh they just don’t care. Why am I going to try if they don’t care about me?’ But when a teacher comes and actually talks to them and asks them what’s going on, it makes the student feel like, ‘Oh, they’re actually interested, they want to help.’ It makes the student feel important to the teacher.”

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Small Changes, Big Impact

Herbert Slater Middle School

Herbert Slater Middle School in Santa Rosa City Schools chose to focus its student engagement work on an eighth grade English class that represented a range of student groups displaying challenging behaviors. “Kids in this class struggled because they seemed so checked out,” said teacher Jaime Hamilton. Because more than half the students in the class were English language learners, they chose to focus on increasing engagement among Latino students specifically.

Slater’s work around student engagement is centered on the belief that “connection comes before content,” meaning students will be more ready to learn when they feel connected to their teacher and engaged in the process, said District Coordinator II, Kaesa Enemark.

Engagement was measured by the number of students reporting strong agreement with the statement that “class today was so interesting I didn’t want to leave.” Students reported on this several times a week, and the results were tracked on a “run chart” that helped the school pinpoint strategies that were successful—and those that weren’t.

Ms. Hamilton observed that there hasn’t been one silver bullet solution. “Sometimes it’s great and sometimes it’s awful,” she acknowledged. The process has allowed her to experiment and see what works and what doesn’t. For instance, she tried introducing a video about mindfulness that walked the students through stretching and breathing exercises. The students didn’t take it seriously, she said. Then she tried leading the class through the exercises herself, and the students were willing to try it. “I don’t think they know it, but they’re a lot calmer after doing the exercises,” she said.

Old Adobe Charter School

Old Adobe Charter chose to focus on increasing student engagement in a class of first graders. Working with young students presented unique challenges. This included how best to measure students’ sense of engagement. Students needed to understand the nuance of the question and how to use the online survey tool.

The Old Adobe team enlisted the help of older students to teach the first graders how to take the online survey where they rated whether they felt that class was “So interesting I didn’t want to leave” on a scale from one to 4. This effort was successful and the older students benefited from the process too. The team recognized that, compared with other ages, first graders tend to be naturally engaged, with a passion and openness for learning new things. They decided that they would work to enhance that natural engagement.

They used the survey results to determine what efforts got students more excited about learning. For instance, they noticed a spike in positive responses when students got to share their creative work with one another in a “gallery walk.”

“The students are very into sharing. They have a sense of pride in what they do, and any day they get to do that is a good day for them,” said Teacher Jenna Green. Building off that insight, the team worked to incorporate the concept of a gallery walk into an academic area. Students did academic journal writing and then shared their compositions with other students, who provided positive input with sticky notes.

“It’s good for them to see that what they’re writing isn’t just for the sake of writing,” Ms. Green said. “They have an audience.”

The team also found that the students enjoyed being involved in improving their education. Principal Jeff Williamson observed that the process has affirmed many of the things they already knew and practiced around student engagement. “Specifically, students are motivated by interaction and being able to collaborate and share as they learn,” he said. “Also, students are motivated when they are allowed to take leadership in their learning and be creative in expressing what they know.”

The work was structured so that educators at various levels of the system were involved, including a classroom teacher, an administrator, and district office staff. “This gives (the work) a narrow focus in the classroom with implications for district-wide improvement efforts - even by looking at just one first grade classroom,” observed Gina Silveira, director of curriculum.
Student engagement in the classroom is about anticipating how to reach each learner so that she is personally invested in what we are doing in school. The following five strategies are designed to foster higher order thinking and internal motivation in your students so as to maintain engagement.

**GROWTH MINDSET**

I like to start off the term discussing growth mindset and productive struggle. Students respond well to finding out that our brains are malleable, and that practice changes neural pathways leading to new habits. We discuss growth mindset occasionally, along with how putting in hard work is crucial to success. Try saying something like, “Everyone can learn math” and then remind learners that recent science has proven that our brains physically change when we work hard to learn new content and ideas.

*Check out Jo Boaler’s Week of Inspirational Math videos to introduce Growth Mindset in any subject area.*

**SENTENCE FRAMES**

Expecting students to speak in complete sentences is an especially important strategy to support English learners, and also an effective engagement strategy for everyone. Try posting sentence prompts for student response to teacher questioning, as well as sentence frames to support student dialogue.

For instance, instead of “I don’t know,” learners can begin to respond to teacher questioning with one of these sentence prompts: “Please repeat the question.” “I’m not sure, will you help?” “I need some thinking time.”

**COMMUNITY CIRCLE**

Community circle is a format for building a respectful, safe learning community. Academic demands can make it challenging for teachers to schedule in time for building soft skills such as are practiced in community circle. But building a learning community in which learners feel they belong and are heard also pays dividends when there is pressure to participate academically since students are more willing to take risks when they feel safe.

**MAKER PROJECTS**

I aim for at least one class Maker Challenge a month in which students form teams and go through the engineering design process in an attempt to meet a challenge in a set amount of time. We also make a few video projects during the year. Through these challenges, students are introduced to a variety of digital and analog tools (such as video editing software, power drill, mallet, glue gun, soldering iron) in which we develop a few experts. During the latter part of the year, we have Maker Time in which students design their own maker projects and elicit support from our experts as needed. It is usually messy and exciting, rigorous, and engaging.

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More often than not, when we think about engaging students, an image of a teacher with a top hat and cane may come to mind. But the reality is, engaging students does not simply equate with entertaining students. While an entertainer asks her audience to sit back, relax, and enjoy the show, a teacher who engages her students is inviting them to take an active part in their own learning. It does not require passivity; quite the opposite. Engagement is about connection and being present. Here are some tips on how to engage students with this in mind.

Meet them where they’re at.

The more you can take the time to get to know your students and recognize their unique contributions, the more likely they will be able to feel connected to you and their classroom community. This also means understanding that your students may not all be coming from the same starting point. Check in with your students and show them that you care about them as human beings. Design activities and assessments that honor differences.

Make it relevant.

Culturally responsive teaching invites teachers to look for pathways that help students connect the content to their own lives. Share real-world applications for what your students are learning. Teach current events. Give writing assignments that allow them to explore their own interests. Try upping the stakes and make it real by giving assignments with real-world deadlines, or a public audience, like NPR’s new Student Podcast Challenge or the New York Times Learning Network writing contests. Use the StoryCorps app to give students the opportunity to practice empathy and active listening by interviewing seniors in their community.

Teach the global competencies.

One of the hardest things about working with teenagers is getting them to see beyond themselves and their nearby surroundings (or let’s face it, their phones). Help your students connect to the world around them. This doesn’t just mean other countries; but their local community as well. Global citizenship is about empathizing with others and working together to make a better world for everyone. You can model this behavior yourself by engaging in community service activities, or seeking out opportunities to connect your students with community members and local organizations connected to your content area.

Teach them how to ask their own questions.

The Right Question Institute’s QFT (Question
Engaging High School Students

Formulation Technique) is a great way to nurture your students’ intellectual curiosity. Getting students to think about what they want to know is a great apathy buster and inspires inquiry.

Get inspired.

Observe your colleagues. Teaching to different learning styles means exposing yourself to different teaching styles. Stay current on your subject matter and be passionate about what you do. Read widely. Keep yourself up-to-date on current trends in your content area. Model what it means to be a lifelong learner.

Model failure.

Your vulnerability reminds your students that you are human. Remember, FAIL = First Attempt in Learning. Model a growth mindset for your students. This might mean giving students a “Not Yet” instead of an F, or encouraging them to take risks and be creative, even if their idea does not necessarily pan out.

Get outside.

You can plan a field trip, yes, or you can simply change up your environment. Are there lessons or activities that can be done outside, or simply somewhere else than your classroom? Sometimes a change of scenery is all that is needed to get the creative juices flowing or to change your class dynamic.

Say it many ways.

Cater to different learning styles as much as possible. Some students are visual learners, while others are kinesthetic learners. The more you can do to ensure you are not just catering to one learning style day after day the better you can reach ALL of your students. Try having your students take a multiple intelligences quiz to help make them more aware of their unique abilities and learning styles.

You don’t always have to be the expert.

Enlist a guest speaker to speak to your students about a specific topic, field, or industry.

Mix it up.

Break students up into pairs and small groups to share ideas through apps like Team Shake. Play pretend by trying out a simulation that allows students to put themselves in the shoes of a historical character or engage students with interactive assignments that inspire play, like creating a board game that teaches math or science concepts.

Build community.

Treat your class as the distinct community that it is. No two classes will ever be the same. Work together to establish class norms. Remind students they belong. For example, in my class students create a “T-Shirt” that we use as an introductory activity at the beginning of the year that remains up throughout the year as a reminder that they have a place in my classroom and that each of us has value. In my Ethnic Studies class, we use a “community ball” during class discussions that each student created by adding a few strands of yarn. Each time a student speaks they hold the community ball in their hands as a reminder of our unique contributions.

 Students create t-shirt designs at the beginning of the year.
Engaging Elementary Students, continued from p.5

BREAKS

Offering a variety of sanctioned breaks is one way to navigate individual student socio-emotional needs while maintaining academic rigor in the classroom. Try hosting a fidgets station in a corner of the room that students can visit as needed. Our fidget station hosts a Rubik’s cube, a Perplexus, and a set of stationary bike pedals. There is also a small basket with a balloon/sand squishy and a few marble fidgets that students can borrow and take back to their seats.

Another type of stress relief is the music break. We have a few ukuleles and a didgeridoo plus some bubble timers. Students can request a music break, then grab an instrument and timer and play in the hall. Also, the class can benefit from brief movement/stretch breaks during an intense or long instructional session. Try playing instrumental music during individual work time.

Student engagement in the classroom is a wide-ranging topic that is an ongoing concern of new and veteran teachers. Growth mindset, sentence frames, community circle, maker projects and breaks are far-reaching strategies that touch on the scope of learning and motivation. Consider how these five strategies may work individually or in concert to foster higher order thinking in your class, as well as encourage internal motivation within your students.

Learn More

Video Resources

Schlechty’s Levels of Engagement
This video explains Schlechty’s five levels of engagement, and what they mean for student learning, in an easy-to-understand and memorable way.

Online Resources

California Department of Education
This CDE web page provides information about student engagement.

Tools from the Schlechty Center
The Schlechty Center is dedicated to helping educators increase student engagement. Visit their library of tools and resources here.

Questions about this publication?

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