




Not Just a BUZZWORD



Using survey data to foster engagement among students, parents, and teachers

By *Tim Hodges*

It's rare for an educator to make it through an entire day without hearing the word "engagement." We want our students, teachers, parents, and the entire school community to be engaged. But what does that really mean? What comes to mind when you think about an engaged school community? What difference does engagement make? And what can we actually do to build and sustain a culture of engagement?

Gallup's research team has been studying engagement for decades, having completed tens of millions of surveys and having conducted thousands of individual client research projects and several meta-analyses. All of this data may seem overwhelming, but in reality, it has led to several relatively simple actions that can be taken to improve engagement at your school.

To put it simply, engagement is a measurement of how involved, enthusiastic, and committed one is to an organization. Whether you're a student, a teacher, or a parent, this simple definition holds true. What is your psychological relationship with the school?

Vast amounts of research and discovery have led to some key conclusions that add rigor and "edge" to what is sometimes dismissed as a "soft" concept. While engagement is "nice to have," it's also necessary for thriving schools. A couple of highlights:

- Engaged students are 2.5 times more likely to say that they get excellent grades and do well in school, and they are 4.5 times more likely to be hopeful about the future than their actively disengaged peers.
- Employee engagement has been linked to a wide range of workplace outcomes. Specific to schools, teacher engagement has a strong relationship to both absenteeism and employee turnover, and is a key driver of student engagement.

Student Engagement

Let's take a closer look at engagement with each group, starting with students. Engaged students are excited about what's happening at their school and about what they're learning. They contribute to the learning environment and are psychologically committed to their school. Engaged students feel safe at school, have strong relationships with teachers and other students, feel recognized on a regular basis, and are learning important things that connect them to a positive future.

Gallup has conducted more than 5 million surveys with students in grades 5–12 over the past several years. These students have come from every state and from a range of rural, suburban, and urban school settings. Two key findings have received broad attention and are worth repeating here.



1. Almost half of students (47 percent) who responded to the survey are engaged with school, with approximately one-fourth (29 percent) “not engaged” and the remainder (24 percent) “actively disengaged.”

A closer look at the data by grade level reveals a disturbing trend. Engagement is strong at the end of elementary school, with nearly three-quarters (74 percent) of fifth-graders reporting high levels of engagement. But similar surveys have shown a gradual and steady decline in engagement from fifth grade through about tenth grade, with approximately half of students in middle school reporting high levels of engagement, and about one-third of the high school students reporting the same.

2. Certain elements of engagement tend to be key drivers. In the early years of the research, Gallup discovered two items that had a powerful connection to engagement. Students who were able to “strongly agree” to the statements “My school is committed to building the strengths of each student” and “I have at least one teacher who makes me excited about the future” were 30 times as likely to be engaged at school when compared to students who strongly disagreed with the same items. A key to building a culture of student engagement is to have students who partner with caring adults to develop their potential.

Teacher Engagement

An important driver of student engagement is the engagement of their teachers. Engaged teachers are loyal and psychologically committed to their employer. Their experience includes valuable relationships with a caring principal who coaches them, offers meaningful recognition on a regular basis, and helps them learn and grow throughout their careers. They are surrounded by committed co-workers who build trusting and often deep relationships. Engaged teachers give the discretionary effort needed to ensure that their students are successful.

Across the many millions of Gallup surveys on engagement, about one-third (33 percent) of employees are “engaged,” about half (51 percent) are “not engaged,” and the remaining 16 percent are “actively disengaged.” Clearly, there is potential for growing engagement in the typical workplace. So, how are

we doing on engaging our nation’s teachers? Unfortunately, not much better than the typical workplace. Two notable takeaways:

1. While elementary school teachers tend to be more engaged than their peers at the secondary level, overall teacher engagement is quite similar to that of other professions, with just over 30 percent reporting high levels of engagement.
2. A study of the individual elements of teacher engagement reveals a key finding: When asked whether their opinions count, K–12 teachers’ positive responses are consistently lower than those of employees in other professions.

School leaders need to do a much better job of soliciting teacher input early in the decision-making process to ensure that teachers are heard. This approach will not only lead to higher levels of teacher engagement, but will likely also lead to better decisions.

Parent Engagement

Engaging our students and teachers is a widely accepted approach to achieving school success. But great schools don’t just focus on the people inside the building, they build a strong constituency in the community. This leads to the natural next step: engaging parents.

Engaged parents are proud to be associated with their child’s school and advocate for it in the community. They feel that the school delivers on its promises. Engaged parents often go so far as to say that the school is “perfect” for their child.

The relationship between a parent and their child’s school may be similar to the relationship between a customer and a company they regularly interact with. How does parent engagement compare to customer engagement? Gallup marketplace research often finds that about 30 percent of customers are fully engaged with the organizations they patronize in the health care, hospitality, retail, and financial services industries. As such, it’s surprising to find that only about 20 percent of parents are fully engaged with their child’s school.

School leaders need to prioritize parent engagement as they strategize and activate plans for school improvement. Doing so requires a focus on some key drivers of parent engagement, as follows:

MEASURING TEACHER ENGAGEMENT

Gallup asks survey participants to rate their responses to a survey like this one, which is designed to measure 12 important markers of engagement in the workplace.


1. I know what is expected of me at work.
2. I have the materials and equipment I need to do my work right.
3. At work, I have the opportunity to do what I do best every day.
4. In the last seven days, I have received recognition or praise for doing good work.
5. My supervisor or someone at work seems to care about me as a person.
6. There is someone at work who encourages my development.
7. At work, my opinions seem to count.
8. The mission or purpose of my company makes me feel my job is important.
9. My associates or fellow employees are committed to doing quality work.
10. I have a best friend at work.
11. In the last six months, someone at work has talked to me about my progress.
12. This last year, I have had opportunities at work to learn and grow.

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- 1. School leadership.** In many communities, a school's principal and leaders are as visible as politicians or business leaders. Strong school leaders embrace this role as they respond to community concerns and inspire the community to believe in the future of the school.
- 2. Academic standards.** Parents want to know that the school is committed to helping their child perform well academically, regardless of whether their child is succeeding in honors courses or struggling to keep up in class. Parents seek appropriate amounts of homework and support to help their students achieve.
- 3. School environment.** Parents seek a welcoming school environment in which their student is treated with respect and there is appropriate discipline. To put it simply, parents want to know that their child enjoys being at school.
- 4. Personalized learning.** Engaged parents appreciate having a teacher who cares about their student enough to get to know their strengths, and who spends time developing their potential. They seek opportunities for their child to do what they do best every day.
- 5. Communication and involvement.** While most schools do a good job of communicating with parents in transactional ways about

grades, weather dismissals, or safety incidents, parents also seek communication about ways to get involved. They crave positive, specific feedback about their child and desire a true partnership with their child's teachers.

Building a culture of engagement for students, teachers, and parents takes effort, but it is not out of reach. It requires systematic measurement of the culture with validated tools. When results become available, school leaders need to study the data in its proper context, looking at national benchmarks and data from previous years. They need to share the results and broaden the conversation to ensure that a variety of stakeholders are involved in the school improvement process. And perhaps most importantly, they must follow through. Conducting surveys of engagement is a great first step, but if school leaders don't act on the findings, it can actually undermine engagement further.

Successful school leaders understand that building a culture of engagement is not an event; it's a process that requires intentional and sustained effort. And while it is not always easy to create engagement, it is absolutely worth the investment. 

Tim Hodges is director of research for Gallup Education.



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