



# Engage and Educate

Six ways to create and nurture participation in your classrooms

By Christopher Wooleyhand

One of the outcomes of the growth mindset movement is a focus on student engagement. Schools are recognizing that teaching the standards requires students' active participation. This is a refreshing move away from more traditional teaching methods, and schools should feel less constrained when planning for instruction that combines the rigor of higher standards with a pedagogy that excites young learners.

In the article "Engage Kids With Seven Times the Effect," author Todd Finley identifies the benefits

of engagement for students. He notes that they:

- Experience improved academic achievement and satisfaction;
- Are more likely to persist through academic struggles;
- Earn higher standardized test scores;
- Have better social skills; and
- Are less likely to drop out of school.

Teachers naturally want their students to be engaged in the instruction they provide. They want their students to be absorbed in the learning process, because their

instincts tell them it supports long-term understanding. But the "how" of engagement can be challenging, even for experienced teachers. Creating active student engagement requires meticulous preparation, as well as a willingness to change direction when the moment calls for it. Most of all, it requires teachers to truly know each student.

Teachers who know the strengths and needs of their students use that knowledge to improve their success. They put their students in learning situations in which the rewards are high and the risk

of failure is low. They don't try to manipulate the end result, but instead they try to narrow the number of potential outcomes.

Here are six ways for schools to increase student engagement:

**1. Develop an “engagement”**

**culture.** Like most significant initiatives, change starts with a school's culture. If you want to focus on student engagement, you'll have to develop a collaborative vision with teachers and staff that celebrates the benefits of engaging instruction. The collaborative approach lends itself to enduring change. You don't have to build consensus or buy-in; you need a commitment among the staff to grow strong instructional practices around the standards you are teaching.

**2. Have them teach each other.**

Engagement jumps when students are told that they will be teaching a new concept to their classmates. It's not the fear factor; students enjoy opportunities to teach each other. Of course, these opportunities should be genuine, not contrived. While this approach might take more time, it leads to greater retention of material and a deeper understanding of the concepts. Students often listen with a greater focus when their peers speak.

**3. Assign authentic tasks with meaningful final projects.**

Students are motivated quickly when learning is related to topics they are passionate about. In turn, passionate teachers can easily motivate students by selecting lessons that focus on real-life problems and issues. Projects associated with problem-based learning should be meaningful. The simplest question teachers should ask before determining the focus of an investigation is, “With whom will we share what we've learned, and how will we do it?” Great teachers share their

passion for learning and pass it on to their students.

**4. Promote working together.**

While it might be hard to know what careers we are preparing students for, we can assume that collaboration will be a skill that's crucial to their success. Collaboration is not a natural talent; students need training in how to work with others. Consistent structures and practices lead to collaboration that flows naturally. Teachers can begin with highly controlled practices and release responsibility gradually as students assume more independence. Teachers should expect some failures as they foster collaboration. But through these failures, they can build resilience in students, and a deeper understanding of how the whole is often greater than its parts.

**5. Incorporate technology.**

The modern teacher has many choices when it comes to using technology as a teaching tool. Teachers must become comfortable with learning about technology alongside their students. Blogging, file-sharing, digital media, digital citizenship, project-based learning, “Genius Hour,” the maker movement, curation, and many more terms have made their way into the current educational lexicon. Technology allows schools to connect students with others across the globe. Small school districts can provide opportunities that their students might not otherwise have had. Start investigating the newest technology; if you don't, your students will.

**6. Get students moving.**

Brain-based research has clearly linked the role of movement in learning, so students should sit as little as possible during the school day. Where does the blood pool when you're sitting for long stretches of time? Not in the brain! Movement breaks and physical activity reawaken the

brain's synapses and make students ready for new learning. If they aren't moving every 15 minutes, they probably aren't learning as much as you want them to.

**What to Look For**

Once engagement becomes part of a school's culture, it must be nurtured to sustain its benefits. School principals can develop look-fors based on the specific needs of their students and staff. The challenge for observers is to distinguish between student activity and student engagement.

Student engagement expert Robert Marzano and his co-authors offer a good starting point for school leaders seeking to foster and assess student engagement in the book *The Highly Engaged Classroom* (2010). Based on his tips, school principals should look for evidence of:

- The quality of relationships in the classroom.
- A variety of teaching methods being used.
- The level and source of questions asked (teacher- and student-generated).
- Student choice.
- Acceptance (teacher-to-student, student-to-student).
- Effective pacing.
- The use of wait time.
- Positive and respectful communication (verbal and nonverbal).

While this is not an exhaustive list, it's a good starting point for schools focused on improving student engagement. If one of the tenets of the Every Student Succeeds Act is to personalize learning for students, targeted student engagement might be the vehicle to success. By maintaining high expectations for all students and offering rigorous, engaging instruction, we can at least get children more excited about coming to school. That's a good start! 

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