

Engagement and Motivation: Helping Handout for School

GEORGE BEAR & ANGELA HARRIS

INTRODUCTION

Student engagement refers to students' active involvement in, and commitment to, academic and social activities in their school (Li & Lerner, 2013). As educators well know, engagement is critical to learning, with research showing that it is related to a number of important outcomes. Among those outcomes are greater academic achievement, peer acceptance, emotional well-being, and fewer behavioral problems and behaviors that pose health risks, such as smoking, alcohol and substance use, and sexual activity (Finn & Zimmer, 2012). Three types of student engagement are commonly recognized by researchers and educators: emotional, cognitive, and behavioral. Emotional engagement refers to students' thoughts and feelings toward school, including teachers and classmates, and their overall liking of school. Cognitive engagement refers to the desire and willingness to exert one's best effort toward learning and to apply the best learning strategies. Behavioral engagement refers to students' active involvement in school-related activities. It includes not only attending to academic tasks and completing assignments, but also following rules and participating in or attending nonacademic school activities. Because behavioral and cognitive are quite similar, they often are combined and called cognitive-behavioral engagement.

The terms *engagement*, especially cognitive engagement, and *motivation* also are often used interchangeably. The two differ, however, in that motivation is necessary but not sufficient for engagement (Reschly & Christenson, 2012). For example, a student might be motivated to read, perform math, or play a sport but does not engage in any of those activities, or only engages feebly. Some reasons for such a lack of engagement, despite

motivation, are lack of skills, poor instruction, peer influences, and interfering emotions. Generally, however, when students are motivated, they also are engaged, and motivation and engagement are influenced by similar factors. Although the term *engagement*, rather than *motivation*, is used throughout the handout, in most cases when engagement is used, it refers to both engagement and motivation—the student is engaged and motivated to be engaged.

WHAT TO CONSIDER WHEN SELECTING INTERVENTIONS AND SUPPORTS

Engagement is influenced by multiple factors. Primary among them are characteristics of the individual student and of the student's learning environment. Student characteristics include past and present academic achievement, social and emotional competencies, perceptions of school and learning, future goals and aspirations, and the presence or absence of interfering behaviors and emotions. Primary among characteristics of the learning environment are instructional methods and strategies used at school and home, the curriculum, a teacher's style and effectiveness with classroom management, and parental support. More specific characteristics of the learning environment are emphasized in the recommendations section of this handout.

With respect to classroom management and parenting, research indicates that an authoritative approach (not to be confused with a harsh authoritarian style) works best for fostering engagement, especially when combined with common characteristics of effective teaching found in the recommendations below. The authoritative approach, as seen in the first recommendation,

consists of a balanced combination of social support, or responsiveness, and structure, or demandingness. Social support is seen in caring, warmth, respect, and responsiveness to psychological needs, whereas structure is seen in high, yet realistic, academic and behavioral expectations, close supervision and monitoring of the student's behavior, and clear and efficient routines and procedures. Relatedly, relationships with others greatly influence engagement, especially a student's relationships with other students, teachers, and parents and other family members. Positive and supportive relationships with others are often critical to engagement.

RECOMMENDATIONS¹

1. **Demonstrate an authoritative approach to classroom management and school discipline.** An authoritative approach consists of a combination of social support and structure. Provide social support by conveying warmth, caring, respect, and responsiveness to the student's psychological needs. This support is critical to helping the student feel accepted, connected with others, and self-confident. Provide structure by establishing clear behavioral and academic expectations, routines, and procedures; having fair rules and consequences; and implementing various additional strategies that are effective in both preventing behavior problems and engaging students. The latter would include strategies such as the following:
 - Physical proximity
 - Close monitoring and supervision of behavior
 - Immediate response at the first signs of off-task behavior
 - Quickly paced instruction
 - Enthusiasm in teaching
 - Use of humor
 - A physical environment, including seating, that is conducive to teaching and learning

More specific recommendations for providing social support and structure are presented in *Improving Teacher–Student Relationships: Helping*

Handout for School and Attention to Task and Work Completion: Helping Handout for School.

2. **Use praise and rewards wisely and strategically.** Praising and rewarding the student, as well as other students nearby, serves multiple functions in fostering engagement. They serve as valuable sources of feedback to students, and when used wisely and strategically, they can reinforce engagement-related behaviors—behavioral, cognitive, and emotional. The strategic use of praise, rewards, and other recognitions may also promote emotional engagement by helping to build and maintain positive teacher–student relationships and feelings toward school. See *Using Praise and Rewards Wisely: Helping Handout for School and Home* for specific strategies for using praise and rewards.
3. **Provide variety, novelty, and fun in instructional methods and learning activities.** Motivation and engagement often wane when the same methods and activities for learning are repeated over and over, across days as well as within the same day. Variety and novelty generally increase interest and engagement and make learning fun. This is especially true when the learning activity calls for the students' active participation. Such methods and activities include project-based and inquiry-based learning, class and group discussions, role-playing, debates, technology-based activities, educational games, and peer-assisted learning. For these and other learning activities, try to make learning fun by incorporating elements such as gamelike features, novelty, surprise, fantasy, and humor.
4. **Provide challenging and genuine tasks.** Such tasks, assignments, and activities focus on realistically applying learned skills, especially higher-order thinking skills. With older students, tasks should be more complex and include multidimensional problems.
5. **Match curriculum and instruction with the student's ability level.** Students are likely to disengage, and often exhibit behavior problems, when tasks are too difficult and frustrating. Thus, where needed, adjust the curriculum or method of instruction, or otherwise provide accommodations, assistance, and support to help a student when signs of frustration are first seen.
6. **Identify the student's interests, values, and goals.** This can be done through surveys, interviews, discussions, and observations. Once you learn

¹ Recommendations are adapted from a training module developed by the authors entitled *Improving Student Engagement*, funded by a School Climate Transformation grant awarded to the Delaware Department of Education by the United States Department of Education.

more about the student, emphasize the relevance of academic material and activities to the student's life. For example, challenge the student to think about how to apply what is being taught to his or her present or future life. Give examples of how others have done so.

7. **Where feasible, align the student's interests, values, and goals with curriculum materials and lessons.** As teachers are well aware, students are more motivated and engaged when the subject matter is of great interest to them. Of course, materials cannot always be adapted to align with the student's interests, values, and goals. Nevertheless, once they are identified, try to match them with curriculum materials or parts of lessons. For example, assign a paper on a topic of special interest, highlighting certain values in a story, or noting a character in a story who shares the student's goals and discussing how the character achieves them.
8. **Provide the student with choices in activities.** Where appropriate and feasible, allow the student to decide what to do and how to do it. Giving choices is likely to increase the chances that the student will complete the assignment, while assuming greater ownership of the learning activity's conception, execution, and self-evaluation. For example, give the student a choice between two similar classroom assignments, a choice of working individually or in a group, and different options on how to demonstrate learning.
9. **Make grade criteria clear and fair and provide frequent feedback.** Explain why high standards are important and communicate with students that they are capable of meeting those standards. Ensure that feedback is not only frequent but also substantive and constructive by providing specific guidance on how to improve.
10. **Challenge the student to set short-term and long-term goals, and to develop plans for achieving them.** These goals should be realistic and geared toward both academics and behavior. For long-term goals, especially for a student in a higher grade, challenge the student to reflect on his or her possible self in the future. Ask questions such as: "What does it mean to be a successful student and adult?" "What must you do to achieve your goals?" Provide activities to help the student develop strategies for attaining short-term and long-term goals. For example, activities might focus on the importance of completing classwork and homework, managing time, doing community service, and working with others to attain goals. Help the student to set standards and methods for monitoring progress toward achieving those goals. For example, if a student's short-term goal is to complete all homework assignments for the marking period, the student can record daily homework completion on a chart to monitor progress. For long-term goals, the student can reflect and write down things done each week to help meet those goals.
11. **Emphasize mastery goals and mastery in external and self-evaluations.** The importance of grades should be recognized, but be sure to emphasize that mastering the material is even more important. Encourage students to focus on their personal progress toward learning new skills rather than on how their skills compare with those of others, and to focus on the information contained in grades (e.g., what skills and knowledge are proficient and what can be improved) rather than on the grades themselves.
12. **Emphasize effort and persistence more than ability.** This way of thinking leads to the adoption of a growth mind-set, rather than a fixed ability mind-set. Teach and emphasize the notion that a growth mind-set is feasible and that people can change. Also, frame learning activities in terms of intrinsic goals instead of extrinsic goals to help promote students' motivation, persistence, and learning.
13. **Encourage frequent self-evaluation.** This includes self-evaluation of progress toward short- and long-term goals, but also self-evaluation of performance on daily tasks and assignments. Have the student focus much more on specific performance feedback, both positive and constructive, than on a grade alone. Encourage the student to identify and learn from mistakes, reflect on achieving set goals, and gauge the mastery of the material taught.
14. **Encourage the student to use self-comparison rather than social comparison.** Comparing oneself to others, especially when others appear to be doing much better, is likely to stifle motivation and engagement. It is often more motivating to compare one's performance to past performance. Encourage the student to focus on personal progress toward learning new knowledge and skills rather than on how the student compares with others. Thus, challenge the student to think about "How much have I improved?" rather than "How am I doing compared with everyone else?"

15. **Highlight important values throughout the curriculum that are associated with engagement.**

Have the student identify values that are important for success in certain subjects and career fields (e.g., sciences, arts), especially in the areas of greatest interest to the student, or identify values that the student may or may not already hold. Examples of the former set of values are hard work, perseverance, dedication, and responsibility, whereas examples of the latter set are kindness, honesty, and fairness.

16. **Encourage the student to participate in extracurricular activities.**

Such activities would include sports, clubs, and school governance. Also, encourage the student to become an active member of the school community by attending extracurricular events.

17. **Provide and highlight models of engagement.**

Learning about or observing others who are motivated and engaged can spark students to exhibit the same behaviors. However, this largely depends on the characteristics of the model observed. A student is more inclined to copy the behavior of role models that have the following characteristics:

- Interpersonal qualities that the student and others appreciate or admire, such as friendliness, caring, and a sense of humor.
- Skills or competencies that the student and others would like to possess, such as academic, athletic, musical, or artistic skills; financial success; and popularity.
- Socioeconomic status, careers, and cultural backgrounds that are similar to the student's but also varying in age, gender, and race.

Thus, when providing or discussing models in curriculum materials (e.g., history, biographies), the popular media (e.g., news, Web postings), and the classroom (including self and others in the school), try to include those with many, if not all, of the above features. Also, be sure not only to highlight those models, and especially the specific qualities and skills you hope the student will copy, but also to reinforce those qualities and skills when they are exhibited by the student and others.

18. **If the student is disengaged from school, or poorly motivated, provide more intensive interventions and supports.** Interventions or activities might include the following, guided by an individual assessment of the student's needs, if needed

(conducted by a team of mental health and educational specialists):

- *Increased home–school communication and collaboration.* The school and family should work closely together in monitoring and promoting student engagement, such as by holding a teacher–student–parent conference, using a daily or weekly report card or behavioral contract, and using electronic postings of assignments and work completed.
- *Counseling or social skills training.* Arrange either individual or group counseling that addresses the student's needs and builds on the student's strengths.
- *Tutoring.* Help arrange a tutor for a student who lacks academic skills, either during school or after school.
- *Individual mentoring and guidance.* Use one of the best evidence-based programs for fostering engagement among likely dropouts: Check and Connect. A school staff member serves as a mentor, meeting at least weekly with the student and coordinating communication with the student's family. The program is successful because the mentor (a) builds and maintains a positive and supportive relationship with the student; (b) works with the student to monitor signs of disengagement, such as attendance, grades, and behavioral referrals; and (c) addresses areas of need, such as tutoring, study skills training, social skills training, and counseling. For more information, visit their website (<http://checkandconnect.umn.edu/resources.html#adminresources>).

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Websites

<https://www.educationcorner.com/teachers-corner.html>

<https://www.edutopia.org/>

<https://www.scholastic.com/teachers/home/>

Each of these websites provides teachers with a wealth of information and resources on teaching, including how to foster student engagement and motivation.

Books and Articles

Christenson, S. L., Reschly, A. L., & Wylie, C. (2012). *Handbook on student engagement*. New York, NY: Springer.

Written primarily for researchers, this comprehensive handbook includes multiple chapters of value to teachers, school administrators, and support staff. Best practices in assessing and promoting engagement are reviewed.

Johnson, J. F., Perez, L. G., & Uline, C. L. (2013). *Teaching practices from America's best urban schools: A guide for school and classroom leaders*. Larchmont, NY: Eye On Education.

This book presents multiple research-based and practical strategies for educators to use to foster student engagement—in either urban or nonurban schools.

Marzano, R. J., & Pickering, D. J. (2011). *The highly engaged classroom: The classroom strategies series*. Bloomington, IN: Marzano Research Laboratory.

This book provides teachers with evidence-based practices for promoting student engagement, including instructional and relationship-building practices.

Related Helping Handouts

Attention to Task and Work Completion: Helping Handout for School

Homework, Organization, and Study Skills: Helping Handout for School

Implementing the Good Behavior Game: Helping Handout for School

Improving Teacher–Student Relationships: Helping Handout for School

Peer Relationships: Helping Handout for School

School Completion: Helping Handout for School and Home

Self-Management: Helping Handout for School and Home

Using Praise and Rewards Wisely: Helping Handout for School and Home

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

George Bear, PhD, is a professor of school psychology at the University of Delaware, and recipient of the 2017 Lifetime Achievement Award from the National Association of School Psychologists. His books include *Children's Needs: Development, Prevention, and Intervention* (coedited with Dr. Kathleen Minke) and *School Discipline and Self-Discipline: A Practical Guide to Promoting Prosocial Student Behavior*. He is coeditor (with Minke) of *Helping Handouts: Supporting Children at School and Home*.

Angela Harris, MA, is a doctoral student in the school psychology program at the University of Delaware, with research interests in the areas of school climate, social and emotional competence, and classroom management and disciplinary techniques.

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