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The future of our communities depends on a generation, not only skilled in academics, but also excited about belonging to an educated community. That community will arise only if schools engage and connect with today's children. Effective schools create an environment that increases academic, social and emotional success—an environment of strong school connectedness.

School Connectedness

Research has demonstrated that students who feel connected to school have both positive academic and behavioral outcomes. Increased student connectedness promotes classroom engagement and school attendance which increases students' academic achievement and competency to overcome challenges. Connected students are focused, achieve higher grades, and invest in relationships at school.

In 2003, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Johnson Foundation brought together experts from schools, universities, and government to determine how to decrease school dropout rates and increase student engagement in school. These experts compiled their research results and experiences in the *Wingspread Declaration* which states: "Students are more likely to succeed when they feel connected to school. School connectedness is the belief by students that adults in the school care about their learning as well as about them as individuals."[1]

Strategies for Creating Effective Schools

The Triad of Engagement

Students feel connected to school when they experience:

- Interpersonal connectedness with school staff and peers;
- An engaging environment that is physically and emotionally safe; and
- Academic engagement—support to reach their personal best with flexible, relevant instruction

This "triad of engagement"is interconnected and builds upon itself.[1] Each element promotes the characteristics that make youth more resilient. When schools excel in the triad of engagement, students feel safe, supported, and capable of solving academic and personal challenges.
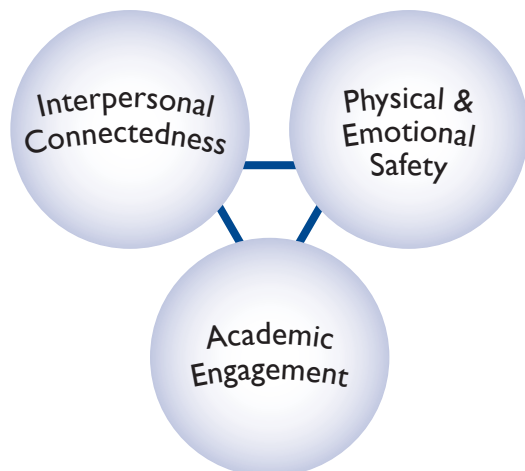
The Triad of Engagement

Interpersonal Connectedness

Physical & Emotional Safety

Academic Engagement

Interpersonal Connectedness

Studies have verified that when students feel connected to at least one significant adult in their education they experience greater engagement and satisfaction with school. Students report that they learn more, attend school more often, and perform better academically. [2,3]

Adult support should come from parents, teachers, teachers' aides, counselors, and school principals, among others. Results from a study conducted in 1999 showed that students with high levels of adult interpersonal support made nearly a one and a half year gain in reading achievement scores while students with low levels of support made only a half year gain. Similarly, in math, students with high levels of interpersonal support made nearly a one and two-thirds year gain while students who had low levels of support made less than a one year gain.[4]

In order for teachers to better connect with their students, teachers must increase interpersonal connectedness in their classrooms. Connected teachers are welcoming, able to identify students' needs and potential, respectful of students' input, and engaged in each student's successes. These teachers are fair and supportive and create a caring, structured environment with high and clear expectations.

- Review students' cumulative files and use that information to support the students.

- Assign academic work that encourages students to talk about themselves, such as creating an autobiography, developing portfolios, or writing essays or poems about topics that are important to them. (See list of ideas for personalizing assignments on page 7)

- Have a regular time each day or week to share thoughts and concerns.

- Ask questions only when you can devote time to listen to the answers.

- Continually diagnose students' learning strengths and weaknesses.

- Schedule times to be available to students and parents outside of class throughout the year.

- Welcome new students and families and make a special effort to connect with them.

- Treat students with respect by giving public compliments and private criticism.

- Empathize with and coach students when they face problems.

- Elicit and act on students' recommendations for activities that occur in class.

- Maintain avenues for private communication, such as the "student to teacher mailbox" where students can send confidential notes to the teacher.

- During class, minimize "teacher talk" time and increase "student talk" time by incorporating peer review, group work and student-to-student discussions.

- Set a goal to highlight positive student contributions daily so that students know you notice their positive attributes.

- Give students chances to correct their mistakes to show that you have faith in their capabilities.

- Develop family ties. Communicate regularly with families regarding students' successes and challenges. Solicit shared problem-solving and celebration.

STRATEGIES TO PROMOTE SCHOOL-STUDENT CONNECTEDNESS

- Create "schools-within-a-school" such as small learning communities, magnet schools, or career academies.

- Use multidisciplinary team teaching, in which groups of teachers get to know each student. Time is scheduled during the school day for the team to confer about students and share strategies for improving their classrooms.

- Create opportunities for lower student-to-adult ratios in classes through use of paraprofessionals, teachers' aides and family and community volunteers.

- Have an adult personally greet students each day at the entrances to the building.

- Ensure that every student has a relationship with at least one caring adult who makes a point of having personal contact a number of times per week, even if just for a personal greeting.

- Provide every student with an identified staff person who tracks, mentors, and advises them academically and personally.

- Provide mentorship programs that pair school or community volunteers with students, or pair students with other students.

Teachers cannot create a climate of connectedness alone. The school's climate is strongly influenced by the philosophy and policies of the school leadership. When school leadership is dedicated to engaging students, evidence shows a more powerful effect than when teachers make isolated efforts to connect.[5] The essential messages that school staff, particularly teachers, should give to all students is "I know you can accomplish this goal; I hold you accountable for working toward this goal; and I'll support you in reaching this goal."

▸ Best Practice Program to Build Interpersonal Connectedness: *First Things First* (FTF) is an evidence-based school-wide program that focuses on improved academic performance through small learning communities. Developed by the Institute for Research and Reform in Education, the primary goal of FTF is to build close, respectful and productive relationships between students attending schools in economically disadvantaged communities and adults working in those schools. The program features low student to adult ratios in core classes, increased student-adult interaction, and high academic and conduct standards. Each student is paired with a staff advocate who serves as counselor and mentor, and who meets periodically with the student's parents to review academic and behavior performance. Results in a pilot school showed a 25% increase in students qualifying for graduation, a 57% decrease in the number of suspensions, and improved daily attendance and parent involvement. *Visit www.irre.org/ftf for more information about this program.*

Environmental Connectedness: Physical and Emotional Safety

Promoting a positive school-wide environment means creating a zone of physical, emotional, and academic safety. Creating this safety zone involves implementing strategies that encourage students to feel valued and competent and to act with pride and respect for school policies and property. In such an environment, students have fewer behavioral problems and find it easier to create interpersonal connections with their teachers and peers. Specifically, student connectedness increases when unstructured common areas, such as lunchrooms, playgrounds, and hallways, are monitored by staff members who treat students respectfully and ensure that students treat each other with respect.

Students must feel safe outside the classroom. Therefore, schools should establish clear rules and consequences for bullying. Schools must partner with parents to teach positive assertiveness strategies to cope with bullying.

▸ **Best Practice Program to Build Physical and Emotional Safety:** *Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports* (PBIS) is a process for creating safer and more effective schools. PBIS is a systems approach to enhancing the capacity of schools to educate all children by developing research-based school-wide discipline systems. The process focuses on improving a school's ability to teach and support positive behavior for all students. Rather than a prescribed program, PBIS provides systems for schools to design, implement, and evaluate effective school-wide discipline plans. PBIS includes procedures and processes intended for all students and staff in all settings within the school environment. PBIS is not a program or a curriculum; it is a team-based process for systemic problem solving, planning, and evaluation. An assessment of 33 elementary schools (K–5) in Illinois and Hawaii showed that schools implementing PBIS were perceived as safer environments.[7] *Visit www.pbis.org for more information about this program.*

Academic Engagement

Increasing students' engagement in learning means setting high academic and behavioral standards, implementing flexible teaching methods, and making students feel that learning is relevant.[6] Helping students to reach a high academic and behavioral standard requires learning support for all students.

Academic goal setting should be individualized and based on an "as-soon-as-mastered" timeline. This strategy allows those who may not reach the school standard to reach their personal best. In order to encourage students to achieve their personal best, teachers should communicate winning messages:

- "I'm glad you're here."
- "I care about your success"
- "I expect you to do your best."
- "I will support you and will hold you accountable for reaching that standard."
- "I will not give up on you."

STRATEGIES TO ENCOURAGE PHYSICAL AND EMOTIONAL SAFETY

- Maintain respectful noise levels in shared spaces.
- Decorate shared spaces with evidence of students' work.
- Ensure quick response to graffiti and clean it immediately.
- Provide consistent curriculum-based opportunities for students to talk together with adults about their feelings of physical and emotional safety.
- Create an advisory class tasked with keeping the building clean.
- Create student-run programs for recycling, school beautification, and school grounds clean-up.
- Create a peaceful place on school property, such as a garden or silent reading room.
- Enforce a fair and just discipline program.
- Engineer a discipline system that is compassionate, and allows for corrections.
- Ensure that all staff demonstrate respect toward students and each other.
- Celebrate differences in cultural backgrounds.
- Implement social and emotional learning programs (see www.casel.org).
- Create systems to allow all students to showcase their work.
- Teach students to learn from their mistakes:
  - Encourage "redo's " on papers and tests.
  - Make time to meet with students after class to help them learn from mistakes on tests.
  - When correcting papers, write in the correct responses.
  - Do not allow students to scoff at others who make mistakes.
  - Create an environment of tolerance for all types of learning.

Engaged schools also understand that students do not succeed in a rigid environment where all students are expected to learn in the same way. Addressing the varied learning style of students can be a complex task,

STRATEGIES TO INCREASE ACADEMIC ENGAGEMENT

- Provide school-wide tutoring and other learning supports.
- Provide teacher-supervised homework study hall, before- and after-school tutor programs, mentors, cross-grade tutors, and volunteers to support students who are struggling or who are in need of special attention.
- Older students can volunteer to tutor the younger students' during lunch time or on Saturdays.
- Engage parents in the school community and in the students' work so that the student realizes that the adults in his world value learning.

STRATEGIES FOR IMPLEMENTING FLEXIBLE TEACHING METHODS

- Provide teacher training, in-service opportunities, and coaching to help teachers keep pace with innovative instructional methods.
- Encourage teachers to address all learning styles.
- Vary assessment methods to meet the needs of the students.
- Use strategies to encourage the use of higher-level reasoning skills, not just memorization skills.
- Adjust the curriculum to accommodate transfer students.

STRATEGIES TO INCREASE RELEVANCE OF LEARNING

- Personalize teaching so that the content relates to the students' lives.
- Use open ended topics as often as possible to allow students to interject their own ideas.
- Use active learning and co-operative groups which encourage students to take greater personal responsibility for their outcomes.

yet many teachers are finding creative ways to ensure the success of their students. For example, teachers may offer students multiple paths for practicing skills and completing assignments such as oral presentations, hands-on projects, cooperative learning or debates. School leaders must be committed to providing ongoing professional development for teachers to build on their skills of creating diverse learning opportunities.

These instructional activities are examples of active learning. Through active learning, students find relevance in the learning environment through activities that demand decision-making and problem-solving skills. Active learning allows students to personalize the learning experience, in turn engaging their curiosity. Teachers can determine what their students find meaningful and relevant by surveying students about their special interests and experiences and building this information into the content of the course. For example, calculations using basketball scores could engage math students who are also members of the basketball team. See the list on page 7 for additional examples of active learning projects.

Developing academic engagement requires leadership. School leaders set the policy and train teachers to be flexible, to use methods based on student needs, and to devise instructional methods that address multiple learning styles. To continually improve their teaching methods and implement engaging academic strategies, teachers need training, mentoring, and ongoing coaching. Teachers need to be freed from trivial administrative duties in order to have adequate planning time so they can create individual education plans and monitor and track the progress of their students.

▸ Best Practice Programs to Build Academic Engagement:

- *Advancement Via Individual Determination* (AVID) is a program designed to help middle and high school students prepare for and succeed in colleges and universities. AVID offers a rigorous program of instruction in academic "survival skills" and college level entry skills. The AVID program teaches students how to study, read for content, take notes, and manage time. Students participate in collaborative study groups or tutorials led by tutors who use

skillful questioning to bring students to a higher level of understanding.[8] *Visit www.avidonline.org for more information about this program.*

- *SOAR* is an evidence-based program for students in grades K-6 that aims to teach group collaboration skills while providing consistent recognition for effort and improvement. In the program, academic instruction is taught in an "inquiry and mastery of content" fashion. Students are taught a skill, asked to practice, and then tested. If any student in the group has not mastered the material, the group engages in problem-solving projects to help the student learn the information. The program, implemented over a two year period, involves teachers and parents as well. SOAR has three components:
    1. A series of instructional improvement workshops for school staff development in which teachers learn how to give positive instruction and feedback for students who learn skills in groups
    2. A series of parenting workshops to enhance parents' skills in helping kids succeed academically and increase attachment
    3. Social, emotional, and citizenship skills training for children.

- *Backward Design* is an instructional model that begins with identifying the desired results and then "works backwards" to develop instruction. By beginning with the end in mind, teachers are able to avoid the common pitfalls of planning forward from activity to activity, only to find that some students are not prepared for the final assessment.[9] The framework identifies three stages:
    1. Stage 1: Identify desired outcomes and results.
    2. Stage 2: Determine what constitutes acceptable evidence of competency.
    3. Stage 3: Plan instructional strategies and learning experiences that bring students to these competency levels.

- *Instructional Strategies that Work.* Researchers at the Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning

(McREL) have identified nine instructional strategies that are most likely to improve student achievement across all content areas and across all grade levels. These strategies are explained in the book <u>Classroom Instruction That Works</u> by Robert Marzano, Debra Pickering, and Jane Pollock.[10]

- *Excellence: A Commitment to Every Learner* (ExCEL) is a program focusing on the primary reasons why students fail in school: reading deficits, behavior problems, lack of parental involvement, and lack of concrete connection to real-world issues. ExCEL includes a learning center for students in need of learning support or intensive remediation as well as a strong family support component.[11]

- *Raising Healthy Children* is a social development approach to positive youth development. The approach incorporates school, family and individual programs to promote key elements that research has shown are critical for creating strong connections and bonds that children need to succeed in school and life. The program is based on the belief that every teacher makes a difference in the life of a child, that every child can succeed, and that the family is an important partner in learning. The program involves movement, novelty, and purposefully engaging the emotions during learning. Students learn critical thinking and questioning strategies that produce deeper levels of comprehension.[12]

In Summary

Implementing strategies to create the triad of engagement depends on the school leadership's willingness to grant teachers the time, training, and support needed to engage students. When given this support, school staff can unite to establish high academic and behavioral standards in an academically and emotionally safe learning climate where every student reaches their personal best through flexible and relevant instruction.

IDEAS FOR PERSONALIZING ASSIGNMENTS AT EACH SCHOOL LEVEL

Elementary School Students:

1. Each student is asked to write two paragraphs about themselves, their interests, families, or other topics. A parent volunteer could be asked to enter the children's information into an electronic document, which is compiled and disseminated to all students and parents.

2. Each child is given a chance to be "student of the week." The student could show photos of their family members, pets, or personal heroes. They could also bring samples of their favorite foods.

3. Students can create a personal crest. The crest is divided into four quadrants. The student can fill each quadrant with personal favorites (food, hobbies, TV shows, subject in school) or pictures of family.

Middle School Students:

1. Students write an opinion paper on what each would do if he or she were the principal of the school or president of the U.S.

2. Once per week, students write a paragraph in response to a question. These are compiled once per month and shared with students and their families.

High School Students:

1. Students present at the parent/teacher association or school board meetings on different topics.

2. Students make video presentations about their school to community groups or local governemtn agencies.

3. Photography and art students post their photos and artwork in community buildings.

4. At a quarterly assembly, seniors give a five minute presentation on a topic of their choice

EXAMPLES OF ACTIVE LEARNING PROJECTS

English and History
Every community has its unique history and literature. Teachers can develop reading and writing assignments based on local culture and lifestyle. The English teacher can team-teach with the history and art teachers to create interdisciplinary projects.

Social Studies
Students can research the economics, geography, or culture of foreign countries. They can make the topic relevant by personalizing assignments. One topic for an essay would be, "If I were the president of the U.S., I would…"

Math
Students can use the scores of the local sports team to learn calculations from basic multiplication to figuring averages, percentages, etc.

Science
Find out the various places students have lived. They can research the geology, climate, and terrain of these places. The class can create a terrarium to simulate the environment there.

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