

Executive Summary

Improving Student Engagement, A Practice Guide

Student engagement is considered essential for attendance, learning, success, and graduation. Engagement has been hard to improve because it is complex and abstract. In this practice guide, the National Dropout Prevention Center (NDPC) offers a practical working model for improving engagement and instruments that educators can use to assess engagement and select the best improvement strategies.

The practice guide defines student engagement as interest in and satisfaction with a school that produces voluntary attendance, willing cooperation, active participation, and learning progress toward graduation. NDPC suggests that educators address student engagement in three domain areas: engagement with people, activities, and instruction.

Engagement with People

Students connect with both adults and peers at school. If these connections are positive, students will be more satisfied with school, will attend better, and be more likely to learn. Some will even want to stay in school and graduate because they enjoy special teachers, coaches, and friends. Negative connections produce the opposite outcomes. The practice guide provides school leaders helpful questions for analyzing the quality and frequency of student-to-staff connections such as, “Are teacher interactions with students consistently positive?” and “Do the most at-risk students equally benefit from positive connections with teachers?” The guide also offers questions for analyzing peer-to-peer connections such as, “Do schedules allow time for students to interact with each other?” and “Are students supervised to ensure that student interactions are positive and appropriate?”

Engagement with Activities

Students who participate in enjoyable school activities, whether a sport like basketball, an activity-based course like band, or an informal friend lunch group, are more engaged, attend better, and graduate more often. The practice guide gives practical strategies for analyzing and maximizing the benefits of activity engagement. These include an assessment of activity “slot” availability with a focus on easy access for at-risk students and recommendations for making teams, clubs, and activity-based courses more attractive to more diverse students. The guide also suggests offering non-traditional school activities like Rubik’s Cube teams, fishing clubs, and Double Dutch teams to increase activity participation rates.

Engagement with instruction

Though the most difficult engagement area to address, the practice guide offers a workable three-prong approach for making instruction more interesting and engaging. The guide suggests that teachers focus instruction on the most interesting and student-relevant elements of any course and connect all lessons, at all grade levels, to topics of interest to students. To quote Dr. Bill Daggett, “Relevance makes rigor possible.” The guide further suggests that teachers use the most interesting delivery methods possible such as service learning, gaming, student presentations, and creative technology to maximize engagement with instruction. Teachers and leaders are guided to understand self-directed learning as the highest level of instructional engagement. With self-directed learning, teachers shift from teacher-centered delivery to help students discover how they learn best and select their ways to learn and demonstrate mastery. Self-directed learning allows students to take control and ownership of their learning and thus to be more satisfied with and interested in school.

Engagement first occurs when an individual student becomes satisfied with and interested in their local school. This guide suggests addressing the issue of engagement at both the student and campus level. To support this approach, the guide offers a detailed *Individual Student Engagement Assessment Instrument* and a *Schoolwide Student Engagement Assessment Instrument*. The guide concludes with a list of engagement strategy options and descriptions of support available from the National Dropout Prevention Center.