

The Proof is in the Pudding

As teachers work on improving student engagement, test scores follow suit.

David Essink

Once I went into the classroom of a young, energetic teacher and witnessed her telling some great stories and joking around continuously with her students. Mixed in with this incredible performance was a little bit of instructional material. In a discussion with the teacher later, I told her I loved her enthusiasm, but asked her why she wasn't focusing more on the curriculum, and I will never forget what she said: "Well, it's the only way I know to keep students engaged." That young teacher had to be exhausted at the end of the day, and although the students may have been entertained, there was very little learning taking place. It's been several years since that classroom visit, and I am happy to report that my knowledge of student engagement, along with that of the teachers with whom I work, has developed considerably.

What is Engagement?

Student engagement is often either misunderstood as something the teacher must do to entertain students or frowned upon as extra teacher effort to get students to do what they should have been doing anyway. Most educators will agree that it is getting harder and harder to hold the attention of students. After several years of really delving into this area and seeing strong student engagement in action, I don't believe it requires a lot of extra effort by the teacher or the ability to be a stage performer to keep students truly engaged. It is mostly a way of putting

the right strategies in place to draw students systematically into the learning process.

What Does Research Tell Us?

There are a lot of good resources available to help teachers make the shift from a good classroom to a highly engaged, learning classroom. Our district has used *The Art and Science of Teaching* (Marzano & Brown, 2009) as a valuable guide in our pursuit of highly engaged classrooms. Design Question 5 discusses strategies such as using games, missing information, competition, questioning techniques, physical movement, pacing, and more (Marzano & Brown, 2009). Many of these ideas are not new to educators, but the way they're systematically embedded into the daily classroom routine may be new to some. When these ideas become part of how a teacher does business and students know what is expected of them, it allows learning to take place in a natural and seamless manner.

Student Feedback

After being in a highly engaged classroom environment, I have had students walk out of the room and tell me they couldn't believe the class was already over. A seventh grade boy came out of an engaging science class one day and said, "That class was better than chocolate pudding!" Having worked with middle school students for many years, not too much surprises me, but that comment really caught my attention. I walked with him down

the hall and asked him to explain what he meant when he compared the class to chocolate pudding. He said, "You know, the good stuff. It's not just the main course. It's the extra things that some teachers do. Like when you think you are done eating and your mom brings out the chocolate pudding as a surprise." I thanked him for his insight, which was better than anything I could have researched or possibly thought of myself. You know you are doing something right when students are involved in the learning process without being prompted; with no motive other than excitement.

Adolescent Literacy Project

Dr. Anita Archer and Dr. Kevin Feldman are two incredible sources when it comes to gaining knowledge in the area of student engagement. Archer and Feldman have led a cadre of Nebraska educators in professional development called "The Adolescent Literacy Project." Much of their focus was on strategies that will help teachers bring students into that self-motivated state of wanting to learn through expectations and planned-out procedures. After being immersed in an engaged learning environment, students start to realize its benefits and crave that kind of learning. As Archer often says, "Learning is not a spectator sport."

Participation is the key to learning (Archer & Hughes, 2011). One of the reminders I use is Feldman's Law: Never should more than 2–10 minutes go by without every single student 1)



saying something, 2) writing something, or 3) doing something in direct alignment with the lesson target or related task/activity (Feldman, 2014). Students may have to be trained to be involved in their own learning, but they will soon expect involvement from themselves because they will understand the material better and will feel good about their learning experiences. Archer emphasizes that well-planned procedures allow students to put their focus on content instead of trying to remember the procedures they are being asked to use.

Our building has successfully used many of the instructional routines suggested by Archer with great success. An example of this is interactive learning where “the teacher does something, then the students do something; the teacher says something, then the students say something.” Another example is having students share information with a partner. This can be as easy as turning to the person behind you or to your right and sharing ideas, or it can be as scripted as having each

student draw from a deck of cards when they come into class and then vary the way students are matched up (e.g. Kings and Queens together, Jacks and 10s together, etc.). Feldman describes good engagement as encouraging students to do more talking, writing, thinking, and sharing. He goes on to describe the ideal learning environment as one in which “everyone does everything.”

Keep Students Moving

There are a lot of instructional benefits to keeping students physically moving while learning the subject content. It helps the

brain stay focused on the material when the body also gets involved. The secret is keeping the movement meaningful, a part of the learning that is already taking place. This could include a multiple choice question where students move to one corner of the room if they think the answer is “A,” a different corner for “B,” and so on. It might be math students forming a human triangle and discussing different types of angles, or it could be students in music class bouncing a ball back and forth to each other to certain rhythms. The possibilities are endless, but the activity must always

Five general factors related to student engagement:

- **High Energy**—physical activity, appropriate pacing, enthusiasm, intensity
- **Missing Information**—capitalizing on the innate human need for closure by asking students to discover and supply missing information
- **The Self-System**—incorporating topics, ideas, and processes that students find inherently interesting and valuable
- **Mild Pressure**—using questioning, games, and competitions that focus attention on key elements of the learning process
- **Mild Controversy and Competition**—structuring nonthreatening forms of controversy and competition through such processes as debates, tournaments, and related forms of team-based activities.

From *A Handbook for the Art and Science of Teaching*, Robert J. Marzano & John L. Brown, 2009, ASCD.

be tied to the instruction to make the engagement meaningful.

Engagement Through Questioning

A Cornerstone Strategy (#8) in the NASSP publication *Breaking Ranks in the Middle* (2006) reminds us that all social, economic, and racial/ethnic groups should have open and equal access to challenging activities and learning. A recommendation under this strategy is that teachers will know and be able to use a variety of strategies and settings that identify and accommodate individual learning needs while engaging students. One of the best ways is through the use of positive questioning strategies. If you have seen the 1986 movie *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*, you likely remember a humorous example of poor questioning strategies. A teacher (played by Ben Stein) talks in monotone and continually asks, "Anyone, anyone?" while all the kids are zoned out. Hopefully, we

never see classrooms where that is actually happening, but it is easy for educators to get into the habit of using the same predictable ways of asking questions.

The goal should be to draw all students into the learning process. The use of whiteboards, clickers, or other techniques that require every student to answer is a way to ensure that every student is engaged. It also allows the teacher to check for understanding before moving on. A common mistake made by teachers is to ask a question and call on the students who raise their hands. This typically results in only a few students being engaged, while the others are not involved and don't even have to be concerned with following along because they know the teacher won't call on them. Master teachers have learned different ways to randomly call on students, which keeps all students on their toes. Some common ways of doing this are by drawing names, computer-generated

student picks, pointing randomly at names in a gradebook, etc.

Learning Walks

If you have teachers who have the ability to engage students and use lots of different strategies, you should consider getting other teachers into those classrooms to watch them work in real time. If that is not possible, videotaping a teacher who has the classroom "rocking" and showing it at a staff meeting is also effective. At Hastings (NE) Middle School, we have done both, and the culture of sharing ideas has spread throughout the school.


What Are the Results?

Like the comment of the seventh grade boy leaving science class, the proof is in the pudding. As teachers at HMS have worked on improving student engagement, test scores have followed suit. We have seen rising test scores over the past several years in reading, math, and science. There is always room for improvement, but the dedication to increasing our knowledge and implementation of solid engagement strategies has given our students a great boost. Bring on the pudding! **PL**

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