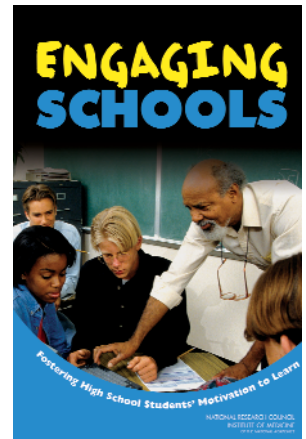


# ENGAGING SCHOOLS: FOSTERING HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS' MOTIVATION TO LEARN

Engaging adolescents in school is a challenge regardless of a student's social or economic status or the location of their school (Table 1). Academic motivation decreases steadily from the early grades of elementary school into high school, and disengagement from coursework is common at the high school level. While dropping out of school is the most visible indication of a student's disengagement from academic purposes and programs, many students who remain in school attend irregularly, exert only modest effort on schoolwork, and learn little.

Disengagement or dropping out of school have negative consequences for all students, but the effects are especially problematic for those youth who do not have the social or economic resources available to cushion the effects of academic failure. If students do not acquire the basic skills needed to function in adult society, whether or not they complete high school, they are at significant risk of unemployment, poverty, poor health, or involvement in the criminal justice system.



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**TABLE 1.** Graduation Rates for Selected Urban School Districts, 1998

District	General Graduation Rate	Black Graduation Rate	Latino Graduation Rate	White Graduation Rate
New York City	54%	42	45	80%
Los Angeles USD	56%	56	48	81%
Chicago District 299	47%	45	43	59%
Philadelphia	70%	65	53	91%
Houston ISD	52%	55	42	84%
Baltimore City	54%	55	N.A.	48%
Cleveland	28%	29	26	23%
Detroit	57%	57	49	43%
Memphis	42%	39	N.A.	50%
Milwaukee	43%	34	42	74%
San Diego USD	62%	54	43	79%
Dallas ISD	52%	60	39	72%
U.S. Total	74%	56	54	78%

SOURCE: Green, J. *High school graduation rates in the United States*. New York: Center for Civic Innovation at the Manhattan Institute, 2001.

A focus on engagement calls attention to the connection between a learner and the social context in which learning takes place.

To identify strategies for minimizing adolescents' disengagement from academic learning, the Board on Children, Youth, and Families of the National Research Council and the Institute of Medicine initiated a study to review and analyze research on academic engagement and motivation. The committee examined how curriculum, instruction, and the organization of schools can be improved to promote involvement of urban youth in their academic programs and the broader school community, also taking into account influences such as peer culture, family, and community resources. The primary objective of this study was to consider what schools and their communities can do to engage (or re-engage) adolescents in learning.

## THE NATURE AND CONDITIONS OF ENGAGEMENT

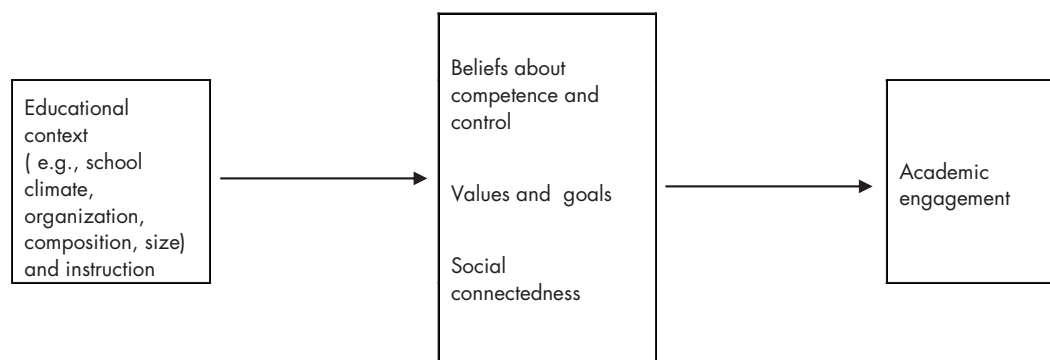
Engagement in schoolwork involves behaviors (such as persistence, effort, and attention) and emotions (such as enthusiasm, interest, and pride in success). Since observable behaviors do not necessarily reflect genuine engagement and learning, it is important to also consider mental or cognitive behaviors. Mental or cognitive behaviors include attention, problem solving, and the use of meta-cognitive strategies, while observable behaviors include active participation in class, completing work, seeking assistance when having difficulty, and taking challenging classes.

Although learning involves cognitive processes that take place within each individual, motivation to learn also depends on the student's involvement in a web of social relationships that supports learning. The likelihood that students will be motivated and engaged is increased when teachers, family, and friends effectively support their purposeful involvement in learning and in school. A focus on engagement calls attention to the connection between a learner and the social context in which learning takes place.

Many people view motivation as a personal quality and describe some students as motivated and others as unmotivated. But considerable research demonstrates that the educational context or setting, even as late as high school, is able to influence engagement for some students. The same adolescent who is unable to pay attention in one classroom for more than a few minutes may persevere on demanding tasks in another environment.

A fair amount is known about the educational conditions that promote intellectual engagement and the psychological variables that mediate the effects of a student's educational context. The psychological mediators include students' beliefs about their competence and control over educational activities and outcomes; their education-related values and goals; and their social connections to peers and adults in schools (Figure 1).

**FIGURE 1.** A Theory on Educational Conditions that Promote Intellectual Engagement



## WHAT CAN SCHOOLS DO TO HELP STUDENTS SUCCEED?

Large-scale surveys and case studies suggest that low expectations, alienation, poor resources, and low achievement prevail in large urban high schools. Many students in disadvantaged communities fail to see how working hard in school will enable them to attain the educational and career goals to which they aspire.

This report highlights several strategies that educators and school systems can use to improve students' engagement in school and learning. These strategies are derived from a research base that is mostly qualitative, correlational, or quasi-experimental. Although the knowledge base is incomplete, consistent findings derived from research and practice are more than sufficient to guide urgently needed reforms in school organization, curriculum design, and training efforts.

Successful high school reforms convey high expectations and promote a sense of competence in a student's ability to succeed, feelings of control over academic outcomes, beliefs in the value of education, and a sense of belonging and respect. Effective schools and effective teachers provide support and help students understand what it takes to learn and succeed in school.

### A ROADMAP OF REFORM STRATEGIES TO FOSTER MOTIVATION AND ENGAGEMENT

The report offers a framework of ten recommendations as a roadmap for reforms to stimulate meaningful engagement and genuine improvements in student achievement. The recommendations are particularly urgent for high schools serving students in low-income communities.

- 1. High school courses and instructional methods should be redesigned in ways that will increase adolescent engagement and learning.**
- 2. Teachers should assess students' understanding and skills on an ongoing basis and use this information to develop appropriate challenging instruction for all students.**
- 3. Preservice teacher preparation programs should provide high school teachers with deep content knowledge and a range of pedagogical strategies and understandings about adolescents and how they learn, and schools and districts should provide practicing teachers with opportunities to work with colleagues and to continue to develop their skills.**
- 4. Schools should eliminate both formal and informal tracking by ability. They should use alternative strategies to ensure appropriately challenging instruction for students who vary widely in their skill levels.** Schools need to foster and sustain a climate in which students from different backgrounds and skill levels feel comfortable venturing beyond familiar peer and instructional contexts.
- 5. Tests used to evaluate schools, teachers, and students should assess high-level, critical thinking and incorporate broad and multidimensional conception of subject matter which includes fluency, conceptual understanding, analysis, and application.**
- 6. School guidance and counseling responsibilities should be diffused among school staff, including teachers who are supported by professionals.** Students need to be given a realistic understanding of how what they are learning is related to their future educational and career options, and the consequences of disengaging from school.
- 7. Schools should provide the support and resources necessary to help all high school students meet challenging standards.** Students are most likely to be academically engaged when they are challenged with demanding learning goals and when they have opportunities to experience a sense of competence and accomplishment.

Successful high school reforms convey high expectations and promote a sense of competence in a student's ability to succeed...

**8. Schools should develop efforts to improve communication, coordination, and trust among the adults in the various settings where adolescents spend their time.** These settings include homes, religious institutions, and the various organized extracurricular activities sponsored by schools and community groups.

**9. Schools should make greater efforts to identify and coordinate with social and health services in the community, and policy makers should revise policies to facilitate students' access to the services they need.** Federal, state, and local policy makers should work with school administrators to improve access to physical and mental health resources, social services, and other community supports.

**10. School districts should restructure comprehensive urban high schools to create smaller learning communities that foster personalized and continuous relationships between teachers and students.** Supportive personal relationships are critical elements of system-wide efforts to model behaviors of trust and ways to discourage disrespectful behavior among students.

#### **FOR MORE INFORMATION...**

Copies of *Engaging Schools: Fostering High School Students' Motivation to Learn* are available from the National Academies Press, 500 Fifth Street, N.W., Lockbox 285, Washington, DC 20055; (800) 624-6242 or (202) 334-3313 (in the Washington metropolitan area); Internet, <http://www.nap.edu>. The full text of this report is available at <http://www.nap.edu>.

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