Research Matters / Moving from Absent to Present

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Lack of engagement is often a school-environment issue, not a student characteristic.

In March 2020, the Los Angeles Times reported that more than 15,000 L.A. high school students were not checking in online after school closures, thus highlighting one of the most critical consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic on K-12 education: absent students (Blume, 2020). Since then, we've had additional clarity to the scale of the issue—approximately three million U.S. students may have stopped attending school when the pandemic forced many schools to physically close in spring 2020 (Korman, O'Keefe, & Repka, 2020).

Studies on chronic absenteeism suggest that while some students miss school due to family or personal circumstances, others are voluntarily absent because they are simply not engaged with the classroom materials, their teachers, or both (Welsh, 2018). Specifically, when students feel cognitively challenged and emotionally supported in classrooms, feel connected to their schools via extracurricular activities, and have meaningful relationships with adults in the building, they are more likely to attend school (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004).

For many students, the rapid shift to online learning in the spring of 2020 appears to have accentuated existing disparities in engagement. Recently, McREL International (Holquist et al., 2020) invited focus groups of students to share their learning experiences before and after the shift to remote learning. Many reported remaining adequately engaged after the shift to remote learning—but only in classes with teachers whom they found to be engaging prior to the pandemic.

Focus First on Relationships

Relationships do matter. Decades of research show that students who have mutually respectful, trusting, and cooperative relationships with their teachers are more likely to develop confidence in their academic abilities, increase their interest and investment in learning, improve achievement, and have better social-emotional outcomes (Hamre & Pianta, 2001).

These simple practices can promote positive teacher-student relationships:

Notice your students as individuals. Students value regular, consistent, meaningful, and individual interactions with their teachers (Yu et al., 2018). They respond well to teachers who correctly pronounce their preferred name, are aware of their academic abilities, and celebrate their success both inside and outside of the classroom.

Show them you care. A meta-analysis of 119 studies with a sample size of 300,000 students linked teacher empathy and warmth to better student behavior, motivation, and achievement (Cornelius-White, 2007). In a seminal study, Kleinfield (1972) observed the most effective teachers integrated “high personal warmth with high active demandingness.” Their students, in turn, demonstrated high levels of engagement, working hard to please their so-called “warm demander” teachers (p. 29).

Engage in “same-level” conversations. Studies find higher levels of student engagement and learning in classrooms when teachers interact with them as human beings, not merely pupils. One simple way teachers can show students they value their knowledge is to encourage them to share their ideas, rather than just recall information.

Challenge and Encourage

Disengaged students are rarely overwhelmed; they are more typically, underwhelmed and bored (Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morison, 2006). So, instead of “dumbing down” material to reach disengaged learners, teachers should increase the cognitive demands of their classrooms by engaging in these promising practices:

Share high expectations and high hopes for learning. Setting a high bar for students and communicating confidence in their ability to master the material through effort helps students develop a growth mindset, which has been found to mitigate the effects of poverty on achievement (Claro, Paunesku, & Dweck, 2016).

Help students connect effort with success. Research links student academic self-efficacy—believing that with effort, they can succeed as learners—to engagement and academic performance (Dogan, 2015). Encourage students to track effort and progress over time and reflect on the link between them.
Personalize learning. Ask students what interests them about a particular topic. It not only shows respect for their voices, but also gives them choices in learning, which a meta-analysis of 41 studies showed to be strongly linked to intrinsic motivation, task performance, and engagement in challenging learning tasks (Patall, Cooper, & Robinson, 2008).

"I'm Here"

We have long known that students who do not feel engaged in school are more apt to be frequently absent (Lehr, Sinclair, & Christenson, 2004). Perhaps the most important takeaway from research, though, is that student engagement is often an environmental condition, not a student characteristic. Thus, it’s relatively easy to change. Although approximately three million U.S. students may have stopped attending school when the pandemic began, all hope is not lost. While systemic issues or challenges involving technology access, family situations, or lack of resources are often involved in student absenteeism, educators can often play a role in re-engaging students by supporting them, making them feel connected to the classroom environment, and helping them move from absent to present.

References


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