

Using Positive Student Engagement to Increase Student Achievement

— The Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement
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Introduction

Teachers and school-based administrators alike have searched to find ways to increase student achievement in their schools. Several widely known and discussed strategies include using data to drive instruction, employing highly qualified teachers, and improving school leadership. Additionally, positive student engagement in the classroom is another compelling factor—but not as widely discussed—that research has reported to be critical in enhancing student achievement (Akey, 2006; Heller, Calderon, & Medrich, 2003; Garcia-Reid, Reid, & Peterson, 2005). Positive student engagement is not an easy term to define, yet we know it when we see it. Students are engaged when they “devote substantial time and effort to a task, when they care about the quality of their work, and when they commit themselves because the work seems to have significance beyond its personal instrumental value” (Newmann, 1986, p. 242).

Engaged students also are more likely to perform well academically. Therefore, teachers need a large inventory of instructional strategies to engage a variety of students (Garcia-Reid et al., 2005). For additional information on these topics, see The Center’s January 2007 newsletter, *A Teacher’s Guide to Differentiating Instruction* (www.centerforcsri.org/files/TheCenter_NL_Jan07.pdf^[1]). This newsletter describes how student engagement impacts learning and outlines ways in which teachers and school administrators can foster student engagement.

What Can Teachers Do to Foster Positive Student Engagement in the Classroom?

Teachers are key players in fostering student engagement (Akey, 2006; Garcia-Reid et al., 2005). They work directly with the students and typically are the most influential in a student's educational experience. Creating a culture of achievement in their classroom, developing interactive and relevant lessons and activities, and being encouraging and supportive to students are all ways in which teachers can foster student engagement in the classroom.

Cultivate a Culture of Achievement

One method of enhancing student engagement is to cultivate a culture of achievement in the classroom where instruction is challenging, students feel comfortable asking questions, and students are expected to do their best. For instance, a teacher might create an end-of-the-year academic goal for a classroom as a whole or a specific goal for each individual student. In order to show mastery of the goal, students must complete a research project or an oral presentation. For example, students might be asked to research a critical political issue such as immigration impacting the 2008 elections. Teachers need to select a goal that is challenging but attainable and find creative ways for students to work toward achieving the goal. Monitoring student progress throughout the school year also will keep students focused academically and invested in their learning. When students feel challenged, they are less likely to be bored and disengaged (Akey, 2006). Teachers should aim to create a culture in the classroom where learning is “cool,” and asking questions is not only okay but expected. It may take some time to develop this type of environment, but it can be done by setting clear, high, consistent yet attainable expectations for all students. High quality instruction—one that is rigorous, aligned with content standards, and uses instructional strategies to meet the academic needs of all students—also is a key factor in promoting a culture of engagement and achievement in the classroom (Weiss & Pasley, 2004).

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1. http://www.centerforcsri.org/files/TheCenter_NL_Jan07.pdf

