

■ *Mary B. Martin and Maureen Furr*

Promoting Classroom Engagement

In recent years, informal walk-throughs have become an expected part of the principal's routine. These visits sometimes bring about the uncomfortable realization that some classes in the school are a monotonous, lackluster test of endurance, rather than the rich, inviting academic experience that could have lasting impact on learning. Rather than being engaged in genuine learning, students in those classes have learned to just get by.

To develop an instructional environment where learning is paramount, principals must fully understand what student engagement is, why it matters, and how it can be examined in classrooms. To successfully encourage teacher growth, principals must be able to correctly diagnose any engagement problem and then address it directly by providing tailored strategies that help teachers examine their practice so that they can capture genuine student engagement.

Defining Engagement

By focusing on learning outcomes rather than on teachers' behavior, principals can encourage effective, learning-centered classrooms in which students are active participants in their own learning and work harder than the teacher, freeing him or her to focus on instructional planning. In this model, the teacher assumes a less-directive, more-facilitative role and must develop a classroom culture in which students know that they may take academic risks without fear of failure and attendant repercussions. This newly defined form of engagement occurs only when students know they are safe as learners.

Teachers must also make the work they create and assign relevant to their students. Students who are interested in their class work will be persistent, even when the work is challenging. Instructional time that is used for meaningful work activities will engage students at a level that enables them to retain what they learn. Such tasks must be worthy of students' attention and effort: purposeful, of high quality, aligned to state standards, and relevant. Further, what is required of students must be challenging, attainable, and develop skills that students can use effectively in the learning process.



Student engagement is the key to whether or not students learn and retain knowledge.

Teachers must ensure that assignments will get students' attention, that the lessons are worth being learned, and that the classroom environment is supportive.

Principals can identify weaknesses in student engagement during classroom observations and work with teachers to improve engagement.



Photos courtesy of Minnetonka (MN) High School

To ensure that students are appropriately engaged, administrators must observe and analyze what goes on in class, determine a specific area on which to focus, and take decisive action to correct it.

Kids Are Not the Problem

Teachers might say that if only students would work harder and focus more, their boredom would disappear and their learning would flourish. This is simply not the case. Teachers must make adjustments to meet the needs of their students. Success for a teacher is defined by the success of his or her students, not his or her efforts or good intentions.

Rigor and relevance are part of nearly every conversation about effective teaching, but few think through what they mean by those terms. Saying that a curriculum is rigorous does not simply mean that it is difficult, and rigor is not measured by the student's inability to achieve the intended learning. Gone are the days when teachers may have taken pride in failure rate as an indicator of the difficulty of their classes. Rigor that benefits students falls within their zone of proximal development and varies to a degree from one student to the next so that all students will be challenged but not frustrated to the point of quitting.

Intentional Support

To ensure that students are appropriately engaged, administrators must observe and analyze what goes on in class, determine a specific area on which to focus, and take decisive action to correct it. The problems may be due to the students' lack of attention to task, the lessons' inherent lack of worth, or the classroom environment, but appropriate strategies for each deficit can be implemented to improve engagement.

ATTENTIVENESS

Appropriate teaching strategies. Look through lesson plans and units to see whether the teacher is using a variety

of appropriate teaching strategies. What has been planned? Is there any provision for choice, novelty, and variety?

Classroom management. Examine classroom management issues. Does the teacher use practices that interfere with students' ability to attend to desired learning activities?

Teacher as learner. Have teachers videotape their lessons and assume the role of learner. Ask the teacher the following questions:

- Have you accepted the responsibility to motivate students?
- Are you creating work that will ensure their engagement?
- Do you see engagement in your classroom at the authentic level?
- Would you want to be a student in your own class?

Value-added teaching tools.

Encourage the use of more visuals and graphic organizers. Although not a panacea, these devices will likely increase students' attention, and because they are value-added in nature, applying and reflecting on them will likely also enhance the learning process.

Cooperative learning. Promote cooperative learning across the school. Teachers may confuse social interaction in the classroom with cooperative learning and fear its inherent management risks, but cooperative learning is a structured process that is controlled by the teacher. To incorporate cooperative learning strategies successfully,

teachers must have opportunities to learn the strategies and practice them without fear of negative evaluative judgment. Teachers who have developed such skills can serve as models.

Presentation strategies. Encourage teachers to share presentation strategies that have worked for them during professional development sessions and departmental and professional learning team meetings. Develop and model the use of such strategies in your presentations to staff members.

WORTHINESS

Lesson objectives. Examine the objectives for each lesson. See whether the learning outcomes for the lesson are clear, whether they are of value, and whether they are instrumental in driving the learning process. Match the lesson objective to the state standards, not just by topics covered but with attention to the level of cognitive challenge.

Assignments. Ask about the relevance of the assignments. Ask students, not only the teacher, because intended relevance may not translate to actual relevance. Does the content of the current assignment logically follow the content of previous assignments? Has an effort been made to take abstract concepts and demonstrate their similarity and difference to concepts that are concrete, timely, and familiar?

Rigor. Look at the level of rigor required to participate in the class. What cognitive skills are needed to finish the work? How complex is the material? Do students have or are they taught the skills they need to be successful?

Differentiation. Focus on opportunities for differentiation. Are all students doing the same thing, the same way, at the same time? Are

assignments uniform in expectations, or are there opportunities for differentiation?

Assessments. How does the teacher monitor student progress? Look and listen for purposeful, formative assessment and meaningful feedback. Are students required to systematically demonstrate their skills and knowledge so that the teacher can adjust instruction accordingly, or is assessment simply a summative tool?

CLASSROOM AFFECT

Environment. Check to see whether the classroom environment is positive and supportive. Are students and teachers interacting frequently and with mutual respect? Is the learning environment safe, so students feel confident taking risks? Is the classroom attractive, comfortable, and welcoming? Is the seating arrangement conducive to interaction?

Positive feedback. Consider whether the teacher recognizes students' efforts and successes. Do all students have opportunities to shine? Is incremental improvement celebrated? Is praise given too easily, rendering it meaningless?

Locus of control. Note the locus of control for classroom activity. Who is doing all the talking? Who is doing most of the work?

Student input. Suggest ways for students to have input into the lessons. Everyone appreciates some measure of control, and input from the students can help the teacher adjust instruction to meet individual needs that he or she might not have considered when planning lessons.

Student self-efficacy. Students with a strong sense of efficacy are more likely to challenge themselves and be intrinsically motivated. Do students believe that they can be successful?

Check for fun. Do you see evidence that students experience joy in learning? Is the teacher modeling enjoyment of learning?

Principals Take Action

Step one. The initial challenge for the principal is to help teachers arrive at a common understanding of student engagement. Does everyone agree on what it looks like and sounds like in the classroom? Encourage the understanding that engagement is central to the success of teachers and their students. Raise teachers' awareness of the levels of student engagement and teach them how they can gain more participation in their lessons. Take advantage of every opportunity to revisit and highlight strong student engagement in faculty meetings, weekly bulletins, department meetings, mentor meetings, and individual conferences.

Step two. Intentionally monitor classrooms to look for student engagement and give teachers specific feedback about what you see and hear. During observations (formal and informal), look for evidence that student engagement is present and directly related to meaningful work. Consider using a feedback form that gives teachers specific feedback about the time students spend on task, the worthiness of the lessons, and the

classroom climate.

Step three. During walk-throughs, identify the reasons for any breakdown in student engagement, then provide teachers with specific examples of the breakdown and effectively collaborate with them on possible solutions. Hold individual conferences with teachers about adjusting their instruction to engage students whose needs are very different from students in the past, rather than expecting students to change to match their teaching. Acknowledge that teaching today is far more challenging than it once was, but stress that with focused support, the challenge can be met.

Step four. Suggest strategies to teachers that will focus on the elements of instruction that are missing or in need of change. You cannot tell teachers to fix student engagement without providing them with specific strategies to help them do so.

Step five. Finally, student engagement begins with effective and purposeful instructional planning. Teachers are responsible for creating work that will help students learn the right stuff, at the right level, in the right way; that takes careful preparation. As they plan, teachers need to ask these questions: Will this work maintain attentiveness? Is it worthy work? Will it be delivered in the right environment so that student success is ensured? When the answers to those questions are a resounding yes, student engagement across the school will be strong. **PL**

Consider using a feedback form that gives teachers specific feedback about the time students spend on task, the worthiness of the lessons, and the classroom climate.

Mary B. Martin (martinmb@winthrop.edu) is an assistant professor of educational leadership at Winthrop University in Rock Hill, SC.

Maureen Furr (m.furr@cms.k12.nc.us) is the principal of South Mecklenburg High School in Charlotte, NC.

The photos in this article are from Minnetonka (MN) High School and were used with permission of Jeffrey A. Erickson, assistant principal.