

Seizing the Day: Student Engagement and Achievement in English Language Arts

o ' o s 's .
o s so .A
s sso .A , , s ss, g g,
s o s s ss o s s .

And thus, John Keating, Robin Williams' character in "Dead Poets Society," explains the value of English Language Arts education (IMDb.com, Inc.).

While Keating was an exceptional – if fictional – teacher, many adults can point to real-life educators who made English Language Arts resonate and school relevant for them. In fact, student achievement has long been linked to mastery of reading and writing and active engagement, and those who have had a teacher like Keating know what that feels like. They understand, as Keating famously did, what it means to "seize the day."

Yet engagement leading to higher student achievement can be elusive, as evidenced by bright students who fail or those who leave school before graduating. Researchers have studied the connection between engagement and achievement for years. At the college level, data has emerged showing that final grades hinge largely on engagement (Whitmer, J., Fernandez, K. & Allen, W., 2012). In high schools, student engagement has been linked to higher performance in reading, mathematics, and science (Willms, J., 2003).

In fact, engagement in school parallels the need to be engaged later in life, and the corporate world is beginning to understand engagement as a business strategy (Yazzie-Mintz, E., 2010). It's not surprising that employers are looking at an engagement model that hinges on strong relationships leading to a more productive and profitable business – and lower employee turnover (Yazzie-Mintz, E.).

E a a a

The most immediate issue for students and teachers isn't low achievement, but student disengagement (Newman, F., 1992). Disengaged students may skip school, disrupt others, fail to hand in homework, or drop out of school altogether. Or, they may complete homework and behave in class but show little commitment or pride in their work (Newman, F., 1992).

Researchers have documented what our intuition tells us to be true: that more engagement results in higher achievement. The time a student spends on a particular task is important, but time on task is not as important as the quality of that time (Huitt, W., Huitt, M., Monetti, D., & Hummel, J., 2009). It also is clear that when students' personal interests are made part of the school program, they do better academically (Heller, R., Calderon, S., & Medrich, E., 2003).

Engagement with curriculum is not the only form of engagement that leads to student success. Researchers have found a correlation between service-learning programs and improved communication skills, sense of educational competence, improved problem-solving skills, and increased interest in academics (Heller, et. al., 2003). For example, middle and high school students who participate in service-learning tutoring programs

Factors

- Activities and special events for students, families, and communities
- Best educational practices based on evidence and research
- Incentives
- Instructional and/or curricular innovations
- Professional development for educators and program providers
- School policies that enhance engagement
- School-wide programs

School districts around the country have tackled the engagement issue by forming math clubs, engaging parents in reading to children in the early grades, providing after-school programs, tracking and mentoring students, developing leadership skills, and offering rewards for good attendance. (Mann-Erickson & Martinez, 2007).

In fact, ensuring student engagement often starts with attendance. Numerous factors contribute to absenteeism and truancy, and schools are challenged to develop systems of support that address barriers to learning and teaching and that help disengaged students to re-engage (Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA).

One important strategy for re-engaging students is to reframe learning in ways that help the student understand why what he or she is learning is personally valuable and applicable to the student's real-life needs (Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA).

"I think the most important thing is to find a context by which a student can get a point of entry and then generate curiosity," says Robert Romano. Romano, the CEO and co-founder of StudySync, who conceived his web-delivered product to increase reading, writing, and critical thinking skills and to provide a point of entry with multimedia supports. "If a student doesn't have that point of entry . . . and if you're unable to generate some curiosity, some point of reference that makes them feel it's relevant to them, you'll lose them (Romano, R., 2014, personal interview)."

Indeed, designing an accessible and relevant curriculum that incorporates students' own interests has multiple benefits, including increased interest in academics (Heller, et. al., 2003).

Students tend to do well when curricula provide attractive entry points, age-appropriate lessons, visual and auditory supports, engaging simulations that model critical thinking and textual analysis, diverse texts that provide a variety of text types, and – in today's new environment – align clearly with Common Core and National Council of Teachers of English standards (Baines, 2011).

Table

1-h(-1.l6(i)8e)3(r)-15-2ptrac

22. -1.lve entcluwny's nees, 2 s15(t 14. S)-1ol ls9(r)-14.9(s3(u)-st mo)-8(de

22. lle8()-7.k-16((ib, p(g)-22.91))nd at(ns, v)1516()16(6.ial-)-32(')l)16e]nd
(ib, p-31R(urr)-15m)- &- 1 5

4. Motivation

Studies have shown that students who use technology in the school environment finish high school and consider college at higher rates. Technology helps students to take charge of their own learning and to take on a greater variety of roles in the learning process, helping other students and even their teachers in the process.

While the promise of technology is real, Baines notes that “the entry point to a lot of technology is the key. It can’t be too cumbersome, complex or take too long to learn the system,” he says (Baines, 2014, personal interview).

Ca

“Carpe, carpe diem, seize the day boys, make your lives extraordinary.”
– John Keating, Dead Poets Society.
(IMDb.com, Inc.).

It is clear that student engagement is a persistent challenge that has kept educators up at night over the years. Lack of engagement has many negative impacts, such as failure to progress on pace, disenchantment with learning, truancy, and decisions to drop out. However, engagement takes multiple forms and can help bring new excitement, confidence, and competence to student learning.

Keys to better student engagement include innovative ways to link learning as many neentekes mul14.9(dent engag)grnlJTJketoweverdiD23(i s9(tt)(r)-15(ning p-15(so)7(me, c)13.409- engagrk)-o)8(r)-15(s up a)15-

R

- Apple Computer Inc. (2002). The Impact of Technology on Student Achievement: A Summary of Research Findings on Technology's Impact in the Classroom. Retrieved November 29, 2014, from <http://gayleberthiaume.com/FGO/AppleEduResearch.pdf>.
- Appleton, J., Christenson, S., & Furlong, M. (2008). Student engagement with school: Critical conceptual and methodological issues of the construct. *Psychology in the Schools*, Vol. 45(5). Wiley Periodicals, Inc.
- Baines, L. (December 5, 2014). Personal interview.
- Baines, L. (2011). New rules for a new game. Monograph for StudySync.
- Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement. (April 2007). Using Positive Student Engagement to Increase Student Achievement. Newsletter.
- Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA. School Attendance: Focusing on Engagement and Re-engagement. Retrieved November 22, 2014 from <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/schoolattend.pdf>.
- Diaz, V., Brown, M., & Salmons, J. (2010). Unit4: Assessment of Collaborative Learning Project Outcomes. Educause Learning Initiative. Retrieved December 4, 2014, from <http://net.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/ELI80084.pdf>.
- Heller, R., Calderon, S., & Medrich, E. (2003). Academic achievement in the middle grades: What does research tell us? A review of the literature. Southern Regional Education Board.
- Huitt, W., Huitt, M., Monetti, D., & Hummel, J. (2009). A systems-based synthesis of research related to improving students' academic performance. Paper presented at the 3rd International City Break Conference sponsored by the Athens Institute for Education and Research, Athens, Greece, October 16-19, 2009. Retrieved November 22, 2014, from www.edpsycinteractive.org/papers/improving-school-achievement.pdf.
- IMDb.com, Inc. Dead Poets Society Quotes. Retrieved December 10, 2014, from <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0097165/quotes>.
- Klem, A. & Connell, J. (2004). Relationships Matter: Linking Teacher Support to Student Engagement and Achievement. *Journal of School Health*, September 2004, Vol. 74, No. 7.
- Mann-Erickson, G., & Martinez, J. (2007). 21 Ways to Engage Students in School. National Center for School Engagement.
- Newman, F. (1992). Student Engagement and Achievement in American Secondary Schools, Teachers College Press.
- Orthner, D. CareerStart: A proven approach to middle-school success. Learn NC. Retrieved November 22, 2014 from <http://www.learnnc.org/lp/pages/7260>.