

Educators' Powerful Role in Motivation and Engagement

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Guest post by Tara Brown

Humans are hard-wired to connect and, when it comes to the connections educators form with students, it truly "takes a village" to positively impact a student's motivation and willingness to engage.

The school community goes far beyond the office or classroom door to include every adult in the building. A friendly custodial staff, a smiling bus driver and secretary, and a compassionate lunchroom worker all play a huge role in how students feel about their

presence in the school.

Research is clear that emotions have a direct impact on learning and how we process and interpret our surrounding environment. "Students learn and perform more successfully when they feel secure, happy, and excited about the subject matter" (Boekaerts, 1993; Oatly & Nundy, 1996). Emotions are the fast lane to the brain!

Regardless of one's title, every interaction with a student, no matter how brief, sends a message about the organization's philosophy on the role of positive connections and importance of a safe, welcoming learning environment. Addressing students' social and emotional needs is a foundational step toward delivering on academics. As I say, "You can't get to Bloom's Taxonomy without going through Maslow's Hierarchy." As much as some may want to focus primarily on rigor, without the relationship and relevance, the motivational on-switch won't flip.

If a student doesn't feel supported, accepted, and emotionally and physically safe, engagement and motivation won't exist because their basic needs aren't being met. The brain will remain in the hyperactive state of protection and vigilance until steps are taken to allow for a feeling of

safety to enter. School communities that spend time and intentional effort putting emotional deposits in the bank accounts of students see tremendous benefits both academically and socially.

When students feel seen, heard, validated, loved, and physically and emotionally safe, motivation and engagement increase and lead to observable academic gains. Learning more about students by way of student profiles, team building, and non-contingent conversations are ways to prioritize student-teacher relationships and provide emotional deposits.

So, how do you know when you're getting it "right" with engagement? Most teachers have an innate ability to 'read' the temperature of the room and gauge the energy level of the class and individual students. An engaged classroom just feels different and certainly has a huge impact on motivation and achievement. There is an obvious level of activity that signals engaged energy, focus, and participation.

Engaged learning will look different in various classrooms and grade levels, but some constants can be found from pre-K through grade 12:

1. **Students are actively doing something—Some examples include:**

- Having students put answers on individual whiteboards—This ensures that the entire class is tuned in, engaged with each question, and is continually active throughout the process. It also gives the instructor real-time feedback on comprehension and mastery of concepts.
- **Working in groups**—This can be utilized on a variety of projects and lessons. The benefits of group work are widespread and provide positive results both academically and personally. Students are placed in situations that require shared views and opinions, as well as collaborative problem-solving and healthy, positive interactions.
- Pairing and sharing—Asking questions and actively listening, student-led instruction, and getting out of the seats as part of the learning process are all indicators of higher levels of student activity.

2. **Great relationships exist between teacher and students and peer-to-peer**—A teacher's positive demeanor has been shown to have a huge impact on student engagement. The mood of the leader absolutely impacts the mood of the organization. An engaged classroom is full of high energy, focused attention, dialogue, and positive feedback. When great positive energy from the teacher is felt by students, the perception of being accepted, supported and emotionally safe increases. This leads directly to a

student's willingness to participate, give more effort and engage in the academic process consistently.

Once engagement and motivation have become top-of-mind for educators, we can also intervene when they stall out. Even in a generally **engaged classroom**, there will be lulls or times when we feel as though we're up against a barrier.

These are a couple of my favorites strategies for jump-starting motivation:

1. Be aware of Marzano's four key questions and make sure to address them with students—This is critical to ensuring the motivational switch is "on." These four questions are:

- How do I feel?
- Am I interested?
- Is this important?
- Can I do this?

When teachers are able to zero in on students' answers to these questions, the explanation for any evident lack of motivation will typically become clear. If, for instance, the brain finds that information isn't interesting or important, the memory will not process or store the information.

Also, if a student's internal dialogue is saying "I'm not smart" or "I'm not capable," the brain will shut down and avoid engaging. Spending time finding the answers to these questions will allow teachers to forge a path to help change perception and clear the way for increased motivation

2. Give students choice in strategies for mastery of concepts, instructional methods, and project topics—Research is clear that when students are given choice by educators, they feel more control over their learning and perceive the activities to be more important.

This is an important point, so I'm going to repeat it: Regardless of your title, every interaction with a student sends a message about the culture and climate that is being created. This all happens one connection at a time. It is true that perception is reality, and how kids perceive the school as a whole and the individual adults that they encounter throughout the school day has a huge impact on how motivated they'll feel and how much they will engage.

Helping kids feel seen, heard and validated sends a clear message that kids are more important than content. Every emotional deposit, every positive connection from adults in the building increases a child's sense of well being and desire to be a part of the process. School staff who lead with their hearts have a strong commitment to making sure that every person's day is better because they interacted with me.

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and an award-winning educator, author, and international speaker. Tara's 30-year professional journey as a teacher and coach has taken her coast to coast from rural Florida to urban schools in California and to one of the largest high schools in Tennessee, with over 40 countries represented. In 2005, in Nashville, TN, Tara played a key role in piloting a Leadership Development program at Antioch High School targeting nontraditional leaders. Because of the success of this program, it expanded to all high schools in Davidson County and earned Tara the 'Pioneer Award' and 'Teacher of the Year' award in 2006. She holds a Master's degree in Administration and Supervision and is a nationally certified Personal Trainer. Follow Tara on twitter [@tarambrown](https://twitter.com/tarambrown)