ACTIVE STUDENT ENGAGEMENT  
AT THE HEART OF LEARNING

One of the buzzwords in education circles is “student engagement.” It is viewed as one of the most valued outcomes of successful school reform. The term often means different things to different people. Research, however, consistently shows that the more time students spend “engaged” in learning experiences, the more they learn. That is, there is a strong, positive relationship between the amount of time students are actively engaged in meaningful and rigorous learning and their academic achievement.

A. What is “student engagement”?

Student engagement is the interaction of students with their tasks, actively involved in the learning activity or experience (e.g., reading out loud, taking notes, solving a problem, creating a visual representation). Students are engaged when they are invested in their work, persist despite challenges and obstacles, and take visible delight in accomplishing their work. Engagement also refers to a student’s willingness, need, desire, and compulsion to participate in, and be successful in, the learning process.

B. What must teachers do to promote student engagement?

1. Create a positive and safe learning environment that promotes trust, mutual respect and high expectations for all.

2. Design standards-based instructional plans detailing the specific conceptual targets to be taught and learned. The knowledge, skills and big ideas are identified along with strategic learning experiences at a correct level of difficulty. Learning experiences are designed to be both effective and engaging. Other factors to be considered include: students interests, their prior knowledge and skills levels, instructional strategies and materials to be used and assessment tools to monitor and measure achievement.

3. Deliver high-quality instruction that utilizes “best practices” for the appropriate stage of learning (acquisition, proficiency, maintenance, generalization/transfer). Effective strategies include: modeling; demonstration; drill and practice; guided practice; independent practice; cooperative learning; peer tutoring; and choral responding, to name just a few.

Teachers must: (A) provide cues and prompts that lead students to correct answers and deep understanding. (B) Sequence/scaffold instruction so high rates of accuracy are achieved and increasing levels of rigor are attained. (C) Formatively assess throughout instruction to diagnose students’ needs so that appropriate differentiated practices can be employed. (D) Increase opportunities for students to respond and be active learners versus passive learners.
C. How are students behaving when they are engaged?

Students who are actively engaged show sustained behavioral involvement in learning experiences accompanied by a positive emotional disposition. They select tasks at the border of their competencies, initiate action when given the opportunity, and exert intense effort and concentration in the implementation of learning tasks. Engaged students show generally positive emotions during instruction, including the demonstration of enthusiasm, curiosity, optimism, genuine interest, and willingness to be stretched intellectually. Students who are engaged learn at high levels and have a deep understanding of what they have learned. They retain what they learn and can transfer what they have learned to new contexts.

D. How is student engagement measured?

The most common way that student engagement is measured is through the information reported by the students themselves. Other methods include checklists and rating scales completed by teachers, direct observations, and work samples.

1. **Self Reports**: Students are often asked to complete surveys or questionnaires regarding their level of engagement. Questions can address attention versus distraction, intellectual effort demonstrated, task persistence, interest in and/or emotional response to the learning task, and their feelings of stimulation or excitement by the task.

2. **Checklists and Rating Scales**: Teachers respond to items on a checklist or within a rating scale relative to specific indicators of engagement.

3. **Direct Observations**: Teacher and student observations are also often used. Direct observations by teachers can be used to confirm students’ reported levels of engagement in learning tasks. A number of excellent established protocols are available for observations.

4. **Work Samples**: Evidence of engagement, use of higher-order problem solving and metacognitive learning strategies can be gathered from student work: products, portfolios, performances, exhibitions, journals, or logs.

Teachers interested in assessing student engagement in the classroom should ideally consider using separate measures to get at the cognitive, affective, and behavioral aspects of task engagement. Addressing student engagement is, indeed, complex but certainly worth a teacher’s time and commitment.
IMPROVING STUDENT ENGAGEMENT
TEN PRACTICAL TIPS FOR YOUR CONSIDERATION

The following are suggestions for getting students more engaged in classroom instruction. They often appear in the research but most often come from the recommendations of excellent teachers.

1. Provide students with choice in assignments and assessments
   - Consider learning styles and multiple intelligences.
   - Provide a homework menu

2. Include a variety of teaching strategies in every lesson
   - Groups or teams
   - Socratic seminars

3. Be mindful of real-life applications
   - Role playing
   - Connection to community, world

4. Use student-generated rubrics
   - Analytical and holistic
   - Provide practice in scoring

5. Create student-friendly learning targets
   - Clearly defined
   - Help students generate their own learning goals.

6. Use cooperative learning strategies
   - Numbered Heads Together
   - Think-Pair-Share

7. Provide descriptive feedback often
   - Allows students to know: “Where am I going? Where am I now? How can I close the gap?”
   - Engage students in self-reflection

8. Provide note-taking, graphic organizers and other templates to help students organize information
   - Similarities and Differences
   - Cornell Note Taking

9. Build a strong sense of community within your classroom
   - Use team builders and class builders
   - Get to know your students through student inventories, people bingo, team interview, etc.

10. Create opportunities for students to take charge of their own learning.
    - Allow students to choose an (extended learning outside of class).
    - Have students track their own learning

Adapted from Dr. Larry McBiles’ “Keys to Instructional Excellence” presentation.

Mesa Public Schools, AZ

Additional resources available at www.mpsaz.org/Pillars