

# Confronting the Crisis of Engagement

Creating Focus and  
Resilience for Students,  
Staff, and Communities

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for downloadable resources.

# Introduction

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## The Engagement Imperative

A crisis of engagement has emerged because of the ongoing pandemic and its disruptions to all corners of society. Even among those who did not experience a direct loss, many students experienced *re-entry anxiety*, a term coined by mental health experts to describe the complex mixture of worries related to disease exposure, social unease after prolonged isolation from peers, and unfamiliarity with in-person schooling routines. The continuing wave of disruptions due to frequent quarantining and classroom closures further upend household routines related to getting up and out the door for school. It's difficult for families to build school-related momentum when a call can mean two weeks of the children in the house now staying home all day. Is it any wonder that we are seeing unprecedented levels of chronic absenteeism, a reluctance to participate in the classroom, and a reduction in expectations among teachers during an unsteady year?

Engagement and academic performance are inextricably linked. The challenges faced in classrooms are especially acute in high-poverty areas. In a national study of student performance before, during, and after school closures, Harvard professor Thomas Kane and colleagues found that learning losses were particularly acute in schools serving students from low-income families (Anderson 2022). Though Kane estimates that students are behind by 11 to 22 weeks of schooling, our anecdotal observations around the nation find many schools in which there is a full year or more of learning loss. Students in second and third grade do not yet know the alphabet; students in middle and high schools do not have the reading skills required to understand their science, social studies, and math textbooks. These are not challenges that will be resolved with Saturday school, after-school programs, homework packets,

or study halls. These students need intensive support during the school day. The only solution is to rebuild student-teacher relationships so that the engagement that is essential to learning can be re-established.

As the world emerges from the global pandemic with interrupted formal education and many student absences, the norms of daily behavior, including interacting with peers and teachers, must be re-learned. Educators are worried about unfinished learning and desperately try to engage students in meaningful tasks that address learning needs (Kuhnfeld and Tarasawa 2020; World Bank 2021). As a result, teachers and school leaders face the daunting challenge of re-engaging students, academically and behaviorally, so that students have the opportunity to reach their potential and meet the challenges that a great educational environment can provide. But these aspirations will be a pipedream without a renewed commitment to what we believe is the foundation of learning and teaching: engagement. By *engagement*, we mean the mutually focused attention of students and teachers on curiosity, challenge, and learning. While much has been written about student engagement, we contend that this is only a part of the equation, for without deep engagement by teachers and school leaders, the expectation that students will be engaged is wishful thinking. In brief, if you expect students to be engaged, you must give teachers the time and space to engage with students. And if you expect teachers to be engaged, then leaders must be in a constant state of vigilance to focus the efforts of the entire school—every minute, every meeting, every initiative—on nothing other than the learning imperatives at hand.

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While the appeal of engagement may be obvious, we find that it is elusive because of the fragmentation that is prevalent in schools and districts. There is a global crisis in maintaining focus. The inability of students and adults to attend to an idea—especially new and challenging ideas essential for

learning—for more than a few minutes at a time has impacted every facet of our lives (Hari 2022).

.....  
**If we are to take the clarion call in this book for engagement seriously, it cannot be one more initiative.**  
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However, the failure of focus and the prevalence of initiative fatigue (Reeves 2021c) were pervasive long before the pandemic and the flood of federal dollars that were designed to help schools recover from it. Unfortunately, many of these funds brought programs that further scattered the attention of teachers, administrators, and students, and failed to provide the essential focus on learning that students desperately needed. This is not a new phenomenon, as federal educational aid programs in past decades, such as Race to the Top, yielded more dollars than sense. The evidence from a study of more than two thousand school plans reveals an inverse relationship between the number of initiatives and gains in student achievement (Reeves 2013). Therefore, if we are to take the clarion call in this book for engagement seriously, it cannot be one more initiative, announced with great solemnity in a school auditorium on top of the 23 other “top priorities” for the year. Engagement is the oxygen of learning. If you don’t focus on that, teachers can only gasp for a few moments before all the other initiatives clamor for their attention. Therefore, this book is organized around the five Cs of engagement that, in turn, encompass so many other dimensions of schooling:

1. Connections
2. Conditions
3. Challenge
4. Control
5. Collaboration

We begin our exploration of engagement with **connections**—the essential relationships among students, teachers, and leaders that are the lifeblood of the school. Students don’t come

to school because they love algebra, but because they have deep connections with classmates and teachers. The essential nature of relationships is hardly unique to the schoolyard, as evidence from the organizational world reveals the power of emotional engagement for employees across industries and cultures (Edmondson 2018) and the destructive power of negative emotions in ruining work relationships (Porath and Pearson 2013). It is therefore baffling that the term “social and emotional learning” has become the object of criticism and abuse, as if only the parents and their fellow employees needed a decent and emotionally safe work environment, but their children should put their noses to the grindstone and get the work done. In Chapter 1 we explore connections not only in the classroom but also on the playground, athletic field, stage, and other opportunities for students to connect and develop relationships.

Chapter 2 focuses on the **conditions** that are necessary for engagement to thrive. As obvious as it sounds, students need to show up to school or to their learning environment if they are going to be able to engage. Further, students need to participate in the learning tasks. Finally, when teachers demonstrate high expectations for their learners, students are much more likely to engage. These conditions, combined with strong relationships, are foundational for engagement in learning.

Chapter 3 addresses the central paradox of engagement—*how do teachers simultaneously engage students with the encouragement and love that comes naturally to us, and **challenge** students to get out of their comfort zone and face disappointment and even the possibility of failure?* We challenge the conventional wisdom that engagement is antithetical to discomfort. In fact, we insist that part of our role as educators and leaders is to take children out of their comfort zone, endure the pain of mistakes, and create a fearless environment for error and the learning that it engenders. This has important implications for administrators who observe classrooms and who may inadvertently send the wrong message that an engaged classroom is one that reflects quiet and order (Gupta and Reeves 2021) rather than inquisitiveness, error, and a bit of chaos. There are great lessons to be learned from our music teachers and athletic coaches, who



are able to provide honest feedback to students without the aid of a red pen or electronic grading systems: The note was sharp or flat. The basket was in or out. The goal was wide or in the net. But in the classroom, we too often temporize, encouraging work that is inadequate because we prefer the comfort of smiles and poor work over the discomfort of tears and corrected work.

**Control** is the subject of Chapter 4, in which we explore the ways in which students increase the ownership of their learning. The nexus between engagement and control may seem unusual, but it is vital. For educators to re-engage students in a post-pandemic world, we must design learning experiences that allow students to engage in self-regulation. Students need to know where they are going, select tools for their journey, and monitor their own progress. Each of these requires specific actions from teachers and opportunities to make mistakes along the way. But with practice and feedback, students can increase their ownership of learning, increasing their motivation and engagement along the way.

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**As difficult as collaboration may be, it is a key to engaging teachers and leaders and is more powerful as a motivator for them than other incentives.**  
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In Chapter 5, we frame **collaboration** among students and teachers as an essential element of engagement. There is a lingering Emersonian ideal of self-reliance reflected in many classroom expectations in which “works independently” is a highly prized attribute. We examine critically the illusion of collaboration in which four students push desks together and pretend to collaborate, compared to the more challenging reality of collaboration in which each student must, with patience and perseverance, make independent contributions to the group. Collaboration is similarly difficult for adults. As difficult as collaboration may be, it is a key to engaging teachers and leaders and is more powerful as a motivator for them than other incentives that many educational systems use (Reeves 2018). If school and district leaders believe in collaboration,

then they need to radically restructure their staff meetings, and give teachers real time for meaningful collaboration.

The book concludes with a chapter on **leadership essentials** for engagement. We are unstinting in our expectations that leaders change dramatically the primitive practices of staff meetings in which they make announcements to busy teachers. If we believe in engagement, then leaders must demonstrate that belief at every opportunity. That includes making every meeting a working one, with engagement rather than speeches and collaboration rather than announcements.

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We write with a sense of urgency. As this book goes to press, more than a million of our fellow citizens in the United States, and vastly more around the world, have been lost to the pandemic. Millions more are traumatized as they return to school. Educational systems face a series of stark choices. First, we can ignore it. (Hint—if you have the same schedule and time allocation today as you had in 2019, you are pretending that the pandemic never happened.) Second, we can wish for educational alchemy, in which the right mix of technology and rapid speech will make up for the fact that we have second graders who can't read and middle schoolers who are lost in every sentence of their textbooks. Or we can choose the path of engagement—confident that in order for learning, teaching, and leadership to succeed, relationships through effective engagement must come first. If you choose the third way, you are in the right place.