

## Engaging

Fostering a learning atmosphere that is relevant, participatory and motivating for all learners.

*This We Believe*

Student engagement is not a simple construct. In attempts to define *engagement*, a variety of other words arise—*motivation, attention, interest, participation, enjoyment, involvement*.

Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1990, 72) coined the term *flow activities* to describe activities that “have as their primary function the provision of enjoyable experiences.” When students are in the flow zone, their skill level matches the level of challenge, and they experience positive emotions, rather than anxiety or boredom. Flow also involves “deep absorption in an activity that is intrinsically interesting” (Willms, Friesen and Milton 2009, 12).

Hume (2011, 6) discusses intellectual engagement, which is “concerned with a student’s investment in learning.” Harris and Cullen (2010, 46) note that “intrinsic motivation to learn is affected by individuals’ personal interests as well as their sense of choice and control.”

Schlechty (2002, 1) uses the term *authentic engagement* to describe a “task, activity, or work the student is assigned or encouraged to undertake . . . that has clear meaning and relatively immediate value to the student.”

VanDeWeghe (2009, 2) states, “Engagement is the key to a lifelong love of learning,” which leads to “deep meaning” as motivated by “personal drives for genuine understanding” (p 43).

The words *deep* and *deepen* are commonly used in describing engagement.

Harris and Cullen (2010, 52) write, “Deep learning, as opposed to surface learning, relates previous knowledge to new knowledge, to knowledge from other courses, to knowledge of the real world, and organizes the knowledge into larger coherent structures.”

Weimer (2013) discusses the research of Marton and Säljö (1976). She notes that “when students concentrated on memorizing the facts, . . . were unreflective and saw the task

as an external imposition, Marton and Saljo characterized their approach as ‘surface’ learning” (p 31). Deep learning, on the other hand, allows students to transfer their new learning or relate it to what they already know or have experienced, which leads to a deeper and richer experience. As Ramsden and Marton (1988, 271) write, “Learning should be seen as a qualitative change in a person’s way of seeing, experiencing, understanding, conceptualizing something in the real world.”

Student engagement is defined and measured in a variety of ways. However, Klem and Connell (2004, 262) remind us that “regardless of the definition, research links higher levels of engagement in school with improved performance.”

Quaglia and Corso (2014, 85) explain the difference between engagement and entertainment: “An entertaining teacher is the center of attention, whereas a teacher who engages students provides tools and resources in order for them to be the attentive center of their learning.” Moreover,

Engagement happens when students are deeply involved in the learning process as characterized by enthusiasm, a desire to learn new things, and a willingness to take positive, healthy steps toward the future. Students are meaningfully engaged when they are emotionally, intellectually and behaviorally invested in learning. (p 24)

They emphasize that student-centred learning and student engagement are strongly connected, since to be academically competent, “students need to engage with the curriculum” (p 39). They remind us that if students are to “achieve their aspirations and not just dream about them, they must be actively engaged in the learning process” (p 79).

### Practices That Promote Engagement

*The following examples were provided by middle level educators at the MYC’s 2023 annual conference.*

#### Real-World Learning

Students are more engaged when learning is authentic and when they can see relevant real-world applications to what they learn in the classroom.

Examples include collaborative projects and learning activities, such as project-based learning, Genius Hour projects, projects in STEM (science, technology, engineering, math) or STEAM (which adds art), and self-directed learning projects that allow students to explore their own interests and passions.

Teachers can connect learning outcomes to real-life or relevant topics. They can also

develop community connections, including taking field trips and inviting experts into the classroom to spark learning.

#### Curriculum Integration

Students enjoy the integration of curriculum from various subject areas (cross-curricular or interdisciplinary learning).

Curriculum integration can take many forms. The humanities (English language arts and social studies) lend themselves to integration, as do STEM and STEAM. Teachers can also develop integrated units based around themes of interest or problems of concern to students.

#### Building Relationships

A significant way to create engaged learners in middle school is through building relationships.

Relationship-building involves teachers taking time to get to know all their students. Tools and strategies for this include interest inventories, questionnaires, surveys, fun attendance and exit cards.

Relationship-building also involves creating opportunities for students to get to know each other through fun name games, team-building activities and icebreaker games.<sup>9</sup>

Teachers and school leaders should also build relationships with parents, through strategies such as the following:

- Communicating frequently, including positive phone calls and e-mails
- Sharing information through agendas, e-mail or the school website
- Holding a meet-the-teacher night early in the school year
- Allowing for student-led conferences with parents
- Having students create portfolios to take home

#### Differentiation

Giving students choice and a voice in assignments has a great impact on student engagement.

Teachers can scaffold their lesson plans to further support students in their learning.

Students also seem to prefer learning in small groups and using technology (for example, Chromebooks, social media and Google for Education).

#### Classroom Culture

If we want engaged learners, we need engaged teachers who create a culture in which

students feel safe to have fun and take risks.

Teachers can model their passion for teaching and learning through their words and actions.

Other ideas include having students help set classroom expectations, creating a class mission statement, having a class mascot or pet, and celebrating student successes.

<p>Essential Attribute: Engaging</p>
<p>Fostering a learning atmosphere that is relevant, participatory and motivating for all learners. (TWB)</p>
<p><i>TQS Indicators</i></p> <p><i>Engaging in Career-Long Learning</i></p> <p>2.(f) Maintaining an awareness of emerging technologies to enhance knowledge and inform practice.</p> <p><i>Demonstrating a Professional Body of Knowledge</i></p> <p>3.(a) Planning and designing learning activities that incorporate a range of instructional strategies, including the appropriate use(s) of digital technology, according to the context, content, desired outcomes and the learning needs of students, and that are varied, engaging and relevant to students.</p> <p>3.(b) Using instructional strategies to engage students in meaningful learning activities.</p> <p><i>Establishing Inclusive Learning Environments</i></p> <p>4.(f) Employing classroom management strategies that promote positive, engaging learning environments.</p>
<p><i>LQS Indicators</i></p> <p><i>Embodying Visionary Leadership</i></p> <p>3.(a) Communicating a philosophy of education that is student-centred and based on sound principles of effective teaching and leadership.</p> <p>3.(e) Promoting innovation, enabling positive change and fostering commitment to continuous improvement.</p> <p><i>Supporting the Application of Foundational Knowledge About First Nations, Métis and Inuit</i></p> <p>5.(d) Pursuing opportunities and engaging in practices to facilitate reconciliation within the school community.</p> <p><i>Providing Instructional Leadership</i></p> <p>6.(a) Building the capacity of teachers to respond to the learning needs of all students.</p> <p>6.(i) Facilitating access to resources, agencies and experts within and outside the school community to enhance student learning and development.</p>

*Understanding and Responding to the Larger Societal Context*

9.(e) Facilitating school community members' understanding of local, provincial, national and international issues and trends related to education.