

The Impact of Student Engagement on Learning: The Critical 10th EPC for California

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Something is amiss in the California accountability system. While the school improvement and accountability system appears to have shown significant gains in reading and math at primary grades over the course of the testing program, recent research data has identified issues that pose barriers to effective student learning. More specifically, the question of how well are we preparing young people to assume roles in the workforce, as citizens, and as leaders in the 21st century has met with disappointing conclusions. The bad news is reinforced by current research that reports low graduation completion rates¹, stagnant scores in history-social science and science, minimal increases in proficient and advanced scores at upper grade levels,² and insufficient attention to writing skills and life skills across the curriculum. In addition, we have seen negligible progress in the integration of career tech, 21st Century Skills³, civic education, and student engagement. The time has come to focus attention on the quality of instruction for students and student engagement.

Student Engagement – The Problem

The National Dropout Prevention Center has reported a dismal picture of California high school graduation rates of only 69.2% of enrolled freshmen completing high school⁴. Over the course of the state testing program, California has shown minimal improvement in state standards testing scores and high school exit exam results. School improvement efforts continue to move very slowly for many students in California schools.

In response to the need to support the lowest performing schools in the state, the California Department of Education has established a school improvement monitoring system using academic program surveys to evaluate school improvement efforts. While each of the components is important and critical in the school improvement process, the omission of one very critical element has helped to create a very incomplete school improvement process. Fortunately, many educational leaders recognize that student achievement is far more complex than data analysis and high quality teaching and learning cannot be happenstance. Unfortunately, the widespread use of the system without attention to student engagement reinforces the problem.

Student Engagement – The Research

Student engagement is an emerging field of research and the initial results are both startling and profound. Review of any current research in student achievement is incomplete without consideration of the enormous impact of the student engagement variable in student learning. “It is important to remember that young people are not just adults-in-training; their lives as they experience them now are as valuable and meaningful as those of the adults they will become. How they feel about school and their own achievement is, for most young people, central to their daily lives – whether they feel good about themselves and cared for at school; whether they are frustrated, anxious, bored, or depressed; whether they feel vibrant and excited by what they are learning; and, for that matter, whether they are learning at all.”⁵

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A longitudinal study conducted by Isabelle Archambault, et al, has found a significant correlation between student engagement and reliably predicted school dropout rates.⁶ The study confirmed the importance of cognitive as well as behavioral student engagement and concluded that participation and active learning are critical determinants to student investment in their education. Other researchers have also reported positive correlations between active student learning and student achievement and have concluded that student engagement is frequently the key determinant. Yonezawa, et al, pose the question, “What keeps students interested and engaged in school? Unfortunately, in today’s climate of increased rigor in classrooms, we are simultaneously losing sight of the need to provide students with an education that is both challenging and stimulating....Only when students see the purpose of engaging in schools, as students and agents of change, will engagement and students’ academics and lives improve.”⁷

Monitoring School Improvement Minus One

What if the educational leaders in California improved testing frequency, data collection, data analysis, assessment monitoring systems, and school schedules, and still find that students are not adequately progressing as they move through the system? What if we require that teachers have state-approved instructional materials, meet with colleagues regularly, test students regularly, analyze assessment data, and develop pacing guides, and still we find that students are feeling disenfranchised and unmotivated? What if, in spite of all the administrative and operational changes, students perceive the curriculum to be irrelevant, meaningless, and unconnected to real life? There is a part of the educational improvement equation that is not adding up. Where is student engagement?

The California Department of Education school improvement process is centered on nine Essential Program Components (EPCs) that measure school structures in support of academic achievement. Of the nine EPCs, six of the measures are focused on reading-language arts and math (instructional materials, instructional time, lesson pacing, school administrator training, instructional assistance and support for teachers, and a student monitoring system). Those, along with the EPCs that focus on credentialed teachers and professional development, teacher collaboration meetings, and fiscal support, are focused on administrative operations. None of the nine components address student engagement, student involvement in the learning process, development of higher level thinking skills, or application of skills. None of the EPCs mention strategies for active learning. None of the EPCs require demonstration of how learning in the content subjects of history-social science and the sciences can involve students in service learning, civic engagement, environmental studies, public policy, current events, global understanding, and healthy living. There remains an insignificant accountability process for the teaching of History-Social Science, Science, writing, and higher level thinking skills.

The research and the evidence suggest that California has neglected a critical element in the school monitoring process and a 10th Essential Program Component is necessary to rectify the omission. The 10th Essential Program Component, “A Culture of Student Learning and Engagement,” would have objectives that include evaluation of relevant curriculum that applies to real-life skills, content classes such as history-social science and science that address student engagement, and teacher-student relationships that nurture a culture of respect and empowerment. The criteria and clarifications would

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include integration of higher level thinking skills, application of knowledge, and demonstrations of knowledge. The 10th EPC would require documentation on how the school and staff empower student pursuit of active learning. Specifically, this component would examine how teachers include relevancy in academic studies, nurture curiosity, and involve students in learning and project design. Schools would be measured on their implementation of a cohesive and coherent curriculum with a common goal of preparing students for the 21st century workforce.

Literature on preparation for the 21st century workforce is replete with initiatives that encourage higher level thinking skills (drawing conclusions, examining multiple perspectives, fact-finding, taking a position and defending it), writing skills, presentation skills, and creative problem-solving. The 10th EPC would be a critical element in making it possible for students to move from passive learning to active learning. To that end, the 10th EPC would reinforce goals that are listed in so many school mission statements such as the creation of life-long learners, creative problem solvers, and positive contributors to the workforce and society.

Student Engagement – A Critical Part of the Solution

Willms, et al, have identified the three dimensions of student engagement as social engagement, academic engagement, and intellectual engagement.⁸ While all three dimensions are important, accountability can easily focus on the academic and the intellectual engagement aspects through a curriculum monitoring system that encourages and supports active learning, applied academic skills, student-led projects that are tied to community and real-life skills, and civic education.

Student engagement is active learning. The strategies include service learning, problem-based inquiry, organized debate, facilitated classroom discussion, and expository or persuasive writing. All activities require grounding in research, evaluation skills, communication skills, reasoned decision-making skills, and fact-finding. The 21st Century Skills Framework⁹ outlines the necessary components for developing a workforce and future leaders that is grounded in core academic content, learning skills such as creative problem-solving and communication, information literacy skills, and life and career skills. There is a strong correlation between student engagement and relevant curriculum that is meaningful to students.¹⁰ “Current research... is clear that simply remembering content is no longer sufficient. Students need to be able to re-visit ideas and recast how ideas fit together in order to build an understanding of the fields of knowing within which content exists.”¹¹

A 10th EPC will not, in any way, mitigate the need to teach reading instruction, improve math instruction, or eliminate academic intervention programs. This focus, rather than detract from the teaching of reading and math skills, will reinforce the need to learn academic skills for real-life applications and career development. As students progress to the upper elementary grades and middle school, instruction must become replete with content-rich classes that incorporate higher level thinking skills, writing skills, real life skills, and active learning strategies. History-social science classes that incorporate current events and develop meaningful connections to civic education through teacher-facilitated discussion and challenging questioning strategies have been shown to motivate students in an intellectually stimulating and connected curriculum.¹²

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Service learning strategies have long provided the methodology to connect theory to real life applications in science, government, career-tech, and the arts.

Student Engagement – The Issues and Recommendations

If students are not engaged in the learning process, all of the testing, data analysis, teacher meetings, and instructional minutes in the world will not motivate students to learn. In the final analysis, the only instructional program that makes a difference is that which involves students in their learning, demonstrates their social connectedness, and secures their investment in the future.

The following recommendations are a starting point at which we can continue to improve our school improvement process:

1. It is imperative that a measure of school climate and student engagement be added to the academic surveys to provide a more meaningful and accurate picture of student learning. Student engagement requires assessment that is more qualitative than quantitative, making the measurements more complex and interdependent, but the benefits far outweigh the inconvenience of developing a meaningful and well-defined school climate/student engagement survey tool.
2. The content classes of science and history-social science must become a part of the EPC system and recommended minutes per day of instruction in both subjects should be established for all grades levels, kindergarten through grade 12.
3. Instructional strategies that promote active learning such as service learning, current events discussion, organized debate, persuasive and expository writing, and problem-solving needs to be a part of a comprehensive accountability system. Emphasis of relevancy, real-life skills, interrelationships between the disciplines, and academic skill development will provide a framework for students to engage, develop vested interests in their education and associations to a broader social network of community, governance, and democracy.
4. It is important that educators, including curriculum specialists, school administrators, and assessment coaches, differentiate between the content subjects (History-Social Science, the Sciences, and the study of Literature) and skills such as reading, writing, presentations, research, logic, and higher level thinking skills. Instruction should identify how the skills are taught and reinforced across the curriculum.

END NOTES

¹ Based on 2005-06 data from the National Dropout Prevention Center, 2009.

² Multi-year data from <http://star.cde.ca.gov/>

³ www.21stcenturyskills.org 2010

⁴ Based on 2005-06 data from the National Dropout Prevention Center, 2009.

⁵ Willms, et al. 2009.

⁶ Archambault, et al. 2008.

⁷ Yonezawa, et al. 2009.

⁸ Willm, et al. 2009.

⁹ Partnership for 21st Century Skills 2010.

¹⁰ The Better Teacher Project (2010).

¹¹ Willms, et al. 2009,

¹² Hess, D. E. 2009.

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