

Student disengagement

It's deeper than you think

American schools are failing to meet the expectations of a wide swath of students, many of them in low-income and rural communities. What's needed is a new pact putting student expectations at its center.

By Elliot Washor and Charles Mojkowski

Even the president is talking about student engagement — or disengagement — in school.

In his 2013 State of the Union Address, President Obama gave special attention to education and particularly to the problem of high school dropouts. This isn't the first time the President has used a major speech to highlight this problem. In a February 2009 speech to a joint session of Congress, the President said dropping out “is no longer an option.” Sadly, dropping out does remain an option for many young people — 1.3 million students leave high school each year without a diploma.

Like the President, we've been paying attention for many years and have come to see the dropout problem as part of a larger and more pervasive one: student disengagement from their schools, communities, and productive learning. This disengagement is particularly strong and pervasive in poor urban and rural communities, where forces of disengagement are more formidable, and the resources for battling them more limited.

In our work with students in these communities, we've identified several reasons. Young people feel that who they are and what they want to become doesn't matter to teachers and schools. While students are required to fit into a restrictive school structure, culture, and curriculum, schools do little to fit themselves to their students.

Many students drop out because of academic failure, behavioral problems, and life issues; many more stay in school but drop out in their heads — gradually disengaging from what schools have to offer. These disengaged students pass the tests and get passing grades, but they limp to a tainted graduation and a diploma that papers over their lack of readiness for successful postsecondary learning and work. Often these disengaged students are just off the radar screens of those early warning systems devised to detect potential dropouts.

Researchers have calculated the cost of dropouts to society, but they've missed the significantly larger cost of disengaged students. They are the ones who graduate from high school but are unprepared for life-long learning. Their talents and potential have been sadly ignored, often because those talents reside just outside the traditional subject-matter bins of a cognitive-abstract curriculum.

Just as schools have high expectations for students, young people have high expectations for schools. Through our work with young people, we've identified 10 such expectations. We believe student expectations constitute the rules for engagement in a new relationship that young people want with school. We frame these expectations in the form of questions that students might — and often do — ask their teachers.

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RELATIONSHIPS

Do my teachers — including others who might serve as my teachers — know about me, my interests, and talents?

Do my teachers help me form relationships with adults and peers who might serve as models, mentors, and coaches concerning my career interests?

Do my teachers help me build relationships in the school community and in out-of-school communities?

RELEVANCE

Do I find what the school is teaching relevant to my interests, including my career interests?

Do my teachers help me understand how my learning and work contribute to my community and the world?

CHOICE

Do I have real choices about what, when, and how I will learn and demonstrate my competence?

Do my teachers help me make good choices about my learning and work?

CHALLENGE

Do I feel appropriately challenged in my learning and work?

Am I addressing real-world, high, and meaningful standards of excellence?

AUTHENTICITY

Is the learning and work I do regarded as significant outside school by my communities of practice, experts, family members, and employers?

Does the community recognize the value of my work?

APPLICATION

Do I have opportunities to apply what I am learning in real-world settings and contexts?

Do I have opportunities to contribute to solving problems my community and the world are facing?

PLAY

Do I have opportunities to explore — to make mistakes and to learn from them — without being branded as a failure?

Do my teachers coach me in tinkering, experimenting, and speculating?

PRACTICE

Do I have opportunities to engage in deep and sustained practice of the skills I need to learn?

Do my teachers guide me in practicing correctly?

TIME

Do I have sufficient time to learn at my own pace?

Am I allocating sufficient time for my learning — to go deep as well as broad?

TIMING

Can I pursue my learning out of the standard sequence?

Do my teachers help me determine the right time for pursuing a project or taking a course?



Deepen your understanding of this article with questions and activities in this month's *Kappan* Professional Development Discussion Guide by Lois Brown Easton. Download a PDF of the guide at kappanmagazine.org.

This list is by no means definitive or even comprehensive, but these student expectations capture what we consider essentials for a student learning experience leading to sustained engagement in deep and productive learning.

Schools do little to fit themselves to their students.

The key to addressing the dropout problem is in not addressing the dropout problem *alone*. We recall the reminder that became a meme — “it’s the economy, stupid,” — popularized by James Carville, President Clinton’s former campaign adviser. Carville’s invocation was a reminder to himself to stay focused on the right issue. And we’ve been reminding ourselves that “it’s disengagement, stupid” that should attract our attention.

The education system focuses on dropping out, which it attempts to solve by creating early warning systems that tag potential dropouts for special attention. But we should not fool ourselves. This is an old magician’s trick. We’re watching the dropout issue, but we’re being distracted from the deeper and more pervasive problem of student disengagement.

Why?

Could the misdirection of our attention be motivated by an unconscious unwillingness to undertake the much more fundamental changes that would be necessary to deliver the student expectations and thereby engage all students in deeper and productive learning? After all, addressing the dropout problem does not require schools to redesign themselves or change how they operate. School life can go on as usual even as schools create a special set of remediations for potential or actual dropouts.

By redesigning themselves to deliver on student expectations, schools can move from remediation to prevention, similar to the approach suggested for American health care, which is so skewed to treatment that an estimated 30% of all diseases are iatrogenic — caused by the doctor or the hospital implementing a treatment.

In a similar vein, many high school dropouts are produced by the system itself. How might educators redesign schools to increase deep and sustained student engagement? We propose a prevention system with student expectations as its design imperative. In such a redesigned school teachers would act as fiduciaries for students, giving serious attention to their choices regarding their education, consider-

ing what’s best for each student, and helping each discover what’s best for him or her.

In *Leaving to Learn* (Heinemann, 2013), we argue that traditional school structures, cultures, programs, curricula, and instructional practices can’t adequately respond to student expectations unless schools develop opportunities for all students to do some learning outside school. To accomplish this, schools must take down the walls that separate learning that students do inside the school from outside of it.

Student expectations describe what students want with respect to learning opportunities and learning environments. Note, however, that teachers can use the expectations as student competencies. For example, with respect to relationships, students ask their teachers to know who they are and to use that knowledge to shape their learning opportunities. By turning the lens 180 degrees, however, it is possible to see the expectation regarding relationships being used by the teacher to push the student to develop deep and meaningful relationships with adults and peers outside the school who are doing learning and work the student wishes to do. Each of the expectations can serve this dual purpose.

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Our intention is to develop a suite of tools that teachers, students, and parents can use to assess how well schools and students are doing with respect to each of these expectations. Schools that deliver on these expectations will see high and sustained levels of student engagement in deep and productive learning.

The relationship between schools and their students is deteriorating in our nation’s high schools. Hundreds of charter and alternative schools around the country are attempting to change that relationship, but they only patch a system that requires fundamental redesign, a safety valve that unintentionally reduces the pressure for more fundamental and systemwide reform. By using student expectations as design imperatives, educators can fundamentally reshape their schools.

We look forward to the day when every school posts these student expectations on their web page to signal their new student-centered focus. Indeed, it’s our expectation!

