



—Christopher Millette/Erie Times-News via AP

Mary Euell helps her sons, Michael Henry, left, and Mario Henry, work through math lessons remotely in their Erie, Pa., home.

Student Engagement & Motivation

EDITOR'S NOTE

Student engagement and motivation face new challenges in the distance learning sphere. In this Spotlight, learn about community wide efforts to engage; evaluate what the data says about digital approaches to motivate; discover toxicity seeping into the frontlines; become aware of what's going wrong; and re-remember the positive connections children need to be engaged and to be motivated.

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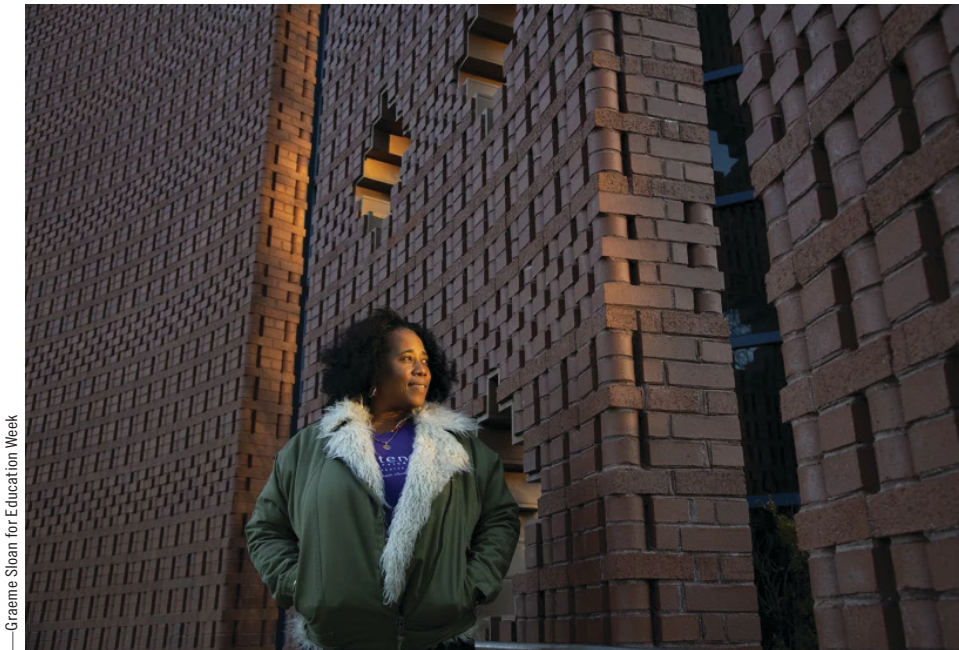
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—Graeme Sloan for Education Week

Kahlil Kuykendall has worked through Crittenton Services of Greater Washington this year to help keep low-income students academically focused.

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Inside the Effort to Find and Help Disengaged Youth

By Christina A. Samuels

January last year, Kahlil Kuykendall, a youth development consultant for an organization supporting teenage girls, would spend school lunches bonding with students in three Washington, D.C., middle schools. She would help the 30 or so girls develop stronger goal-setting skills, learn more about college and careers, and navigate the storms of adolescence.

Then came the coronavirus pandemic, which closed school buildings and sent the economy into a tailspin. An unknown number of children and youth—as many as 3 million, by one estimate—have not had a meaningful connection to their schools since in-person learning was disrupted in March 2020. Those adults, such as Kuykendall, who work closest with these students and their families, are now using every tool they have to keep these vulnerable youth connected to their education.

Kuykendall, who works for Crittenton Services of Greater Washington, has pared her caseload down to 18 girls, all African-American

and from low-income families, at one middle school. In partnership with the school, she's now their "advisory" teacher, and checks in every day. But many of the girls in the group can't access their classroom lessons because of their glitchy computers and sporadic internet service. Three have been diagnosed with the coronavirus. One 13-year-old lost her mother, who was only 27, to the virus.

"I think the further they get away, the more disengaged they become. I'm seeing a decline in terms of academic self-esteem and I'm just trying to find ways to encourage them," said Kuykendall, who has hosted online pizza parties and other social events for the girls. Crittenton Services of Greater Washington is one of the many nonprofit organizations that are helping students across the country weather a time of loneliness, disconnection, and loss.

"One of the mantras I say with my girls is, 'I want for my sister what I want for myself,'" Kuykendall said. "That keeps us grounded."

When in-person learning abruptly ended last spring, schools and community groups sprang into action, scrambling to offer wireless internet access, computers, and food. For many

families, those measures were enough to ensure a level of economic and academic stability.

But for some children, they weren't enough. Parents may have lost jobs and housing. Older children may have been drafted into working or caring for younger siblings, leaving them a step away from dropping out of school entirely. This has led to many students disappearing from school rosters altogether.

How Many Children Are Missing?

It can be difficult to track precisely how many students have disengaged from school on a national level, because no one organization is in charge of tracking that data.

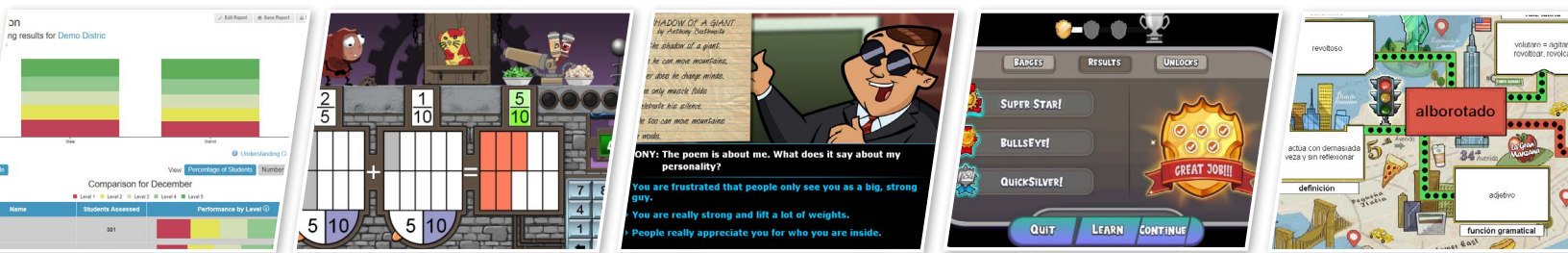
Bellwether Education Partners, a Washington-based organization that conducts policy analysis, took a stab at trying to quantify how many children and youth may be, what it calls, "missing at the margins."

Its analysts focused on five groups of students particularly at risk of missing education in a remote environment: those belonging to migrant families or experiencing homelessness, children in the foster care system, English-language learners, and students with disabilities. They then looked at reports from a sample of districts on how many of those students have not logged on for classes. Based on that analysis, the organization says that 10 percent to 25 percent of students in those groups—accounting for 1 to 3 million children and youth—may have had minimal to no educational access since March of 2020.

"The first thing we need to know is who is missing from school, and why," said Hailly T.N. Korman, a senior associate partner at Bellwether and a co-author of the analysis. "School districts and cities are going to have to go in search of those answers before they start designing solutions."

Children and youth experiencing homelessness represent a particularly vulnerable population, said Barbara Duffield, the executive director of SchoolHouse Connection in Washington, D.C., an organization that supports homeless families and youth and the school personnel who work with them.

Worryingly, even though the unemployment rate is up, SchoolHouse Connection estimates that 400,000 fewer children and youth were identified as homeless in the fall of 2020, compared to the same time a year earlier. That drop likely represents families who would have been identified in normal times but have fallen off the radar screen of school districts because teachers and administrators aren't seeing the children every day



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and may not be able to spot warning signs.

The housing crisis has forced some families into appalling conditions that can make school an afterthought. In addition, embarrassment or fear of having children taken by social services keeps many families from coming forward.

Lisa Montesana, the program specialist overseeing homeless and foster care youth for the Beaverton district in Oregon, said she works with a mother who has two children and pays \$600 a month to live in a backyard shed. A single extension cord powers a lamp, slow cooker and a heater. Water comes from a garden hose. The family uses a bucket as a toilet.

“That’s in Nike’s backyard. In your average American neighborhood and home,” Montesana said, referring to the athletic apparel giant whose headquarters are nearby. “No one living in situations like that is willing to tell anyone about it.”

In the face of such turmoil, school staff and community organizations want families to see them as a source of stability. Kuykendall’s calm and steady presence—in addition to working with Crittenton, she is a doula and a yoga teacher—has been very important to Trenita Collins Miller-Aganyemi and her 14-year-old daughter, Ayoka Miller-Aganyemi.

Ayoka, an 8th grader in the District of Columbia school system, said she’s had to deal with computer problems and problems with the internet, particularly when the weather is bad.

“It’s stressful. I have to worry about my other siblings, even my mom. It’s a struggle,” she said. But Crittenton “has been helping me. I can express myself with them and they can help me, and I can help them,” she said.

The emotional support has been a huge help, her mother said. “If it wasn’t for Crittenton there’s no telling if we’d be here today.”

Maintaining Connections

YouthBuild USA, which works with 16- to 24-year-olds who have dropped out of high school, is strengthening its partnership with Penn Foster, which offers high school diploma and certificate programs through distance learning. As the pandemic wears on, older students may be looking for the job and academic training YouthBuild offers, said Michael Brochner, the organization’s chief strategy officer. It’s a recognition that some students may not return to traditional public school, but they can still achieve their academic goals.

In Beaverton, Montesana said that a new community resource center serving her district is coming in 2021. That will serve as a

FINDING AND HELPING VULNERABLE YOUTH

Here are some interventions schools can consider:

- Visit local motels and campgrounds where families experiencing homelessness sometimes stay, placing flyers on vehicle windows or under doors.
- Create user-friendly websites and Facebook pages with clear information about community resources, food distribution, and distance learning.
- Set up a phone hotline for assistance with any needs.
- When delivering food or learning packets, ask about other needs, encourage families and students to keep in touch, and let them know they are missed.
- Provide parents and youth with the technology they need to stay in touch, such as pre-paid cell phones.
- Use all available means of communication to reach families and students, such as email, phone, texting, regular mail, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, and “curbside” home visits.
- When families and students don’t respond, don’t give up—reach out to emergency contacts and other students to help.
- Reach out to unaccompanied youth directly, because most unaccompanied youth have no contact with parents or guardians.
- Once you connect with a parent or youth, stay in touch on a regular schedule using “check-in” forms to guide your conversations.

Source: Source Connection

one-stop shop to support families and students, who often have a variety of social and academic needs.

“We’re really excited about that and we hope that it will help to expand services, prevent displacement, and just help us navigate through this period of time,” she said.

Christy McCoy, a school social worker for the St. Paul, Minn., district, said she has been able to maintain contact with students through online, affinity-based support groups, such as those focused on Latino or African-American students. Now that districts have more access to personal protective equipment to avoid contracting the virus, she’s also added in home visits.

Another important piece of her job is referring children and families to mental health services.

“Kids who might have had the resilience early on are getting worn down,” McCoy said. “And those kids who were struggling with mental health issues at the start of the pandemic, that has just intensified.”

She’s also found that texting can be a more effective mode of communication with students than phone calls. “I have a significant group of students, who, every morning, I send them a text: ‘This is your friendly reminder of what your plan is for today.’ We’ve seen more engagement and they’re showing up for their synchronous classes,” McCoy said.

For these students facing the deepest challenges, entire communities across the nation are going to have to come together to help them get through this trauma, said Siobhan Davenport, the executive director of Crittenton Services of Greater Washington.

“We just have not seen this level of hardship with our families. But we’re here for (them),” she said. “I feel like our foot is on the gas, and we can’t take it off.”

The children and youth who have stopped attending school regularly since March were often facing challenges before the coronavirus pandemic. SchoolHouse Connection, which advocates for homeless youth, has compiled tips for helping hard-to-reach students. ■

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Digital Games: Powerful Motivation Tool or Not So Much?

By Mark Lieberman

Remote and hybrid learning are fueling the use of digital games in K-12 instruction more than ever before. But, strangely enough, the students who have grown up in a digital gaming culture are not particularly impressed.

In an exclusive survey conducted by the EdWeek Research Center, 60 percent of middle and high school students said they're playing digital games for instructional purposes more than they did before the pandemic. About the same percentage of teachers who responded to a separate survey said they are incorporating more digital games into lessons than before COVID-19.

But educators and students do not necessarily agree on the impact of using those games.

More than 60 percent of teachers who are using games more often said the games are making learning more interesting for students, while only a quarter of the students playing more games said they make learning more interesting.

Those findings bring an interesting twist to questions about the role of digital games in instruction, especially since one of the biggest arguments in favor of using games is that they are one of the best tools teachers have to motivate and engage students.

One reason students might not value the games they are playing at school could be that educators are haphazardly integrating games into learning without strategizing first, suggested Richard Van Eck, a researcher who has studied educational games and currently serves as associate dean for teaching and learning at the University of North Dakota School of Medicine and Health Sciences.

Van Eck said children value games not necessarily because they're flashy and entertaining, but because they're "hard fun"—in other words, it is the thrill of the game's challenge that keeps students coming back.

Incorporating digital games as a tool for engaging students is okay, Van Eck said, but "if you do so on a superficial level, you're not tapping into the benefits, like promoting problem solving and critical thinking."

That could be a huge missed opportunity: 90 percent of U.S. teenagers say they play games on a cellphone, computer, or game



console, according to a 2018 Pew Research Center survey.

How Games Can Help Teaching

Laura Steinbrink had been using digital games as a teaching tool before the pandemic. Students used online quiz games from platforms like Quizizz and Kahoot and competed against other classes for high scores. They even set weekly goals for improving their scores.

Plato High School in Plato, Mo., where Steinbrink teaches Spanish, English, and other subjects, has been open this fall for full-time in-person learning. But some students and teachers have had to stay home for two-week stretches to quarantine after potentially being exposed to COVID-19. The games have helped Steinbrink keep instruction going for those students who were at home, and to track students' progress during a two-week period when she had to stay home and appear virtually before her in-person students.

She's even helped spread the gospel of digital games to her colleagues with training sessions over the summer. "Kahoot and Quizizz are a lot more used now throughout the district than they were before," she said. Seventy-six percent of teachers in the EdWeek Research Center survey said they're getting ideas from their fellow teach-

ers for using games as teaching tools.

Teachers at Plato High have been using games much more frequently since the pandemic started, as an alternative to handing out paper worksheets and potentially spreading germs, said Kelsey Todd, a junior in Steinbrink's homeroom class.

Cecilia Groves, a junior in Steinbrink's Spanish 2, mythology, and yearbook classes, said games help with memorization and performing better on tests, especially for students who otherwise struggle to memorize. "It really helps them understand what we are learning rather than just seeing it one time and being expected to know it," she said.

Students also get excited by the competitive element, according to Todd and Groves. "We fake get mad at each other, but we're obviously kidding and it's all fun and games," Groves said.

Even so, the pandemic has revealed some of the limitations of digital games as teaching tools. During the spring, when students were learning exclusively at home, Steinbrink had to pull out old copies of her paper vocabulary exercises to send to students who couldn't connect to online games.

Plus, Groves said some of her peers who generally have a negative attitude about school do not seem more interested in learning simply because they are playing more games for class.

Students' home connectivity issues have also made it harder for teacher Rachelle Dene Poth to assess whether a student scored low on an online quiz game or simply ran into a glitch and couldn't finish it on time.

What's more, Poth worries that the use of games for learning contributes to the already record levels of screen time students are experiencing. "I do want the kids to get a break from the screen," said Poth, who teaches foreign languages and STEAM at Riverview Junior/Senior High in Oakmont, Pa.

'Dabble in Digital Gaming'

Digital games have been an effective learning tool during the pandemic for Michael Matera, who teaches 6th grade history at the University School of Milwaukee, a private K-12 school. He's long used board games to get students excited about learning, but that wasn't possible when all his students were at home, so he had to get creative.

He's now regularly streaming live on YouTube with interactive "roll and write" games (like Yahtzee) which involve rolling dice and writing results down and can be played by an infinitely large group of people at the same time.

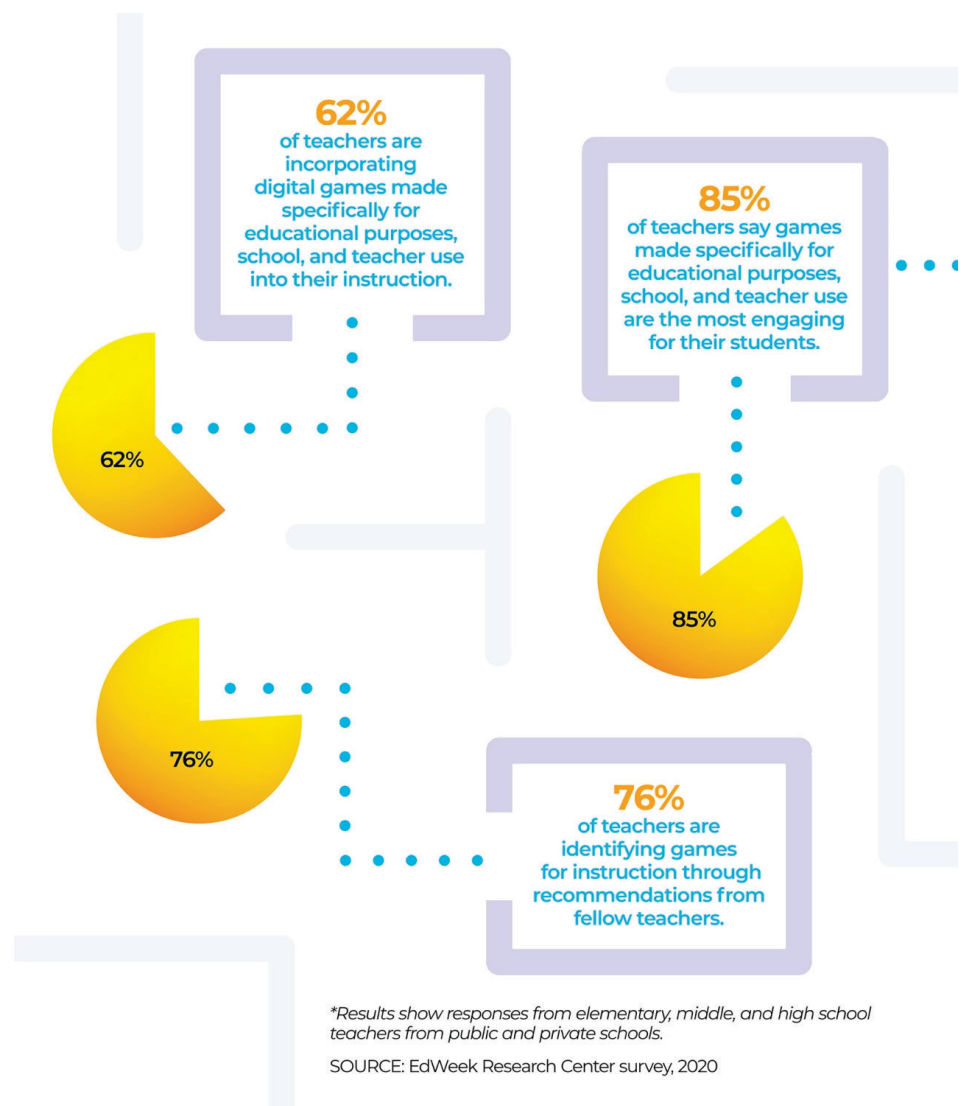
And on Zoom, he came up with his own game activity called "Image Battle Royale," in which students scramble to search the internet for a single image that illustrates a concept, like a gift box to represent the gift of the Nile for Egypt's economy.

These activities have helped Matera construct the friendly, engaged atmosphere that he likes to use in his physical classroom. He said they also help teach valuable skills such as strategic thinking, resource management, and information literacy.

"I could lecture as a history teacher talking about generals being flexible in their strategy," Matera said. "But the concept of information literacy just becomes apparent when you play a game."

Some teachers use games to help overcome flaws or gaps in other teaching materials. In one section of Poth's Spanish textbook, for example, "you learn 'I dance' and 'you dance', but you don't learn how to say anybody else dances until three chapters later," she said. Quizlet games show her students those additional vocabulary words before they appear in their textbook.

Rebecca Gibboney has been urging teachers to think about gamification in her role as a curriculum specialist for BLaST Intermediate Unit 17, which provides support and training



for teachers in four northern Pennsylvania counties. She believes games can be crucial tools to motivate students, particularly during a pandemic.

In the spring, many teachers were over-investing their time in lengthy videoconference meetings and live instruction with students, Gibboney said. "As people are starting to develop an understanding of that healthy balance, I think they're starting to dabble in digital gaming," tapping into online game repositories like BreakoutEDU, she said.

'Renaissance of the Physical'

None of the pandemic-related growth in digital game use in schools comes as a surprise to the nonprofit Games for Change, which creates

and distributes games for social impact goals.

"It's accelerated the process of acceptance" that digital games are useful in schools, said Susanna Pollack, the organization's president. Teachers "are so challenged with finding activities and learning opportunities to engage with remotely that having a program that taps into an interest area like video games gives them that extra edge."

Van Eck said he's hopeful that parents and schools alike will now demand higher-quality, more sophisticated educational games from the market, especially after parents saw students' learning experience up close during extended remote learning.

Those games should feature more built-in tools for assessing students' performance and more integrations with other technology

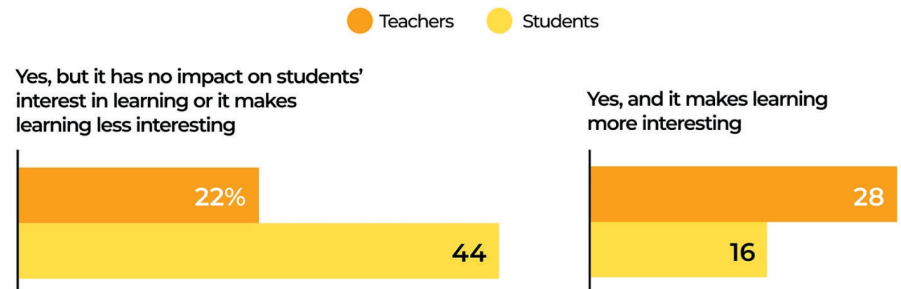
platforms schools are already using, said David Birchfield, founder and CEO of SMALLab Learning, a company that specializes in 3D learning environments.

He cautions against the use of standalone commercial online games that are not directly linked to instructional priorities. Those games can lead students down the wrong path, he said.

Experts predict digital games will likely continue to be a big part of the learning landscape this school year and beyond. More than two-thirds of students learning entirely in person this fall said they're playing more digital games than they did previously, a slightly larger share than that of students experiencing full-time remote learning and hybrid learning, according to the EdWeek Research Center survey.

Brooklyn Atterberry, a junior in Steinbrink's Spanish 2 and yearbook classes, generally doesn't like school but has recently enjoyed games on Gimkit, a popular set of online educational games created by a 2019 high school graduate. "It does add in more of the effect of actually playing a game while you are still learning," Atterberry said. "It

Compared to before the pandemic, are online or digital games incorporated more now into your classes?



*Results show responses from middle and high school students and teachers from public and private schools.

SOURCE: EdWeek Research Center survey, 2020

makes you want to learn more often."

Still, some educators suggest the novelty appeal of digital game use may wear off a bit when schools can ease pandemic restrictions and the emphasis on online learning drops

off, compared with now.

"My guess is when it's all said and done, we're going to see a renaissance of the physical," Matera said. "I think you're going to see more people doing cardboard challenges." ■

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When Toxic Positivity Seeps Into Schools, Here's What Educators Can Do

By Arianna Prothero

"Look on the bright side" and "it could be worse" are statements we hear all the time, and likely even more so during the pandemic.

On the surface, these remarks might seem to inject much-needed optimism into a tough situation. But rather than motivating students or teachers to push through stressful times, experts say statements like these have the opposite effect.

"Toxic positivity" as it's known—or the papering over of legitimate feelings of anxiety, stress, or despair with saccharine, out-of-the-box phrases like, "look at the good things you've got"—doesn't promote resilience in children or adults, said Marc Brackett, the director of the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence.

"You can't always look on the bright side of things. Sometimes ... you have to give yourself permission to feel all emotions," said Brackett. "Especially as a teacher, if you only tell everyone everything is going to work out fine, a, that's unrealistic because nothing always works out, and b, ... you're not being a role model for your students that it's OK to experience the full range of feelings."

Morale and motivation are suffering right now in schools. Some numbers from recent EdWeek Research Center surveys illustrate just how much: Nearly 40 percent of middle and high school students said their morale was lower than before the pandemic. Half said the pandemic has made them less motivated in their schoolwork.

Forty-five percent of teachers said their morale is lower now than before the pandemic, and 42 percent said the pandemic has made them less motivated at work.

Nearly a third of educators said that ad-

ministrators' attempts to improve teacher morale had no impact at all. Four percent said these attempts actually made morale worse.

'It's OK Not to Be OK'

Urging students, staff, peers or even oneself to find the silver lining in a bad situation might seem like a good way to boost motivation and improve school climate, but it often has the reverse effect.

The issue, said Brackett, is that ignoring negative emotions doesn't make them go away.

"They become like a debt inside of you," he said. "They show up somewhere, whether it be in a depression, or an eating disorder, or in aggression, or in physical health problems."

Additionally, negative emotions serve an important purpose, said Brackett, and you need not look any further than the pandemic for examples of this.

"[A]nxiety is a good thing to feel right now,



BLENDED LEARNING ENGAGES STUDENTS AT SCHOOL AND HOME

Summary:

As COVID-19 drove school closures, Pocatello/Chubbuck School District 25 (PCSD 25) moved quickly to transition to remote learning and progress monitoring. Istation's digital assessments and instructional tools made it easy for students to continue learning at home. Plus, parents as well as teachers maintained a clear view of students' progress with on-demand data reports, as well as Istation's home assessments and progress-monitoring tools.

Despite unprecedented circumstances, PCSD 25 saw a marked increase in home usage and students' skill levels climbing.

"We have seen outstanding student growth while utilizing Istation."

— Gretchen Kinghorn, Federal Programs Coordinator at PCSD 25



District: Pocatello/Chubbuck School District 25 in Idaho



Elementary Schools: 13

K-5 Student Population: 5,500 students

K-5 Classrooms: 450

beneficial that students were already familiar with Istation. But PCSD kept advancing student

learning by expanding the technology department's help desk hours to provide extra support for parents and educators.

Context:

For two years, students have utilized Istation's reading and math online curriculum. PCSD 25 also utilizes Istation's Indicators of Progress (ISIP™) computer-adaptive assessments.

Challenge:

PCSD 25 needed to transition to remote learning quickly and effectively. It needed a total e-learning solution that could assess students' learning at home, monitor progress, and provide teachers with fast, accurate feedback and instructional tools.

Response:

Gretchen Kinghorn, Federal Programs Coordinator at PCSD 25, credits their remote learning success to the hard work of teachers, administrators, and the technology department. She said it was

Students had 1:1 device access, and for students who didn't have internet access, PCSD 25 utilized Istation's teacher resources, which include thousands of printable lesson plans, automated tools, and resources that customize instruction and support diverse teaching approaches.

Teachers kept communication open with parents through email, phone calls, home visits, and Google Meets. Plus, teachers utilized Google Classroom, students worked on their own timelines, and classes met virtually to boost community.

Results:

Over 75% of participating students were using Istation at home during school closures, totaling approximately 4,300 students.

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because it will make certain that you stay socially distanced, that you wear your mask, and that you take care of washing your hands,” he said.

Being a good role model for students doesn’t mean always putting up a happy face, said Adrienne Khan, a 4th grade teacher at Bayview Elementary in Fort Lauderdale, Fla. She said she does try to stay upbeat for her students, but not constantly.

“I think sometimes kids think adults are perfect, and as teachers and parents we hide what is going on with us,” she said. “And they need to see that reality. We all have bad days. We are all going through this together. It’s OK not to be OK.”

She said she urges her students to keep trying, and reminds them that the pandemic won’t last forever. But in the here and now, she admits, it is tough.

Khan has been struggling with toxic positivity in her job. She said the administration in her district doesn’t want teachers to discuss with parents or post on social media about their struggles, in particular with the technology they’re using to teach remote students. Khan said she feels pressure to act as though everything is just fine. She has been telling herself that “it could be worse” and “at least I have a job,” which she said leaves her still feeling negative.

“It would be very helpful if I could hear the words, ‘We realize this is really tough, and this sucks right now,’” from district’s leadership said Khan. “It wouldn’t change anything, but at least I would feel acknowledged.”

That sentiment is echoed over and over again on social media, where teachers point out that writing “you’ve got this” in chalk on the sidewalk or hanging a banner that says “teachers are heroes” often rings hollow as they struggle to deal with everything ranging from technological glitches during classes to coronavirus-related deaths in their school communities. In EdWeek’s recent survey, teachers anonymously wrote in these pieces of advice for administrators:

“Save the pep talks, it seems phony.”

“Stop the comments ‘we appreciate all you do.’ These reduce morale and are frustrating.” And finally: “Stop with the toxic positivity.”

Telling someone to look at the good things they’ve got essentially dismisses what they’re feeling, said Leslie Blanchard, the executive director of the Leadership Development Institute at Louisiana State University, a leader-

ship training and consulting group that works with K-12 schools.

“It’s the same as not listening at all,” she said.

And toxic positivity isn’t unique to administrators—it can just as easily come from other teachers in a profession that puts a premium on having an upbeat attitude.

Blanchard, a former middle and high school teacher, published a piece on Bored Teachers about toxic positivity in April and it struck a chord with educators—she was inundated with emails from readers saying they were fed up with insincere optimism from colleagues.

Toxic positivity doesn’t just fail to motivate people, said Blanchard, it often has the effect of making them feel guilty, in addition to being stressed, for not being able to muster optimism.

Blanchard has two pieces of advice for dealing with toxic positivity, which, she emphasized, can come from principals, administrators, parents, and fellow teachers (as well as oneself). First, recognize that the person telling you that “everything happens for a reason,” or unhelpfully reminding you that this already terrible situation could be worse, doesn’t intend to make you feel bad.

The second: “I might tell a client to, in a kind way, explain to Pollyanna that ‘when you tell me ... that it’s not as bad as it seems, you invalidate the things that I’m feeling and struggling with right now.’”



—Gina Tomko/Education Week + Ingram Publishing/Getty

A Balancing Act

All of this is not to say that being positive is bad, or that being negative is good. It’s a balancing act. On average, people should feel more positive than negative emotions, said Brackett, the expert from Yale.

But a constant state of happiness—whether in a pandemic or not—shouldn’t be an emotional goal because that expectation is unrealistic and sets people up to feel even worse when they can’t achieve it, he said.

It’s not healthy to wallow in negative emotions, either.

“If you fail a test, as a kid, and you’re feeling despair for a day or two, or for a week, fine, that may help you figure out what to do to study better or get the help you need,” Brackett said. “But if you feel chronic despair about your academics, that’s not helpful.”

What is helpful is tuning into your own self-talk—or encouraging your students to—and making sure that you’re acknowledging the difficulties you’re facing but also not being too harsh on yourself, said Brackett. Breathing and mindfulness exercises are other strategies for tackling the unrelenting stress and anxiety caused by the pandemic.

And, finally, it helps to be honest that while things could always be worse, they still really suck right now. ■



—Getty

Published on March 17, 2020

English-Learners May Be Left Behind as Remote Learning Becomes ‘New Normal’

By Corey Mitchell

As the nation shifted to online learning during the novel coronavirus outbreak, language and access barriers may shut many of the nation’s nearly 5 million English-learner students out of the learning process.

A December 2019 report from the U.S. Department of Education found that few teachers reported assigning English-learners to use digital learning resources outside of class, in part because of concerns about students’ lack of access to technology at home.

The same report also revealed that teachers who work with English-language learners are more apt to use general digital resources rather than tools designed specifically for English-learners and that English-learner educators reported fewer hours of professional development with digital learning resources than did mainstream teachers.

Those findings suggest the spread of outbreak-related school closures could have severe consequences for the millions of students with limited access to digital devices or the internet, limited understanding of English, and limited ability to work independently without support.

“This crisis has emphasized the inequities

and gaps that exist in our [education] system,” said Kristina Robertson, the English-learner program administrator for the Roseville, Minn., schools. “This is a wakeup call about the value of having technology for all.”

English-learner educators often offer tailored support for their students in class, something that is not available in many of the online programs schools have implemented, said Joseph Luft, the executive director of the International Network for Public Schools.

The New York City-based network operates 28 high school and middle school campuses in New York city, the San Francisco Bay Area, the Washington, D.C.-area, and Minneapolis that educate more than 10,000 English-learners and newly arrived immigrant students.

The widespread closures have left teachers and administrators scrambling for ways to connect with students they may not see face-to-face again for weeks or months.

Education Week created an interactive map to track school closures across the nation: At the time of publication, at least 39 states had closed schools to help slow the spread of coronavirus; the closures have affected more than 40 million public school students.

In some of the International Network’s New York schools, teachers spent their weekends printing paper packets for student pickup. The

organization has also created a network-wide resource for teachers to share curriculum ideas and suggestions for connecting with families.

“This makes online learning a lot more difficult,” Luft said. “We’re trying to be very creative but it’s very hard to transition so quickly.”

Language Barriers

Across the country, public schools educate about 4.9 million English-learners from hundreds of different language backgrounds. While the numbers for several other languages are on the rise, 76 percent of the nation’s English-learners speak Spanish.

Many of the nation’s largest school districts have had significant English-learner populations for years, but communication challenges even exist for many of those school systems.

In Seattle, where schools will remain closed until April 24, the district offers translations for materials in six languages: Spanish, Somali, Mandarin Chinese, Vietnamese, Amharic, and Tagalog. That still leaves some families out of the loop. The district has nearly 7,000 English-learners and they speak a total of about 160 languages.

“[English-learners] who don’t speak one of the major languages have much less support,” Judie Haynes, an author and English-learner-educator consultant, wrote in an email to Education Week. “All distance learning will probably be in English or Spanish unless another language group has a big concentration.”

The state of New Jersey, where Haynes is based, has a concentration of Portuguese students and teachers that would allow their needs to be met at school, she said.

Roughly 40 percent of the 7,000 students in Robertson’s district, the Roseville schools, speak a language such as Spanish, Hmong, Karen, Somali, or Nepali at home.

The district employs 11 cultural liaisons, whose duties range from providing interpretation and translations, advising students, cultural navigation, and working to bridge the language and cultural gaps that emerge between district staff and families.

The district also plans to establish a multilingual Facebook page to communicate with families and send daily robocalls and emails in multiple languages to inform families about meals and other efforts to support families.

“Families need to have somebody they trust to communicate what they need from schools,” Robertson said. “They want to their children to be safe and have learning opportunities just like everyone else.”

“

You can digitize instruction, but education is about connections. We don't really know what this is going to look like over the next couple of weeks. I'm not looking for miracles; I'm just looking for people working to keep kids connected to school.”

JOSEPH LUFT

THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR,
INTERNATIONALS NETWORK FOR PUBLIC
SCHOOLS

Banding Together

Colorín Colorado, a site for English-learner educators, has compiled a list of resources and suggestions for school staff and English-learner families. The guide includes tips for ensuring that families have access to information about online learning and that their district or school online-learning plans account for English-learners.

In addition to providing links to COVID-19 information in several languages, the site also offers tips on staying connected with English-learner families during the extended shutdowns by communicating with families via phone calls, texts or video chats and providing translated information whenever possible.

“We want to ensure immigrant and English-learner families aren't left behind,” said Giselle Lundy-Ponce, an English-learner advocate with the American Federation of Teachers. “It's going to require a monumental effort.”

In an ongoing online survey of teachers conducted by the site, respondents have reported that many of their English-learners don't have laptops or tablets to access online lessons; in some cases, they don't have internet access.

“We would like not to lose anything [in terms of learning progress], but that's not very realistic,” Robertson said. “Some families are going to be left behind.”

A longtime English-as-a-second-language teacher, Haynes started #ellchat about a decade ago. On Monday, the Twitter chat focused on online learning for English-learners during the coronavirus outbreak. The exchange focused on tools that could help students access online lessons and remain in touch with teachers.

TESOL International Association, an organization for teachers who specialize in working with English-learners, has also collected resources that teachers and administrators can use to help guide their discussions with students about this pandemic.

‘Losing Ground’

Luft is especially concerned about a particular subset of English-learners: older students who are nearing graduation.

School districts have long struggled to meet the educational needs of these students, including refugee and immigrant students who often have gaps in their formal education. Laws allow students to enroll in traditional public schools until they reach age 21, but many times they're pressured to leave campuses or funneled into alternative programs.

Luft fears that, with extended school closures, some of these students may leave school without graduating, unless some districts waive exam requirements or amend state laws on how many days schools must be in session.

“It's just throwing another roadblock in their way,” Luft said. “We don't know how long this is going to last. They're in real danger of losing ground.”

Robertson has asked district staff, including the cultural liaisons, to monitor whether families have enough food and understand when to seek medical help during the coronavirus outbreak.

Staff in the district—which has a one-to-one computing initiative—were also pressing to get tablets to students as schools shut down Wednesday through at least March 27.

“You can digitize instruction, but education is about connections,” Luft said. “We don't really know what this is going to look like over the next couple of weeks. I'm not looking for miracles; I'm just looking for people working to keep kids connected to school.” ■



—Christopher Millette/Erie Times-News via AP

Published on January 11, 2021

How Online Teaching Needs to Improve—Even After the Pandemic

By Mark Lieberman

Despite all the frustrations and struggles to make remote and hybrid learning work during COVID-19, many teachers have evolved their practices to an approach more tailored to individual students' needs, and the vast majority say they've gained skills that they'll continue to use after the pandemic ends, concludes a new report.

These are among the findings in surveys of teachers and administrators from a new report conducted by Clayton Christensen Institute, a nonprofit research organization that promotes innovation in education and other fields.

The data reinforce what many online learning advocates and experts have been saying since the pandemic started: the online learning that's taken place doesn't represent the best that it can be; most teachers were underprepared for abruptly switching to a new instructional model; and there are reasons to be hopeful that more robust online learning will remain viable for schools to offer in the long term.

“When people are frustrated with what's happening in distance learning right now, it's in some ways not surprising given the way that they've had to throw things together,” said Tom Arnett, the report's author.

The report cites evidence that many teachers have tried to re-create the physical



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classroom experience for students by hosting long whole-group videoconference calls and sharing documents in the learning management system, approaches that are contrary to the advice of online learning experts. Slightly more than 40 percent of educators said their synchronous remote instruction, in which they're "face to face" virtually with students, lasts as long as a regular school day.

At the same time, teachers' workloads appear to have increased dramatically. Eighty-five percent of teachers said they spend more time than they used to on planning and preparation for the school day. That additional time might include navigating and troubleshooting technology platforms, tracking down remote students who have been absent or behind on their assignments, and developing new social-emotional learning activities to help students cope with the effects of an unfolding public health crisis.

The heavier workload also likely includes the time and energy required to create new instructional materials for these unprecedented circumstances. Survey data from the Christensen Institute shows nearly half of educators said their primary source for curriculum materials was their own efforts, and 87 percent of administrators said they expect teachers to use materials of their own making.

Hybrid teaching has emerged as the most popular approach to restore some classroom instruction while also allowing for some students to continue learning from home part- or full-time. But that mode isn't substantially easier for teachers than offering instruction remotely full-time, according to the report. Asked to rate their ability to serve their students effectively on a scale from 0 to 100, in-person teachers said an average of 77, hybrid teachers said an average of 64, and teachers of fully remote students said an average of 59.

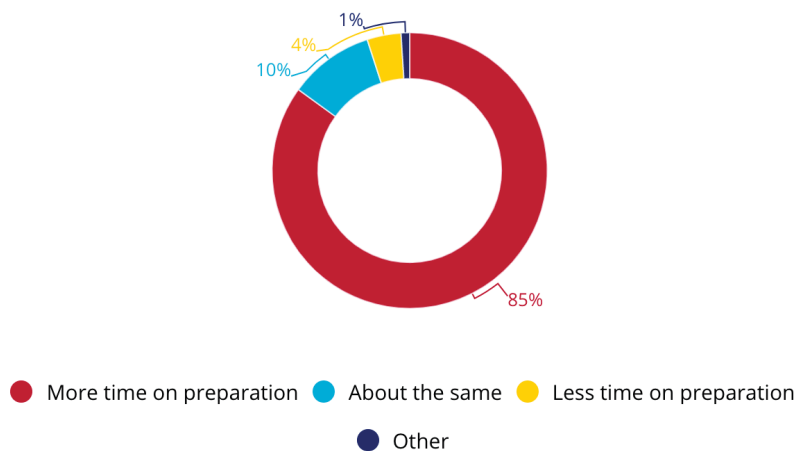
Identifying Possible Solutions

The status quo for remote teaching isn't fixed in stone. The Christensen Institute offers several ideas for easing some of the biggest burdens teachers are experiencing.

State education departments should review curriculum materials specifically to determine which ones work best for online instruction, the report says. Teachers who are comfortable with online and student-centered teaching should be empowered to lead training sessions and coach their struggling colleagues.

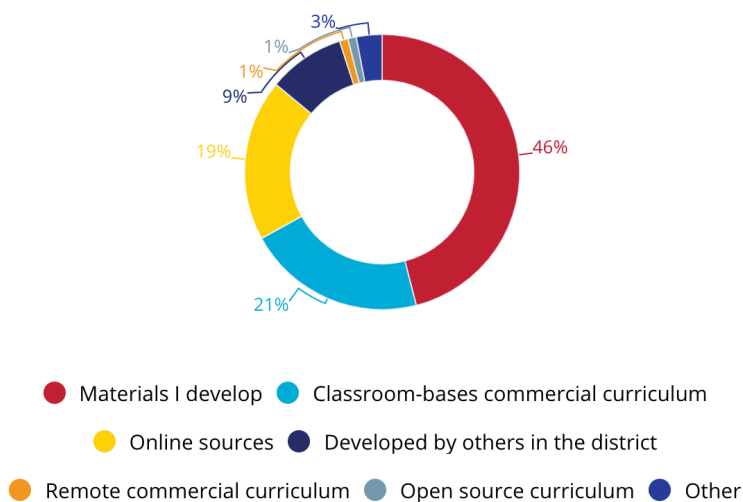
The report also recommends that schools establish virtual programs with autonomous

Change in proportion of time teachers spent on preparation since last year



SOURCE: Christensen Institute, 2020 survey of teachers

Primary source of the curriculum materials



SOURCE: Christensen Institute, 2020 survey of teachers

staff and leadership that tap into the resources and expertise of their conventional school partners to "give students benefits that neither conventional schools nor virtual schools alone can offer."

Arnett acknowledges that might be difficult to do in the near future given the K-12 system's current budget woes and staffing chal-

lenges. But he believes virtual schools should follow the model of the Appleton eSchool, run by the Appleton district in Wisconsin.

"We've seen the organizations that survive disruption and reinvent themselves, they start with an independent team building from a fresh slate, as opposed to a team that's trying to build on a bunch of work they're al-

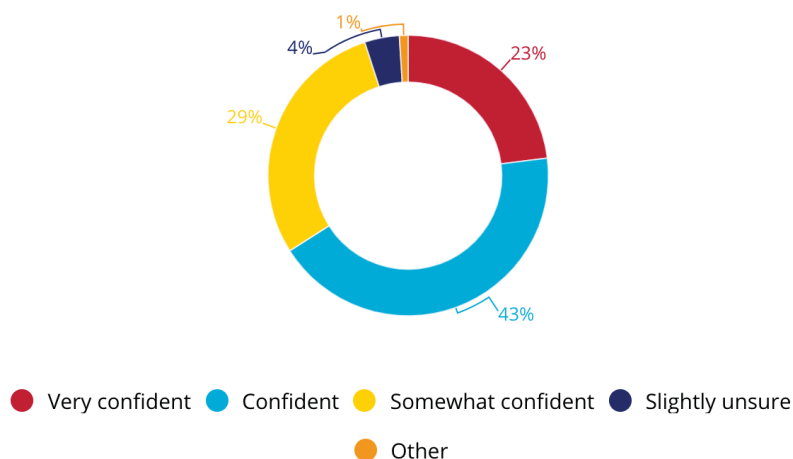
ready doing,” Arnett said.

The institute’s survey found 69 percent of administrators say their schools currently offer their own full-time virtual programs, compared with only 27 percent prior to COVID-19. Teachers are rapidly gaining new experience as well: 83 percent surveyed said they regularly teach online now, while only 16 percent said they regularly taught online before the pandemic.

Arnett, like many education observers, believes schools will return to full-time in-person instruction for most students when it’s safe to do so. But refining online instruction and offering it as an option going forward presents an opportunity to reach students who weren’t served well by the K-12 system even pre-pandemic, he said.

“For some students, the conventional classroom works a lot better. For some, they’re seeing some real benefits to online learning. Some online learning models are better than others,” Arnett said. “For me, the takeaway from all that is not to force people into models.” ■

Teachers' confidence in using online tools



SOURCE: Christensen Institute, 2020 survey of teachers

OPINION

Published on September 9, 2020

What Happens When Students Have Ownership Over Their Success

Student agency matters

By Nicole Williams Beechum

We heard a lot of concern this summer in the education sector about “learning loss,” “accelerating learning,” and making sure some students do not “fall further behind.” Such fears are not new for Black, Indigenous, and Latinx students; students with disabilities; or students from low-income communities. These young people have always been subject to scrutiny in a system that keeps them at a disadvantage and then worries over their differences in performance.

Even before the upheaval of the last several months, our education system was in dire need of a shift in how to define success for our young people. Our over-reliance on high-stakes, test-based accountability systems in the context of



Taylor Callory for Education Week

historical and contemporary injustices has left little room for students’ full humanity to be cultivated in American schools.

We know from research that students can have more robust learning experiences when what happens in school is relevant to their lives, helps them connect to a larger purpose, and is grounded in a sense of belonging. This means that the system must be responsive to

their goals, interests, and sense of self and community. If young people are not at the center of conversations about what constitutes success, we will not get school right.

We often show students that we don’t see them as experts about their own lives and astute observers of their surroundings. This is especially true when the conversation shifts to groups of students who have been marginalized by race, culture, language, family income, or disability. Insidious cultural beliefs seep in, and the “real experts” take over to tell students what is possible for their futures and then design policies, curricula, and professional development without their input.

But students demonstrate daily that they can define and realize their own success, including the work of detoxifying their environment. At High Tech High Chula Vista in California, three students—Ana de Almeida Amara, Izadora McGawley, and Luz Victoria Simón Jasso—created an ongoing, student-run ethnic-studies course when they realized their school offered nothing about the cultural and historical background of its many Latinx and Filipino students. In the Bloomfield Hills, Mich., school district, students helped draft and win school board approval for a new equity policy. And in Oakland, Calif., members of the Kingmakers of Oakland—Black male middle and high school students—are learning to lead by centering their cultural wealth.



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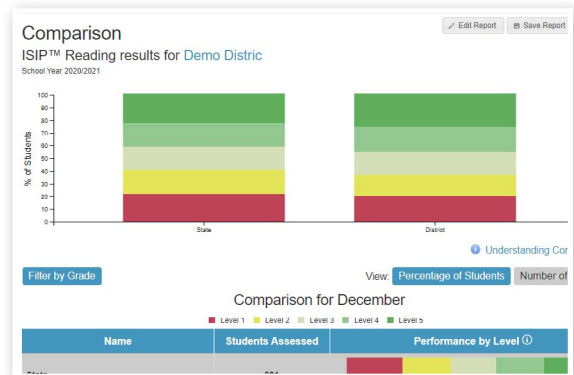
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What is the work of adults in supporting students to define and achieve success that is meaningful and motivating to them? A key is building relationships that make space for young people to articulate what they want and what they need. The Search Institute in Minneapolis has identified five features of such relationships. Young people want adults to express care, challenge them to grow, provide support, share power, and expand their potential by broadening their horizons and connecting them with others. In these ways, adults create the conditions for trust and agency.

At least as important, adults must know themselves and reject the oppressive systems they have been part of. Decisionmakers at all levels (classroom teachers to state and federal policymakers) have failed to interrogate their own identities, experiences, biases, pedagogy, and they have resisted analysis of racism's impact on school and life outcomes. The result is that, too often, we place the burden on young

people to navigate oppressive structures on their own. Instead, an aim of education should be to help students build the capacity to critique and dismantle the parts of the system that don't work so they internalize that agency for themselves.

In schools, it is, first of all, up to educators to create equitable learning environments, and groups such as the Building Equitable Learning Environments Network are compiling resources for teachers and school leaders to do just that. With sound strategies, educators can examine their current environments and shape opportunities for young people to define success for themselves and pursue it.

As my own work has moved from research to the translation of research into practice, I have had the humbling opportunity of deeply listening to students. What stands out is that when young people are able to take agency, feel affirmed (their lived experiences, families, histories, cultures, communities), and share power with adults, they thrive. My big-

gest fear is that we adults don't actually want to hear what young people have to say. Taking them seriously disrupts our comfort and expertise—and threatens our sense of authority.

The 2019-20 school year in Chicago, where I live, demonstrated the power and potential of young people. They stood beside their teachers during the fall's labor strike. They have navigated a global pandemic. They took to the streets to protest police brutality and they have organized across the city to remove police from their schools. If we cannot connect the dots between these life-altering experiences and academic success for young people, then it is we who have failed. ■

Nicole Williams Beechum is a senior research analyst in the University of Chicago's Consortium on School Research and a trained social worker. Her research interests include the transition to high school and postsecondary opportunities, teacher-student relationships, and how noncognitive factors contribute to student success.

OPINION

Published on December 21, 2020

Here Are 3 Top SEL Strategies That Can Help Improve Student Engagement Right Now

By Alex Kajitani, Tom Hierck, John Hannigan & Jessica Djabrayan Hannigan

The No. 1 need we have heard and addressed here in helping schools improve since the start of the pandemic has been how to improve student engagement. Collectively, we have over 100 years of experience improving student engagement within our own schools and supporting educators across North America, so we wanted to provide three key elements and an SEL strategy for each that are tried, tested, and known to work.

Do any of these comments sound familiar? "My students don't care." "My students aren't logging on." "My students won't turn in work." "My students are distracted." "Even when they are logged in, my students are not paying attention." "My students are overwhelmed." How can we shift our mindset from these deficit-based problem statements into actionable skills students need opportunities to learn and master.

Student engagement isn't a binary skill. It comprises what we refer to as the three high impact elements (SElements) of student engagement. SElement 1 (S1): connected, safe, and welcomed; SElement 2 (S2): choice, voice, and agency in their learning; and SElement 3 (S3): connect what they are learning to real-world meaningful application. Now more than ever, we need to teach SEL strategies as a matter of purpose rather than banking on the idea that things will quickly return to normal.

Before reading further, please take this short *Student Engagement Opportunity Quiz* ([Teacher Version](#)) from the teacher's perspective. You can also access the [student version](#) of this quiz, which may come in handy as you reflect on your own practices through a student's eyes.

Below is one SEL strategy for each of the three key elements to serve

as a guide as you get started with ensuring the SElements of student engagement are in place.

1. SElement 1 Strategy: D.N.A. The best way to build relationships with your students is to know their D.N.A. (their Dreams, Needs, and Abilities) and then base their experiences in your classrooms around this information. Using this skill of relationship building allows teachers to take the next steps in designing high-quality instruction for ALL students. The more teachers can tap into what motivates students and what each student brings to the classroom each day, the more they can target instruction to those needs. Successful learning environments are all about the choices teachers make, so it's important to question your methods and try new approaches for learners who aren't ready "yet." Knowing this information about every student and

applying it in various ways throughout the school year builds a sense of community within your classroom and allows teachers to meet student needs in a whole new way. To assist students in identifying their D.N.A., teachers can offer the following prompts:

- Dreams:** What do you think deeply about? Where do you want to go in the future?
- Needs:** How can I help you? How can I be a better teacher for you?
- Abilities:** What are you amazing at? What could you teach others?

2. SELelement 2 Strategy: CONDUCTING EMPATHY INTERVIEWS with your students can improve student engagement and specifically help teachers demonstrate evidence of SELelement 2: Choice, Voice, and Agency in their learning. An Empathy interview is designed to help teachers understand the experience(s) of the user (i.e., student); you have to allow for a safe opportunity for students to share their thoughts, emotions, experiences, and motivations to help meet their social and emotional needs. This four-step process includes:

- Step 1: Introductions.** Introduce yourself/role (e.g., teacher, counselor, admin) and have the student introduce themselves.
 - Step 2: Purpose.** Explain the purpose of the interview/check-in to the student and let them know their input is valued. Tip: Actively listen to the student and be authentic.
 - Step 3: Questions.** Ask neutral questions. Tell me about the last virtual learning classroom session you experienced that was very interesting? Why was it interesting? (i.e., encourage story) Tip: Avoid asking binary questions that can be answered in a word. Ask, “Why?” Pay attention to nonverbal cues and observe body language and emotions.
 - Step 4: Wrap Up.** Thank them, wrap up, validate their input, and set up a follow-up to share the actions taken based on their input.
- 3. SELelement 3 Strategy: Connect students with REAL people.** We can help students gain a true sense of real-world, meaningful application of what they’re learning

Student Engagement Opportunity Quiz

Teacher Version

Yes ✓

Working on it ✓

Not yet ✓

My students are regularly recognized for contributing in class (S1).	
My students have opportunity to make peer and teacher connections in class (S1).	
My students feel safe to share their ideas, opinions, and ask for help when they need (S2).	
My students are allowed choice in their studies (S2).	
My students feel like the work they do in my class is relevant (S3).	
My students see what I’m teaching relates to the “real world” (S3).	

This is a sample of a quiz teachers can take to understand their level of building SEL in their classrooms.

in class by connecting them with real people from their community. With distance learning, there has never been an easier, or better, time to bring in “special guests” (via video-conferencing) who can share with students about their jobs and lives and how they’ve applied their experiences in school. The key is to invite guests who live in the same neighborhood as students and who reflect their ethnicity and experiences. Studying square footage? Invite a local contractor to join you in your next class meeting. Studying story plot? Bring in the local reporter. (Be sure to have the students read some of the reporter’s stories in advance, to provide context.) You won’t need to go far to find people—start by asking your students or colleagues if they know someone who fits what you’re looking for.

When students meet living examples of people from their community, they connect what they’re learning in class with what they need to know for the “real world,” all while helping them create a clearer vision for their future.

These three key elements (SElements) are a must in order to improve student engagement. We have provided an example SEL strategy within each key element to serve as an example and to model our approach. Part 2 of this three-part blog series will focus on the SElements for the teacher, while Part 3 will focus on how a school/district can support these 3 SElements schoolwide/districtwide. ■

Alex Kajitani is an author and the 2009 California Teacher of the Year. He was also a Top-4 finalist for National Teacher of the Year in 2009. Tom Hierck has been an educator since 1983 in a career that has spanned all grades and many roles in public education, including teacher, administrator, district leader, department of education project leader, and sessional lecturer. John Hannigan is the executive leadership coach for the superintendent of schools in the Fresno Unified school district in Fresno, Calif. Jessica Djabrayan Hannigan is an assistant professor in the Educational Leadership Department at California State University, Fresno.

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