

Brief Research-to-Results

Child
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...information on why school engagement matters, how out-of-school time programs can affect school engagement, and how to measure engagement.

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ASSESSING SCHOOL ENGAGEMENT: A GUIDE FOR OUT-OF-SCHOOL TIME PROGRAM PRACTITIONERS

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BACKGROUND

Students who are disengaged from school are at risk for poor academic achievement, skipping classes, sexual activity, substance use, and ultimately dropping out of school.¹ The nation has moved to establish rigorous academic performance standards, such as those required by the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). However, some evidence shows that levels of school engagement are declining, and that these engagement levels are particularly low among boys. Just one-half of girls and only 25 percent of boys aged 14-15 were engaged in school in 1999.² By 2002, these levels fell further: only 39 percent of girls and 20 percent of boys were reported by their parents to be engaged in school.³ Out-of-school time programs can play a role in increasing school engagement.^{4,5}

WHAT IS SCHOOL ENGAGEMENT?

Researchers have described **school engagement** as encompassing three areas: behavioral, emotional, and cognitive.⁶

1. Behavioral engagement includes participation in school related activities, involvement in academic and learning tasks, positive conduct, and the absence of disruptive behaviors.
2. Emotional engagement consists of relationships with teachers, peers, and academics.
3. Cognitive engagement consists of an investment in learning and a willingness to go beyond the basic requirements to master difficult skills.⁷

A student's overall level of engagement depends on the extent to which he or she is engaged in these areas.⁸ A good school environment can be instrumental in enhancing engagement. Levels of school engagement are much lower in environments that lack adequate school supports such as a challenging curriculum, caring teachers, clear and consistent goals, and a school community that emphasizes support and belonging. However, some students may be highly engaged even under poor conditions.^{9,10}

WHY IS ENGAGEMENT IMPORTANT?

School engagement is associated with several positive outcomes. Research has shown that school engagement can:

- **Improve students' academic performance.** School engagement is critical for improving the academic outcomes of students.^{11,12} This engagement is linked to higher academic achievement as measured by both school grades and scores on standardized tests.¹³ Some researchers have suggested that school engagement may be the most important area that programs should target to lessen the achievement gap between white and black students.¹⁴

- **Promote school attendance.** Engagement is also linked with lower dropout rates and higher resiliency. When engaged students receive low or failing grades, they tend to work harder to improve their performance rather than not show up for class or give up on school entirely.^{15, 16}
- **Inhibit risky youth behaviors.** When students are not using their out-of-school time doing school work, it can lead to negative behaviors such as delinquency, drug and alcohol use, and early sexual activity, in addition to losses in academic attendance.¹⁷

HOW CAN SCHOOL ENGAGEMENT BE INCREASED?

There are several ways to promote school engagement in students. In general, students are more likely to be engaged if they have support from adults at their school, challenging and interesting tasks, adequate structure, support for autonomy, opportunities to learn with peers, and opportunities for active learning.^{18,19} In contrast, general conditions that are likely to lead to disengagement from school include lecturing to students, unsafe or unfair environments for learning, and inconsistent enforcement or non-enforcement of school rules.²⁰ Several physical factors may also have negative effects on engagement. Among the most salient of these factors are hunger, fatigue, illness and nutritional deficiencies, and use of drugs or alcohol.²¹

WHAT CAN OUT-OF-SCHOOL TIME PROGRAMS DO?

The National Research Council and Institute of Medicine report that children who regularly attend high-quality after-school programs are more likely to be engaged in school and attentive in class than are children who do not attend such programs.^{22, 23} In a review of experimentally evaluated programs for children, researchers found that out-of-school time programs such as [Across Ages](#), [Project Belong](#), and the [Woodcock Youth Development Project](#) had positive effects on school engagement.^{24, 25} This evidence linking participation in out-of-school time programs and extracurricular activities with increased school engagement has been found to be especially strong for students who come from low-income families.²⁶ Programs can be successful in enhancing student engagement if they include one or more of the following components:^{27, 28}

- Mentoring
- Community service
- Academic tutoring
- Life skills training

Programs that have SAFE features (sequenced, active, focused and explicit) have also been shown to have positive effects on student engagement, academic achievement, and other areas of positive development.²⁹

- **Sequenced:** They use sequential skill-building activities.
- **Active:** They actively involve students in lessons.
- **Focused:** They employ at least one component that focuses on developing social skills.
- **Explicit:** They concentrate activities on well-defined target skills.^{30, 31}

ASSESSING ENGAGEMENT IN SCHOOL AMONG ADOLESCENTS

In previous research, student self-reported, teacher, and parent-completed questionnaires have been used to measure the three components of engagement—behavioral, emotional, and cognitive. Observational studies have been used to measure behavioral engagement and cognitive engagement as well.

Out-of-school time programs may want to adapt well-established measures of school engagement to help identify youth who are not engaged in school and tailor services to address this. In particular, programs may want to utilize student self-report measures. For example, the School Engagement Scale (Fredericks et al., 2005) is a student self-report measure that assesses all three components of engagement in elementary school children:

- **Behavioral Engagement:** Students are asked if they follow school rules, complete their work, pay attention in class, etc.

- **Emotional Engagement:** Students are asked if they like being at school, are excited about their work, are bored at school, etc.
- **Cognitive Engagement:** Students are asked if they spend time out of class on schoolwork, how thoroughly they complete schoolwork, and if they devote extra time and effort to enrichment activities that relate to what they are working on in class.

WHAT ARE SOME SPECIFIC MEASURES OF SCHOOL ENGAGEMENT?

Below, we offer illustrative measures from three surveys.

School Engagement Scale³²--Behavioral, Emotional, and Cognitive Engagement

(Response scale: “Never, On Occasion, Some of the Time, Most of the Time, All of the Time)

Behavioral Engagement

1. I pay attention in class.
2. When I am in class, I just act as if I am working.
3. I follow the rules at school.
4. I get in trouble at school.

Emotional Engagement

5. I feel happy in school.
6. I feel excited by the work in school.
7. I like being at school.
8. I am interested in the work at school.
9. My classroom is a fun place to be.

Cognitive Engagement

10. When I read a book, I ask myself questions to make sure I understand what it is about.
11. I study at home even when I don’t have a test.
12. I try to watch TV shows about things we are doing in school.
13. I check my schoolwork for mistakes.
14. I read extra books to learn more about things we do in school.

Patterns of Adaptive Learning Survey (PALS)³³ – Academic Motivation (for elementary and secondary school children)

(Response scale: “Not at All True, Sometimes True, Very True”)

1. It is important to me that I learn a lot of new concepts this year.
2. One of my goals in class is to learn as much as I can.
3. One of my goals is to master a lot of new skills this year.
4. It’s important to me that I thoroughly understand my class work.
5. It’s important to me that I improve my skills this year.

Additional Items that Adults Can Respond to:

National Survey of American Families (NSAF) 2002. From the instrument for parents of children ages 6-17:

For each of the following statements, please tell me if you think it describes (CHILD) all of the time, most of the time, some of the time, or none of the time?

1. Would you say (CHILD) cares about doing well in school?
2. (CHILD) only works on schoolwork when forced to?
3. (CHILD) does just enough schoolwork to get by?
4. (CHILD) always does homework?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES ON SCHOOL ENGAGEMENT AND MOTIVATION FOR YOUR PROGRAM

High School Survey of Student Engagement (HSSSE)

Information on conducting a survey on student engagement in high schools.

<http://ceep.indiana.edu/hssse>

National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE)

Information on conducting a survey on student engagement in colleges and universities.

<http://nsse.iub.edu/index.cfm>

Child Trends LINKS (Lifecourse Interventions to Nurture Kids Successfully)

Information on experimentally evaluated programs that are effective or not effective in fostering student engagement in school.

<http://www.childtrends.org/LINKS>

Child Trends Databank

Statistics on child-related outcomes in health; social and emotional development; income, assets and work; education and skills; demographics; and family and community.

www.childtrends.databank.org

Department of Education What Works Clearinghouse

Information on evaluated interventions that are geared towards improving outcomes in education.

<http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc>

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