Giving Students a Voice

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The highs and lows of student engagement

If we want to keep students engaged, we should listen to what they say about what turns them off at school — it’s not what you think.

“I get to do homework!”

Yes, Parrish, my son, was really excited about starting school, meeting his classmates, and doing homework like the big kids in the neighborhood. When friends and family asked about his adjustment to school, I said that he bounded out of bed, skipped to school, and told many stories about his new adventures.

Almost to a person, adults warned me that this enthusiasm for school won’t last. “Enjoy it while you can.” “Don’t get used to it.” “That will change,” they said. They knew from experience that kids become less excited about school with each passing year. I knew from the Gallup Student Poll data that they were right. Why does student engagement wane as students advance through the grades? And, can I keep this from happening to Parrish?

To address these questions, I dive into data from America’s students and examine Gallup research on predictors of student engagement.

What students say

Every year, during our fall polling period, the Gallup Student Poll asks students five questions about the conditions that foster their involvement in and enthusiasm for school.

• I have a best friend at school.
• I feel safe in this school.
• My teachers make me feel my schoolwork is important.
• At this school, I have the opportunity to do what I do best every day.
• In the last seven days, I have received recognition or praise for doing good schoolwork.

Sixty-three percent of students in America are engaged. Engaged students are highly involved with and enthusiastic about school. Students who aren’t engaged (23%) are often just going through the motions at school. These students, while not overtly negative, may blend into the landscape and may not be maximizing their own potential. Students who are actively disengaged (14%) are likely to undermine the teaching and learning process for themselves and others.

While most students report that they have a best friend at school and that they consider their school safe, less than half report that they get to do what they do best every day and that they get praise and recognition for good schoolwork. And, only half see their schoolwork as relevant, strongly agreeing that “my teachers make me feel my schoolwork is important.” Getting the opportunity to do what they do best, along with feeling that their schoolwork matters seems to make for an engaging education experience, regardless of the grade or age of the student. Receiving praise or recognition for good work, varies more by grade and may partially explain the engagement slide.

The engagement slide

Student engagement peaks during elementary school, decreases through middle school and early high school, plateaus a little, and then increases through the rest of high school — seemingly after some of the most actively disengaged students drop out of school. This downward trend suggests that we may be losing the hearts and minds of some students in middle school, with involve-
ment in and enthusiasm for school declining from grades 5 through 10. Examination of the five engagement items suggests that this decline is largely attributable to students receiving less praise and recognition as they age. Around 74% of 5th graders gave a 5 out of 5 to the item, “In the last seven days, I have received recognition or praise for doing good schoolwork” — indicating that they strongly agree with the item. Only 31% of 9th graders gave a 5 to this item.

The praise and recognition slide seems to be a plausible but incomplete explanation for the engagement slide. However, this isn’t how most adults explain the slide. (The 2010 PDK/Gallup Poll results showed that parents said students get more praise and recognition from school adults than the students acknowledged receiving in the separate 2010 Gallup Student Poll.) “Hormones,” “harder classes,” and “bigger school” seem to sum up the anecdotal information I’ve gathered from parents and teachers over the years. What did students say about the engagement slide? One 7th grader in Omaha, Neb., summarized the comments of many of her peers: “Things seem harder in middle school.” So, anecdotally, both parents and students see a link between the increased rigor of school and the dip. The student also noted that she longed for the years when she had a “bond with the teacher that you had all day long.” And she said that middle school teachers “don’t have as much time to get to know you.” These comments complement adults’ observation that the transition to bigger schools may result in disengagement. Interestingly, students never mention “hormones” or the rigors of adolescence as an explanation for the engagement slide.

This disconnect between student perceptions and parent and teacher views may translate into attempts to engage the student that miss the mark. For example, parents and teachers might develop and give out more school-level awards — handed from principals to students — when students are looking for more individualized praise, perhaps delivered by favorite teacher during a quiet moment.

**Preventing the slide**

Given the data and adult and student anecdotes, students seem to need more praise and recognition, greater readiness for the rigor of middle school, and more personal interactions with adults in the school to offset the challenges of school size and the feelings of anonymity.

Through Gallup research focused on finding ways to prevent the engagement slide, we also found that a school’s commitment to developing student strengths is associated with higher student engagement. Of students who strongly agreed with “My school is committed to building the strengths of each student,” 79% were engaged at school, compared to 11% of students who disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement. We also found that teachers who are engaged in their work tend to have students who are engaged in learning.

Keeping students engaged across the grade levels gives students a better chance of performing well on high-stakes tests. Based on what students tell us, there are four ways to keep them engaged:

- **Elementary schools prepare them for the rigors of the work in secondary school.**
- **Teachers get to know them.**
- **Adults praise and recognize them for good schoolwork.**
- **All schools commit to building the strengths of each student.**

Engaged parents, teachers, and principals can use these four strategies to reach the highs and prevent the lows of student engagement.

Now, even though he’ll undoubtedly lose his excitement about homework, will Parrish stay engaged in school? Well, I will try to give him enough praise for good schoolwork, but I’m sure he’ll say I don’t provide enough. More importantly, I’ll teach him how to build relationships with adults. People who know and appreciate him are more likely to work to keep him engaged.