

YOUTH ENGAGEMENT IN EDUCATIONAL CHANGE

Working Definition and Self Assessment

BY THE FORUM FOR YOUTH INVESTMENT¹

“We are young adults. We can give you respect. We are able to understand the issues. We can think for ourselves. It’s our education. If we have a say, it will make a difference.”

— Bertha Rodriguez, Denver High School Student

Sustained progress to improve educational policy and practice at the classroom, school, and district and community levels cannot be made without engaging education’s primary consumers — young people — in the process. Young people’s engagement is vital in shaping beliefs about the purpose and nature of education and the development and implementation of effective strategies for transforming school and community learning opportunities.

Research demonstrates that young people who are engaged emotionally, cognitively and behaviorally in their education are less likely to show signs of alienation, and that such engagement increases their connectedness to school.² Increased school connectedness is related to educational motivation, classroom engagement and better attendance, which are all linked to higher academic achievement.³

But “engagement” is used and defined in many ways. It is a broad, multifaceted term, often misunderstood or misused when describing the role of young people in educational contexts. Engagement should not be a set of disconnected activities for small groups of students. For our purposes, engagement is an active, voluntary construct, a verb rather than a noun, and an action that adults intentionally support and young people intentionally choose. The American Heritage College Dictionary (4th ed.) defines it as “[being] actively committed;” to be engaged is to “involve oneself or become occupied; to participate.” New Oxford Dictionary says to engage is to “attract or involve.” Common usages include “commitment,” “participation” and “the act of sharing activities of a group.”



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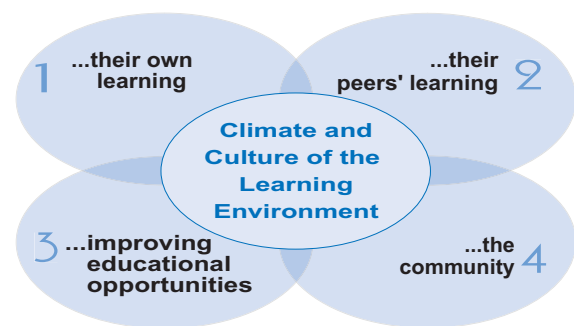
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Meaningful youth engagement in...



Involves...

- recognizing the strengths, perspectives and experiences youth bring to the learning process;
- ensuring that these are integrated and reflected in the learning environment; and
- the support of adults in the deliberate practice of those strengths, perspective and experiences.

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Strategies for engaging youth in the learning process itself are emerging in schools and districts across the country. In addition, the importance of engaging youth in the civic life of communities continues to gain support from a variety of sectors and systems, including but not limited to, education. But, in order to be most effective both in supporting the educational and developmental outcomes of all young people in schools and for the sake of systemic growth and improvement, efforts to authentically engage young people in public education must take place at multiple levels using multiple strategies. Engagement must be a set of well thought-out strategies that institutionalize authentic roles for all young people by creating a range of engagement opportunities from the classroom to the school and district level.

The basic strategies for engaging youth in educational change are four-fold (see figure on page 1). The first two — youth engagement in their own learning and in their peers' learning — are strategies for engaging young people in the learning process itself. These strategies are central to classroom practice and require supportive and respectful relationships between students and teachers.

Engaging youth in their own learning requires a balance of challenging, relevant learning experiences that offer multiple avenues for student choice and responsibility through cooperative, project-based and active learning. This includes opportunities to select content, set learning goals, ask questions, reflect on their learning, practice communication and problem solving skills and assume leadership roles in the classroom.

Youth engagement in their peers' learning means creating opportunities for cooperative learning between students, and empowering students to serve as positive role models, mentors, coaches and conflict mediators. This can include students supporting struggling peers and students assessing one another's work and progress. Creating these opportunities requires that adults provide the support and development opportunities young people need to successfully assume these roles. This connects directly to teaching and learning and requires structuring classrooms in ways that encourage interaction between students and

provide multiple learning opportunities for students with various learning styles.

But youth also need opportunities to assume roles that allow them to connect how and what they learn in school with what they do at home and in the community. The third strategy — **engaging youth in improving educational opportunities** — means giving young people clear opportunities to share responsibility for school and community reform and improvement processes aimed at increasing achievement for all students. This requires well thought-out strategies at the school, district, community, state and national levels that allow youth to partner with adults as leaders in the process of change or continuous improvement in their schools. This can include youth

representation in adult structures or youth-led structures and processes with well defined roles and responsibilities for youth in creating, shaping and defining policies and practices related to their educational experiences.

The fourth strategy is about **engaging young people in the community and civic life** through multiple avenues such as service-learning, internships, community action research

projects and community organizing. This strategy connects school and community-based learning experiences, creating opportunities for students to link classroom learning to lived experiences.

At the heart of all four strategies sits the learning environment and the values that shape it — the underlying beliefs, assumptions and expectations about young people; how they learn, what they think, what they need from schools and adults, what they believe in and what they are capable of. It is these values that set the tone for how all members of the school community interact with one another, both inside and outside the classroom. It is in the context of climate and culture that the conditions for authentic youth engagement are created or undermined. And, while young people play important roles in creating, maintaining or improving safe, supportive learning environments, it is the responsibility of adults to provide the support and structure to allow this to happen.

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While, in some contexts, youth engagement strategies may be robust enough to stand alone as interventions, our experience is that in the most effective examples, youth engagement is used as a frame through which an initiative's core interventions and strategies are considered rather than as a "stand-alone" strategy. For example, young people are important stake holders in any community dialogue or constituency building efforts, but they can also be valuable partners in policy analysis and work with practitioners.

Youth engagement warrants attention of its own, but the tendency to create islands of involvement for the sake of involvement can result in tokenistic roles for students where their input is solicited but not acted on, demoralizing and demotivating students in the process. "We're tired of talking and nothing happening. Adults at school only listen to us when we're in a meeting and they want something from us, but they never act on our thoughts or comments," said a student leader from Hoopa High School in at a recent leadership workshop in Klamath-Trinity Joint Unified School District on the Hoopa Indian Reservation. "How can we trust and respect them, if they do nothing with what we tell them. After talking to students they need to ask for our help in finding solutions and give us roles and responsibilities. We want a role!"

Creating pathways for, and maintaining a focus on, youth engagement in the context of the extremely complex and multi-faceted process of high school transformation is a difficult charge and requires a dual focus on developing the capacity of both youth and adults to do this work. But, it is an essential component of any reform initiative. If the voices of youth are lost in the shuffle, reform initiatives run the risk of missing key indicators of success or failure. "One of the things I notice consistently in my work with students is that they have an awareness of what's working or not working long before some of the adults do. As adults, we tend to rely on intricate or complicated methods to evaluate the work we do and, in doing so, we overlook the most accessible and significant source of information about program effectiveness — our young people," said Elyshia Aseltine, Youth Engagement Coordinator for LEED Sacramento.

Lessons from the Field⁴

Infuse youth at many different levels and in many different roles. Develop pathways for increasing youth engagement. Young people can be engaged in designing aspects of their own learning, setting a climate for an improved school environment, community service, or systems-level change. Within each of these spheres they can participate in a range of activities from serving as participants in a focus group to coordinating a drive to change district policies. Be thoughtful in shaping roles for youth and in selecting a diverse range of young people into those roles. Taj James of Movement Strategies Center put it this way: "young people need to see the rungs of the ladder clearly. Many ladders are missing the bottom rungs — so kids can't even get started."

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Train adults to effectively partner with youth. Partnering effectively with youth is a set of

skills that must be learned. While some adults naturally understand how to partner with youth, often larger scale initiatives give the skills piece of the partnership short shrift. Youth engagement is conceptually simple, but difficult to pull off without intentional training for adults. "Adults need help learning how to collaborate with young people just as much as youth need help adjusting to their transformed role with adults," notes Wendy Lesko in the Youth Infusion Intergenerational Advocacy Toolkit.

Train youth to effectively carry out their work. Taking young people's intuitive and experiential sensibilities and perspectives about what needs to be done and shaping them into programs, action agendas, and policy recommendations requires an investment in young people's capacity. Opportunities to build skills, motivation and opportunities are all critical ingredients to young people's success. Adrian Ruiz noted that youth in San Francisco's Peer Resources program "receive foundation training in communications, values, decision making and more. As project leaders they also get hands on experience planning and executing projects, running meetings and presenting to audiences."

Begin engagement by focusing on youth’s daily experiences with school environments and around instruction. Often the best place to start is where young people are. If funding formulas are a concern among advocates but the youth keeping talking about the bathrooms being in disrepair, start by tackling that issue and build connections to the broader concerns or issues that are more often championed by adult school reformers and program planners. Jake, a high school student at the Philadelphia Student Union, describes this dynamic: “Students focus on improving relationships, the atmosphere in schools, making schools more comfortable ... adults tend to focus on the structural and bureaucratic things. We try to balance the two ... the structural end of things, and students’ everyday experiences.”

Secure resources for youth engagement efforts. To work effectively, young people need access to resources just as adults do. Often, they need only a modest amount of money to support training, coordinate events or produce materials. Sometimes it is not about money but rather being able to secure space for meetings, permission to conduct a survey or access to individuals. But for youth to have a fair footing in impacting change, tangible resources must be secured that allow them to be productive and to engage a broader constituency of their peers in their efforts. This is how Kara Cayce, a former student organizer with the Colorado Progressive Coalition, put it. “Students need to have a catalyst, like an established organization to make sure you have a thorough understanding of the issues you’re working on and resources to tap into.”

Link with outside groups such as nonprofit organizations that work with youth to establish or enhance a project, and support training and implementation of youth engagement initiatives. Many of these organizations have developed tools and strategies for action engaging young people. Additionally, many local efforts are finding that a combination of insider and outsider organizational strategies increase the success and reach of youth engagement efforts.

Self Assessment

The matrix that follows is a simple self assessment and discussion tool for educators, young people and other stakeholders with an interest in youth engagement in schools. We have included a blank matrix (see pages 6–7) that can be copied and filled out, and an example of a filled-in matrix to give you a sense of how the tool might be used to document efforts underway in a particular school or district.

The vertical axis features the four basic youth engagement strategies outlined in the working definition, with more detailed examples of what each looks like in practice. Along the horizontal axis we suggest three contexts for reflecting on each of these strategies — the beliefs and core values of a school or district, school policies and structures, and specific practices or strategies that are in place. Too often, isolated youth engagement strategies are implemented without a clear link to district or school policy, or youth engagement appears as part of our core beliefs but does not get concretized into specific practices or policies.

Use the tool in whatever way is useful. We find it can be an effective introductory exercise for teams to fill out and discuss as part of a planning meeting or retreat. Another possibility is that role-alike groups (i.e., students, teachers, leadership) fill it out separately and compare notes.

Assessing Youth Engagement in Youth-Centered High Schools⁵			
	BELIEFS AND CORE VALUES	POLICIES/STRUCTURES	PRACTICES/STRATEGIES
<p>Youth engagement in their own learning</p> <p>Students responsible for their own learning. Multiple avenues for student choice and responsibility in course and curriculum content. Cooperative, project-based and active learning. Leadership opportunities in the classroom. With the support of staff are able to define success. Opportunities to set learning goals, ask questions, reflect on their learning and practice communication and problem-solving skills. Challenging, relevant experiences. Authentic assessment; students help define expectations and standards.</p>	<p>Student Voice valued. Students seen as equal contributors to assist in the development promotion of school culture and climate. Open communication between students and teachers.</p>	<p>End of the year portfolios. All students have Individual Learning Plans. Advisories.</p>	<p>Once a week during advisory, students assess their learning by going over their ILP, first alone, then with advisor to identify goals accomplished, challenges and areas of need and readjust accordingly.</p>
<p>Youth engagement in their peers' learning</p> <p>Opportunities for cooperative learning between students. Students as positive role models, mentors, peer coaches or conflict mediators. Students provide support in learning and developing new skills. Opportunities to connect course content to student's life experiences. Opportunities for students to assess one another's work and progress. Students as teacher's assistants or coaches in teacher development.</p>	<p>Student Voice valued.</p>	<p>Advisories.</p>	<p>Peer mentoring — older youth mentor younger youth.</p>
<p>Youth engagement in improving educational opportunities</p> <p>Youth partner with adults as leaders in the change or continuous improvement process. Youth inclusion in adult structures/processes. Opportunities for youth to contribute to and influence the development of policy and structural change. Regular opportunities for student voice, choice and contribution. Youth-led, youth-only tructures/processes.</p>	<p>Students seen as equal contributors to assist in the development promotion of school culture and climate.</p>	<p>Student participation with voting rights on Site Based Management team (SBM) — ability to make decisions on budget, curriculum and school policy. Advisories.</p>	<p>Process to collect student input on issues to be voted on in SBM (suggestion box, surveys).</p>
<p>Youth engagement in the community</p> <p>Opportunities for students to be engaged in the community and civic life through service learning, internships and community service. Connections between classroom and school-based activities to out-of-school opportunities. Links between school and community-based learning experiences. Connections to community, networks and role models.</p>	<p>Student Voice valued. Students must learn to be engaged citizens.</p>	<p>All students will complete 20 hours of service learning.</p>	

Assessing Youth Engagement in Youth-Centered High Schools⁵	
	BELIEFS AND CORE VALUES
<p>Youth engagement in their own learning</p> <p>Students responsible for their own learning.</p> <p>Multiple avenues for student choice and responsibility in course and curriculum content.</p> <p>Cooperative, project-based and active learning.</p> <p>Leadership opportunities in the classroom.</p> <p>With the support of staff are able to define success.</p> <p>Opportunities to set learning goals, ask questions, reflect on their learning and practice communication and problem-solving skills.</p> <p>Challenging, relevant experiences.</p> <p>Authentic assessment; students help define expectations and standards.</p>	
<p>Youth engagement in their peers' learning</p> <p>Opportunities for cooperative learning between students.</p> <p>Students as positive role models, mentors, peer coaches or conflict mediators.</p> <p>Students provide support in learning and developing new skills.</p> <p>Opportunities to connect course content to student's life experiences.</p> <p>Opportunities for students to assess one another's work and progress.</p> <p>Students as teacher's assistants or coaches in teacher development.</p>	
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Assessing Youth Engagement in Youth-Centered	
POLICIES/STRUCTURES	PRACTICES/STRATEGIES

References:

1. This working definition was developed by the Forum for Youth Investment with input from Schools for a New Society youth engagement coordinators.
2. Fredricks, J.A., Blumefeld, P.C. & Paris, A.H. School Engagement: Potential of the Concept, State of Evidence. *Review of Educational Research*, Spring 2004. (Vol. 74, Number 1)
3. Blum, R.W., & Libbey, H.P. (Eds.). (2004, September). School Connectedness: Strengthening Health and Education Outcomes for Teenagers [Special issue]. *Journal of School Health*, 74(7). Retrieved October 1, 2004, from www.jhsph.edu/wingspread.
4. These lessons were developed by the Forum and first appeared in the PEN publication, *Communities at Work: Strategic Interventions for Community Change*. Available online at: www.publiceducation.org/pdf/CAW/CAW_report.pdf
5. At the heart of all four strategies is the climate and culture of the learning environment or what we call a “youth-centered” learning environment. Essentially, these are the underlying beliefs, values, policies and practices which set the tone and define the expectations for how all members of the school community interact with one another, both inside and outside the classroom; they are also the levers that create the conditions in which authentic youth engagement can occur. While young people can play a role in improving and maintaining a safe, supportive, learning environment, it is the role of adults to ensure that provide the support and structure to allow this to happen.



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