

# RSS ROUNDUP

RSS ROUNDUP is written by your Regional Service Specialists (RSS): Dr. Dina Wert, East Region; Susan Martin, Central Region; and Cynthia Zajac, West Region

## Student Engagement – A Creative Solution to Improve Learning

By Cynthia Zajac



**About the Author:**  
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Student engagement is a critical component of successful learning as it promotes motivation, participation and retention of knowledge. Think back to a true learning experience in your lifetime: What happened that made it so impactful? Learning to drive may come to mind as a true learning experience. What was involved in this learning process? Was it something you were interested in accomplishing? Were you an active participant? Did you have a model? Were you given opportunities to reflect on new and related situations? Were there opportunities to collaborate? All of these questions should have been answered with a resounding “yes”! If related questions are used in the planning of classroom or professional development activities, with the use of engagement strategies, educators can be more confident that deeper learning is occurring in every experience.

*So, how do we know if students are really engaged in the learning experience?*

When students are actively engaged, motivation and participation increase which most likely results in a more positive and empowering learning experience. Engagement promotes a sense of ownership over learning and fosters a positive attitude towards education. On the other hand, when students are disengaged, they may feel bored, uninterested, or disconnected from the learning process, which leads to poor learning outcomes. *“Student engagement can be seen as the glue that holds together all aspects of student learning and growth. Not only does student engagement make teaching itself more fun, engaging, and rewarding, but it has been shown to have critical impacts on students.”* (Sutton 2021).

Disengagement is not always easy to recognize. Sometimes participation is misunderstood to be engagement. When a child is on the right page at the right time, they appear to be paying attention, yet they can still be disengaged from the experience and potentially may not be learning anything. Following along in the book and raising a hand waiting for the teacher to choose someone to answer is a minimal level of engagement and could lead to minimal or no learning. Recognizing that there is a difference between participation and active engagement will help ensure deeper levels of learning.

Active engagement, sometimes referred to as active learning, involves discussions, written responses, hands-on approaches and helpful feedback from teachers and/or peers. Instructional leaders can promote student engagement in their organization by encouraging teachers to incorporate activities that keep students actively involved in the topic through multiple levels of engagement. Building leaders and principals can and *should* model engaging activities at faculty meetings and onsite professional development. By utilizing actively engaging approaches that capture the interest of your faculty members, you not only spark feelings of connectivity but also model expectations for the same practices in their classrooms.

There are different ways of categorizing levels of engagement for learning, but one common framework is the three levels of engagement proposed by Fredricks, Blumenfeld and Paris (2004):

- 1. Behavioral engagement:** This level of engagement refers to the student’s participation in the learning process, such as attending classes, completing assignments and following rules and procedures.



2. **Emotional engagement:** This level of engagement refers to the student's affective connection to the learning experience, such as their interest, enjoyment and motivation to learn. Emotional engagement is influenced by factors such as the teacher's enthusiasm, the relevance of the content and the degree of challenge provided by the tasks.
3. **Cognitive engagement:** This level of engagement refers to the student's mental investment in the learning process, such as their use of higher-order thinking skills, critical analysis and problem-solving strategies. Cognitive engagement is influenced by factors such as the complexity of the tasks, the level of autonomy provided to the students and the quality of feedback given by the teacher. Asking, and allowing students to ask, engaging questions can keep the lesson more active and engaging.

It is important to note that these three levels are inter-related and if viewed as successful on an isolated level, then minimal learning can occur. For example, a student who is behaviorally engaged but not emotionally engaged may still be on the right page in their book and may complete assignments, but the learning outcomes could be limited due to a lack of motivation or interest. Effective teaching practices should aim to foster all three levels of engagement in order to promote successful learning outcomes.

There are a number of engagement frameworks available to guide a classroom or school wide initiative on deeper learning (Fisher, Frey & Hatte, 2020). As principals, it is crucial to align with a framework of engagement (or create your own) to use as a guideline to deeper learning in the classroom environment. When the framework is embedded into daily practice with common language, modeling and expectations, teachers will be able to better monitor engagement and promote empowerment that pushes learning experiences to the next level. Additionally, students should be well versed on what engagement looks like and what actions lead to deeper learning. Providing students with the ability to self-monitor their engagement level should be a regular part of every learning activity. Learners should recognize that formulating questions, sharing explanations, making hypotheses and utilizing outside resources can be easily monitored and will contribute to the emotional,

behavioral, and cognitive investment necessary for true learning. On the other hand, when students recognize out of seat behavior, classroom distractions or frequent visits to the hallway as noticeable disengagement activities, they can develop strategies to change or connect their behavior to learning. Not only should we expect to see active engagement in the classroom, but it is equally important for principals to model the same techniques for teachers during faculty meetings and professional development, ensuring a thorough understanding of engagement in a collaborative and challenging manner.

If we believe (and we know) that student engagement is a critical component of successful learning, then we must motivate learners to be actively involved in learning. And, if we believe that learning increases as engagement increases, then it is our responsibility to provide an atmosphere that allows for empowerment, questions, discussions and self-monitoring of personal engagement. One creative solution is to use a common framework in your school across all grade levels and classes. Desktop visuals and classroom posters can be easily created to help promote teacher and student agency for monitoring engagement and assist them to make efforts to be more engaged as a class or individual student. Simple visual reminders can easily make learning more engaging and motivating and therefore create more investment in the content. When everyone is "talking the same talk," students (and your teachers) will be more invested in the program.

The next time you visit a classroom or hold a faculty meeting, observe if the learners are *really* engaged and use the opportunity to help promote a school that embraces and empowers deeper learning experiences.

#### References

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