Maintaining Student Engagement in the K-12 Classroom

The TREP Project works to connect research on the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral consequences of developmental trauma with the realities of school and classroom management. We focus on schools serving communities coping with high levels of concentrated poverty and social disorganization, such as housing and food instability, household and neighborhood violence, and drug dependence. We aim to create schools and classrooms that can meet the socioemotional and academic needs of not one or two children who have been exposed to traumatic levels of chronic stress, but the needs of a classroom of traumatized children.

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While our modern understanding of student engagement was originally conceptualized as a way to reduce boredom, alienation, and dropping out of school, one can make the argument that many schools now use student engagement as a mechanism to identify, label, and punish students who seem disinterested in learning. This shift to punishing disengagement ultimately increases disengaged students' chances of dropping out of school. This shift in ideology and approach correlates with wide-spread school accountability reform efforts such as standardized testing and loss of resources for not meeting accountability standards. Thus, the stakes are high for educators and students alike in regards to maintaining engagement in the K-12 classroom.

As researchers at the UCLA Center for Mental Health in Schools note, two common reasons students cite for disengaging in learning are "It's not worth it," and "I know I won't be able to do it." By acknowledging and responding to the feelings that students have about the value of learning and their expectations about whether they will be able to learn it, educators can effectively re-engage disengaged students.

> **"Student engagement is the effort, enjoyment, and interest expressed while participating in academic activities." -Furrer& Skinner**

TABLE OF CONTENTS

THREE COMPONENTS OF ENGAGEMENT

Behavioral engagement is probably the most widely discussed form of engagement because it is observable and tangible. Behavioral engagement happens when students willingly complete the learning tasks for the lesson and engage with their teacher and classroom in agreed upon manners. This may include sharing with a partner, reflecting on their own, and taking risks by raising their hands multiple times during lessons when they might not have the correct answers. When students are disengaged, they are engaged in tasks that are not part of the classroom norms and expectations. This may include not following instructions, making distracting noises or movements, getting out of their seats without permission, and talking excessively.

Cognitive engagement is the form of engagement most consciously and unconsciously required by educators for students to meet academic benchmarks and performance standards. It can be thought of as students being intrinsically motivated to not only learn the material being taught, but to actually put energy and effort into understanding the complexity of the material and extending learning beyond classroom instruction.

Emotional engagement is maybe the most important form of student engagement, but it is likely the most forgotten and abandoned form. It has everything to do with how students feel about the school/classroom atmosphere, their teachers and classmates, the lessons being taught, and many other interrelated parts of the school climate that affect their ability to effectively engage in learning.

It is a fallacy for educators to conclude that the responsibility for engaging students lies with the students alone. Educators must commit to teaching engagement behaviors in relation to the learning styles of the students in their classroom.

# PRESERVING ENGAGEMENT vs PREPETUATING DISENGAGEMENT

Regardless of circumstances outside of the school, classroom engagement and disengagement are largely under the control of educators. There is no reason to blame students, their parents, or their communities as an excuse for student disengagement.

	Preserving Engagement	Perpetuating Disengagement
BEHAVIORAL	Not only teaching the "what" about on task and off task behaviors, but also teaching the "why"	Harshly punishing students for being off task and displaying outward behaviors that disrupt classroom instruction
	Deeply understanding the different types of engagement and how they interact and affect students' multiple learning modalities	Only rewarding or praising students who display high levels of behavioral engagement
	Creating school policies that uphold students' cultural ways of learning, engaging, and processing	Creating school policies that dictate a narrow scope for what engagement should look like
COGNITIVE	Teaching students how to regulate their emotions and behaviors	Repetitively punishing students for breaking school rules without teaching the rules
	Further nurturing students' positive beliefs about themselves	Believing that students should implicitly know how to act and engage appropriately in the learning environment
	Examining your own personal biases, blind spots, and deficits about certain groups of students	Assuming that all students have well developed social and self-regulatory skills
	Understanding that students are already resilient, have grit, and maintain the capacity to learn	Expecting that students should automatically have positive attitudes about school and be psychologically invested in learning from you
EMOTIONAL	Providing ample opportunities for students to engage the curriculum by seeing themselves in it	Targeting students displaying externalizing behaviors while internalizing students and those dealing with somatic issues suffer silently
	Building positive, trusting and caring relationships with students and families	Not utilizing students' cultures, knowledge, and languages as pedagogical tools to enhance engagement and achievement
	Creating a warm classroom culture where all students feel a sense of safety and belonging	Failing to provide a safe and nurturing school environment where all students feel welcomed
	Scaffolding and differentiating instruction to meet the emotional needs of students	Ignoring cultural and power differences between the characteristics of the staff and the students being served in the school
	Understanding that students want to learn from you, but they need to be seen, validated, and legitimized first by you	Scripting school cultural norms that require students and families to dis-identify with their racial-ethnic and linguistic identities

RACIAL-ETHNIC EQUITY IN SCHOOL DISCIPLINE

According to the 2014 Civil Rights Data Snapshot on School Discipline, Black students were suspended three times as much as their White counterparts. Native American and Hispanic students also had higher suspension rates than their White peers.

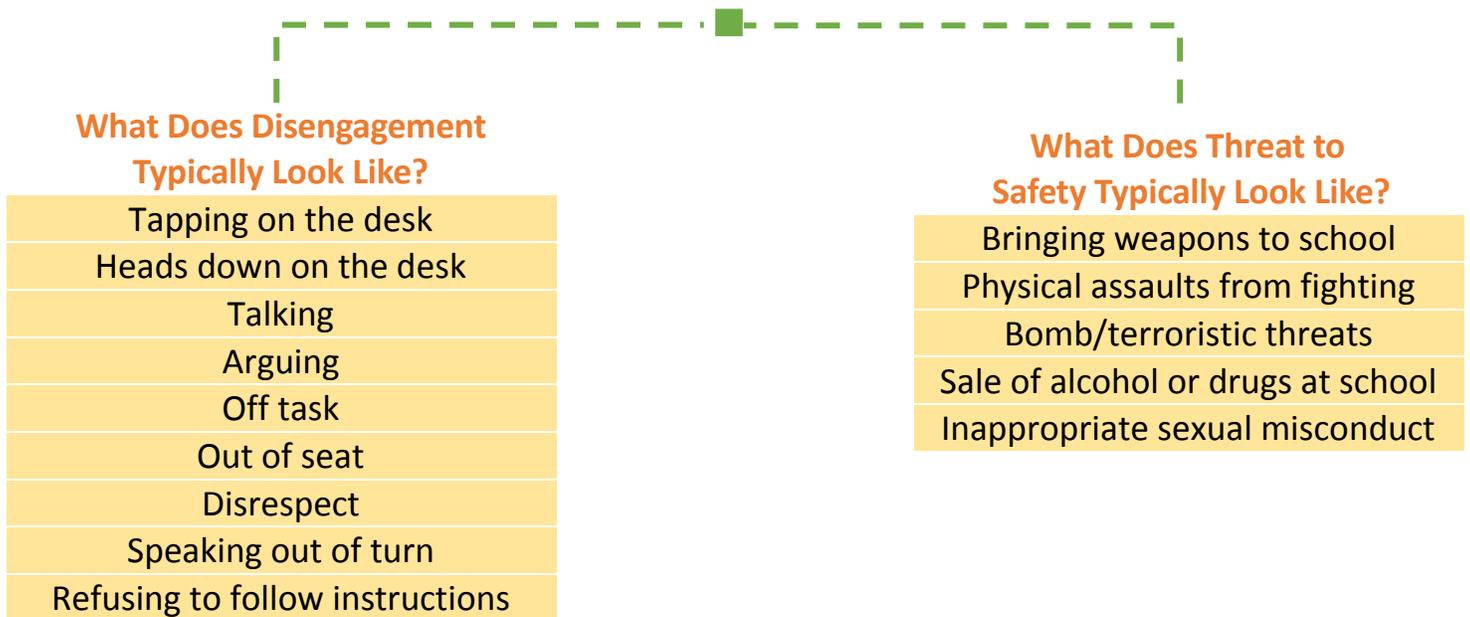**Students Receiving Out-Of-School Suspensions by Race-Ethnicity and Gender**
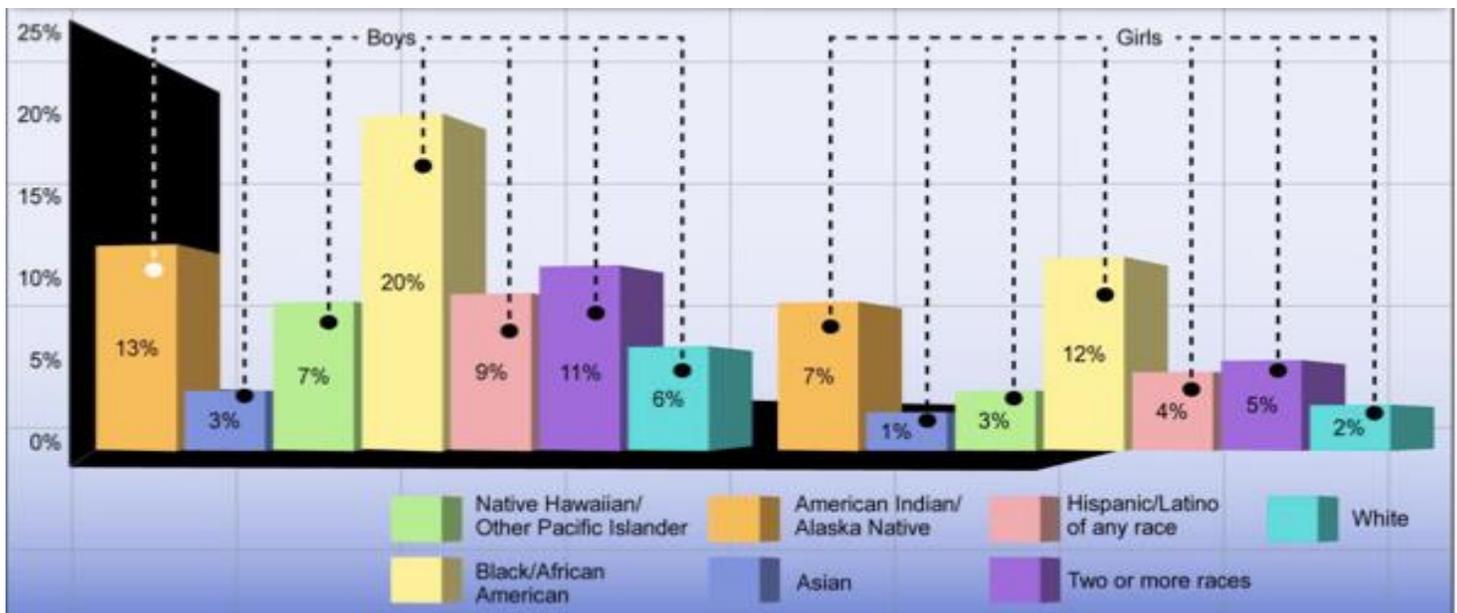
(Figure 1, U.S. Dept. of Education, Office of Civil Rights, Civil Rights Data Collection, 2011-2012)

Research conducted by Professor Ivory Toldson, the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation, and the Open Society Institute Campaign for Black Male Achievement found that the majority of students perceived to be disengaged in the learning environment received punitive consequences from school personnel. This included behaviors like coming late to class or not turning in homework assignments on time. Additionally, as shown in the figure above, the likelihood of receiving punitive consequences is racialized and gendered. Most notably, Black males perceived to be disengaged were the students most likely to be given behavior demerits, detentions, and suspensions. Depending on the frequency and severity of the disengagement, some students were either pushed out or dropped out of school.

"Suspension and expulsion often provides [vulnerable] kids exactly what they do not need: **an extended, unsupervised hiatus from school** that increases their risk of engaging in substance abuse and violet crime." -Losen & Skiba.

RETHINKING RESPONSES TO DISENGAGEMENT

There is a significant difference between students fighting with or bullying a peer or bringing a weapon to school, versus not staying in their seat, making jokes in class, or throwing paper across the room because they are not engaged in the lesson. Yet, the vast body of research on school discipline concludes that on average, most school punishments are for non-violent behaviors that are indicators for student disengagement rather than for actual, violent threats to students or to school personnel.

What Does Disengagement Typically Look Like?	What Does Threat to Safety Typically Look Like?
Tapping on the desk	Bringing weapons to school
Heads down on the desk	Physical assaults from fighting
Talking	Bomb/terroristic threats
Arguing	Sale of alcohol or drugs at school
Off task	Inappropriate sexual misconduct
Out of seat	
Disrespect	
Speaking out of turn	
Refusing to follow instructions	

Adapted from Figure 2, MPS Code of Conduct.

Ivory Toldson's Factors to Consider about Student Engagement and Disciplinary Referrals

Creating and sustaining community based delinquency prevention programs may lessen student delinquency and interaction with the justice system.

Promoting parent involvement structures may strengthen relationships with teachers.

Promoting stronger mental health supports for students could help them process and regulate their emotions, especially students who are coping with traumatic stressors.

Promoting positive school experiences and belonging throughout the school might improve student engagement.

Student engagement is key: disengagement → truancy → poor grades and school dropout

NEED FOR CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE PEDAGOGY

◆ Students of color who struggle academically (cognitive engagement) will not only be disengaged in the learning environment, but they will likely receive more negative attention from school personnel prompting more behavioral consequences.

◆ Many students of color make informative choices to not actively engage (emotional engagement) in school because they see it as just another oppressive institution that failed so many of their racial-ethnic group in the past.

In an article titled **But That's Just Good Teaching!**, Gloria Ladson-Billings advocates for culturally relevant pedagogy. Culturally responsive or culturally relevant educational systems are grounded in the belief that all culturally and linguistically diverse students can excel in academic endeavors when:

- Their culture, language, heritage, and experiences are valued and are used to facilitate their learning and development **AND**
- They are provided access to high quality teachers, programs, and resources.

Education that is culturally relevant enables students to see their culture, interests, and ultimately themselves in the curriculum, thereby enhancing student engagement in the learning environment. Culturally relevant teaching also has tremendous benefits for educators. For example, utilizing culturally relevant pedagogies has been found to bolster teachers' confidence in facilitating and scaffolding instruction in meaningful ways, and strengthens their relationships with students.

Schools that devote resources to creating an infrastructure where culturally relevant teaching is the standard can preserve student engagement, and effectively close racial and linguistic gaps in discipline and disengagement. These infrastructure resources include:

- Opportunities for teachers to get to know their students and families
- Teaching materials and artifacts throughout the school that represent the student body
- Collaborative opportunities for family and community members to inform the school's policies and practices

Culturally relevant teaching utilizes the backgrounds, knowledge, and experiences of students to inform the teacher's lessons and methodology, while still meeting the expectations of district and state curricular requirements.
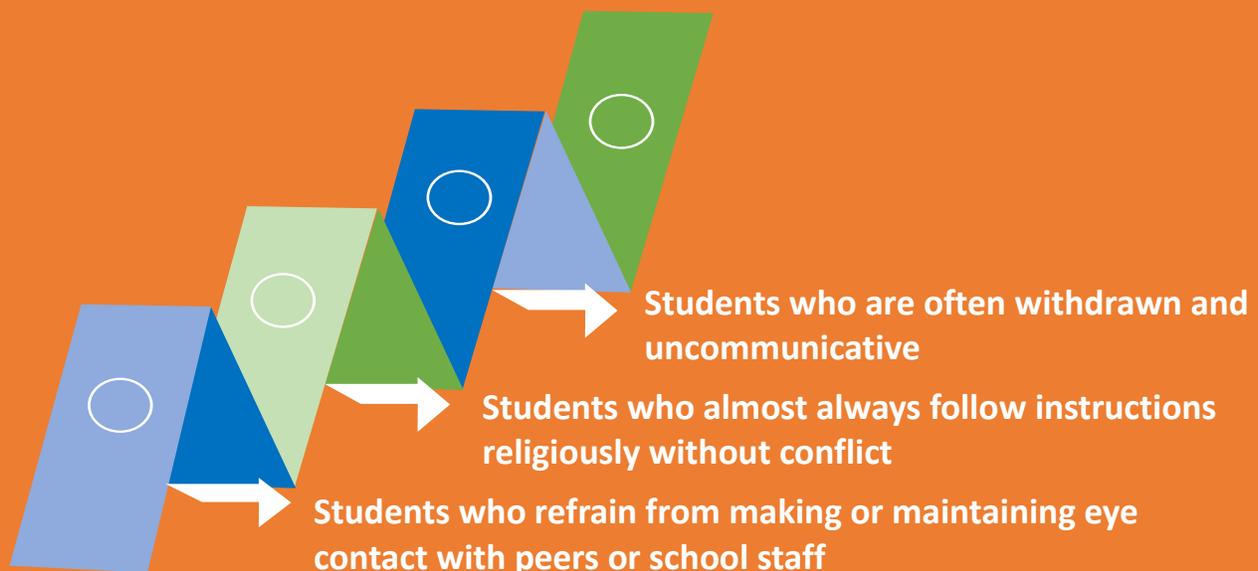
WHEN DISENGAGEMENT MINICS ENGAGEMENT

Disengagement behaviors are not always outward and disruptive, just like engagement behaviors are not always cheerful and participatory. Many student fake engagement; most disengagement behaviors get negative attention from educators and failure to get re-engaged in the lesson is met with further consequences. Thus, some students who display engagement behaviors in the learning environment may actually be disengaged. Hence, the display of engaged behaviors does not always imply interest in the lesson.

Disengagement can also be displayed as withdrawn, quiet, non-confrontational behaviors, such as showing polite disinterest in learning activities and shallow discussions with peers during group activities. Students exhibiting these disengagement behaviors often go unnoticed because they don't disrupt the teacher. However, this type of disengagement may actually be more harmful to student achievement and matriculation than the standard perception of student disengagement.

The discipline gap, much like the engagement gap causes students to miss crucial instructional time, and can unfortunately beget a negative academic identity as well as push many students to leave school prematurely.

The Forgotten Kids in the Student Engagement Debate

Students who are often withdrawn and uncommunicative

Students who almost always follow instructions religiously without conflict

Students who refrain from making or maintaining eye contact with peers or school staff

RE-ENGAGING DISENGAGED STUDENTS

One of the ways that educators can re-engage students in the classroom is by maintaining a critical focus on the "why" of student engagement behaviors vs. those behaviors that cause student disengagement. Put differently, shifting the focus to how educators can shape, frame and facilitate student engagement behaviors as proactive mechanisms that enhance student achievement vs. reacting punitively towards student disengagement behaviors that can have negative school and life outcomes.

Critical Questions to Ponder:

1. What school/classroom procedures or policies initiate effort and perseverance from students and which ones cause inattention, restlessness, and passivity?

2. What engagement opportunities would help students develop and maintain a zest for learning and go above and beyond what is required in your classroom?

3. How can you build relationships with students that would increase their desire to want to learn from you?

	Engagement	**Disengagement**
BEHAVIORAL	**Proactive**	**Reactive**
	1. Action initiation	Passivity
	2. Effort, exertion	Giving up
	3. Working hard	Restlessness
	4. Attempts	Half-hearted
	5. Persistence	Inattentive
	6. Intensity	Distracted
	7. Focus, attention	Mentally withdrawn
COGNITIVE	**Proactive**	**Reactive**
	1. Enthusiasm	Boredom
	2. Interest	Disinterest
	3. Enjoyment	Frustration, anger
	4. Satisfaction	Sadness
	5. Pride	Worry, anxiety
	6. Vitality	Shame
	7. Zest	Self-blame
EMOTIONAL	**Proactive**	**Reactive**
	1. Purposeful	Aimless
	2. Approach	Helpless
	3. Goal striving	Resigned
	4. Willing participant	Opposition
	5. Mastery	Apathy
	6. Follow-through	Hopeless
	7. Thoroughness	Pressured

PROACTIVE AND INCLUSIVE STRATEGIES

Another way to re-engage students in the learning environment involves critically unpacking the role of teachers' and re-imagining not only how they might construct relationships and trust with students and families, but also how they might proactively decrease the disproportionality in school discipline. The California Safe and Supportive Schools organization developed some fruitful strategies for educators in their What Works Brief.

One transformative theme from their strategies is that engaged student-teacher relations are infused with:

Pedagogical Caring: Educators display the need to create supportive relationships and understandings with students to promote academic achievement and social consciousness.

Optimal Structure: Educators believe that structured learning environments are those that are safe, nurturing, and accepting of all students, especially those who are considered disadvantaged and disengaged.

Autonomy Support: Educators value student voices and perspectives enough to allow them to make informed choices in the classroom, and create lessons that are culturally relevant to students' experiences outside of the classroom.

The Teacher Role: Build Trust, Establish Community, and Engage Students

Engage students in developing 'classroom norms.' Explain that norms are ways that we agree to behave in a group. Classroom norms help ensure that everyone feels like the classroom is a safe place to learn and to build friendships.

Allow students to reflect on their behavior and articulate better ways they might have handled a conflict.

When problem behaviors arise, inquire in a professional appropriate way about challenges students may be experiencing outside of school. Knowing about your students' lives helps you understand their behavior in your classroom.

Develop 'classroom agreements' by asking students what they think other members of the classroom community, including you the instructor and they the students, should do when an established classroom norm is broken. Encourage students to think of breaks in norms as opportunities for learning.

Provide authentic praise to students for exceptional contributions to the classroom social and physical environment.

Avoid reprimanding students in public. Find ways to talk with students privately about their behavior, thinking carefully about what skills (e.g., controlling anger; managing conflict) the student may need help building.

Help students 'restore' the community by offering opportunities for repairing harm (e.g., apologizing, repairing or replacing property).

EACH ONE TEACH ONE is a proverb born during the years of African slavery in the U.S. when, because knowledge is power, they were forbidden from learning to read. There is power and empowerment in learning from each other, and getting beyond the state of ignorance of only knowing about one's most immediate circumstances. We believe that educators learn best from their peers and are empowered by using their challenges to teach others.

Please send us your experiences about how trauma showed up in the school and classroom experiences of your students and how you handled it in the moment. Also, please tell us what you wish you knew at the time but didn't, what you have learned since, and what you have done or would do differently. Email us about your experiences at info@TREPEducator.org

The audacity to engage. Nicole J. Williams, a teacher on Chicago's southside understands that many of her students come to school attempting to cope with traumatic experiences that not only alter their day, but also significantly affects their ability to reset and maintain focus in the classroom. She maintains that the battle for control and balance is a daily challenge for her. So, she takes great pride in getting to know her students and going the extra mile to set clear expectations for their behavior and engagement in her classroom. Nicole believes that knowing what interests her students' outside of academics displays care and concern for who they are and who they will become in the future. She also believes that incorporating elements of what makes students' happy in her classroom routines and procedures has helped to maintain a high level of engagement during instruction.

Additionally, Nicole has helped her students to envision and embrace the idea that the classroom space is a home, belonging to both the teacher and the students. Not only has she witnessed their academic growth, but their social-emotional growth and development as well. Recently, one of her eighth-grade students shared that she feels comfortable learning from her because her classis a judgment free zone where she feels safe making mistakes. Nicole has plenty of teaching strategies to share, but wanted teachers who are struggling with student engagement to know that there is no magic strategy or secret formula to maintaining engagement, and getting students to learning from you. She says it all begins with showing students that you care about them and who they are as individuals.

Please email us at info@TREPEducator.org to share your experiences with student engagement and student disengagement and how that affected the way you responded to each, how this has changed over your teaching career, and any advice you want to share.

Please join our virtual learning community@ http://www.trepeducator.org/forum to receive weekly ResearchToPractice briefs on the following topics:
- TREP Classroom Management
- De-Escalation
- Social & Emotional Learning
- Educator Self-Care

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