

Redefine the rules of engagement

Just as the Executive turns the spotlight on disengaged learners a new book on this very issue has been published by the prestigious National Academy of America - 'Engaging School - fostering high school students' motivation to learn'. The review could have been commissioned by the Executive so familiar are the issues it raises.

The pupils described as most at risk of disengaging from school are those who experience schools as impersonal, punitive and uncaring; they feel they don't belong. They see their parents as uninterested in school. They feel intimidated by the pressure to prove themselves all the time. At the same time they see little point in working hard because they don't see any connections between school and their community or job opportunities. What they're taught doesn't make much sense to them as teaching doesn't draw on any pre-existing understanding. Many of them carry a 'chip on their shoulder' and feel their efforts won't be recognised as the teachers are 'agin them'.

So what can schools do? The book describes how classrooms will only engage learners if they nurture three factors, namely 'I belong' feelings, 'can do' beliefs and 'want to' attitudes. A sense of connection with the school is crucial. When pupils get involved in extracurricular or after school activities that provide a venue where they can relax and show what they can do they're more likely to develop a sense of loyalty to the school. So efforts to promote social engagement are worthwhile.

The book calls for fundamental changes in how teachers and pupils relate to one another. Every pupil needs to be known well by at least one adult and this requires every adult to mentor a small group of pupils. Teachers staying with the same group for more than one year can help promote 'respectful and mutually accountable relationships'. Converting large schools into smaller units is another strategy that 'fosters personalized and continuous relationships'.

Pupils benefit from working together but pecking orders, usually based on academic ability often make group learning difficult. At the same time disengaging pupils invariably have little contact with their more academically ambitious peers. So schools need to create mixed groupings based on shared interests rather than academic competence and build a climate where pupils feel comfortable beyond their culture zone. Engagement is particularly influenced by how much their best friends are 'into' school. These factors underscore the importance of avoiding concentrated groups of disengaged pupils.

Pupils work either because they want to or because they feel they have to. Autonomous learners work hard whether or not they enjoy a particular course because they've adopted school values. Pupils are likely to adopt the values of teachers who help them meet their needs for belongingness and competence. At the point that autonomy needs are peaking in adolescence however schools become for many pupils an infantilising activity in which they're told what to do every step. 'Can do' beliefs are promoted by tasks that are stretching but achievable rather than easy work or work that is too difficult. This principle of "optimal challenge" is hard to achieve in mixed ability classrooms; it requires assessing pupils' understanding frequently and in different ways.

Pupils become engaged when they get involved in their own creative sense - making, when pushed to understand by being required to wrestle with new concepts, explain their reasoning or defend their conclusions. Many teachers believe pupils can't process high-level concepts, such as algebra, until they've mastered computational skills. So pupils with poor basic skills are likely to receive drill rather than more challenging, open-ended problem solving. But research shows that even pupils with relatively poor skills can handle instruction that allows them to engage in deep analysis and there is evidence that algebraic and other concepts can be introduced at many levels. Scheduling some courses in long blocks can allow deeper and more sustained engagement and more individualised pacing.

The review compares "bureaucratic" with 'communal' schools. Communally organised schools have a pervasive ethos of caring that permeates relationships. Bureaucratic schools rely more on rules and procedures. In communal schools, staff feel responsible for pupils' total development, not just for teaching. They share responsibility for pupils' academic progress and sacrifice their own professional autonomy in their coordinated efforts between classrooms.

Communal schools are moving beyond traditional discipline to developing pro-social values and a sense of community, asking pupils to contribute ideas for resolving problems. These schools also provide "academic press" by paying attention to pupils' work, providing help when needed, giving constructive feedback, holding pupils accountable and not giving up on them. Pupils respond best when this press is accompanied by high communality; they need both.

The review concludes that schools will achieve higher levels of engagement through greater community involvement. For example Services Learning programmes place pupils in community organisations and let them see that their learning is useful to others. Applying learning in hospitals and construction sites also builds confidence, social competencies and a sense of responsibility. These programmes are most effective when they offer close adult- pupil relationships, are linked to the curriculum and let pupils develop their own ideas. Creating schools with occupational themes is another promising strategy if it covers a variety of types of learning and integrates academic content with occupational applications. These reforms work because they replace the disconnected curriculum with more coherent programmes that allow pupils choice and a chance to see how subjects are interrelated and linked to the outside world. Efforts to improve schools are usually too "school-centred" and fail to take advantage of community resources. It is better to think of the school as the hub of a range of coordinated learning spaces, rather than an independent organisation.

These recommendations involve big changes in how schools see themselves. Tokenistic dabbling with isolated aspects of how schools work isn't enough. The review concludes that we need to put all the pieces together, including pedagogy, school organisation, ethos and connections to the outside world to create a set of reforms that will reinforce each other.

