



# ELEVATING AUTHENTIC, ONGOING STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

## A Short Overview

### PURPOSE

The purpose of this overview is to explore how student engagement can range from  **cursory or perfunctory involvement to full empowerment**, with considerations for deepening Authentic Student Engagement.

### WHAT IS AUTHENTIC STUDENT ENGAGEMENT?

Authentic student engagement is the on-going, collaborative and meaningful involvement of students in their learning process, decision-making, and school experiences which impacts the learning environment. It goes beyond participation in activities or compliance with academic tasks. True engagement empowers students to have a voice in shaping their educational journey and creates an environment where they feel valued, and connected to their school community. This begins with adults and folks in positions of power genuinely seeking to know who students are, as well as seeking to listen deeply and understand their perspectives.

### WHY STUDENT ENGAGEMENT MATTERS

Research<sup>1</sup> consistently demonstrates that high levels of student engagement are linked to better academic performance, improved social-emotional skills, and lower dropout rates.

When students are genuinely engaged, they are more likely to:

- Achieve higher grades
- Attend school more regularly
- Develop stronger social skills and emotional resilience
- Demonstrate safer, more positive behaviors and decision-making patterns.

Research<sup>2</sup> also indicates that higher levels of student engagement are connected to higher levels of educator well-being. When students are actively engaged, teachers tend to feel more effective and motivated. Studies have found that teachers who perceive their students as engaged report higher job satisfaction and emotional well-being.

### THE IMPORTANCE OF ELEVATING THE VOICES OF FOCAL STUDENT GROUPS

Creating an inclusive and equitable school environment requires intentionally elevating the perspectives of students who identify as belonging to focal student groups, including those from racial, cultural, and socio-economic backgrounds that have faced systemic marginalization. These students offer valuable insights and experiences that can help shape a learning environment where everyone feels seen and valued. Prioritizing the voices of students who belong to focal student populations boosts engagement and also creates a more inclusive, responsive, and effective learning environment for all students.

1 Wong, Z.Y., et al. "Student engagement and its association with academic achievement and subjective well-being: A systematic review and meta-analysis." *Journal of Educational Psychology*, vol. 116, no. 1, 2024, pp. 48–75. APA PsychNet, <https://psycnet.apa.org/doiLanding?doi=10.1037%2Fedu0000833>. Accessed 11 December 2024.

2 Gottfried, Michael, et al. "Do Teachers With Absent Students Feel Less Job Satisfaction?" *Educational Researcher OnlineFirst*, SAGE Publications, 11 November 2024, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/epub/10.3102/0013189X241292331>. Accessed 11 December 2024.

By amplifying the voices of focal students, schools can:

- Strengthen engagement by fostering a sense of belonging
- Identify and address hidden barriers to success
- Ensure that instruction is culturally relevant and responsive
- Promote greater equity by making school practices more inclusive
- Enhance overall school climate and build stronger relationships

## DIMENSIONS OF STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

The following three dimensions of engagement work together to create a comprehensive and authentic student experience, ensuring that students are not just physically present but fully invested in their learning and school community.

1. **BEHAVIORAL ENGAGEMENT:** Behavioral engagement is about how students show up and take part in school activities. It means being involved in class, doing assignments, and joining in on extracurriculars like sports or clubs. When students are behaviorally engaged, they're actively participating and contributing to their school community, not just going through the motions.
2. **SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL ENGAGEMENT:** "A focus on Transformative Social-Emotional Learning (TSEL) enables students and adults to be affirmed in their identities, where they can develop a sense of agency and belonging, engage in collaborative problem-solving, and deepen their curiosity about the kind of society they want to make a reality."<sup>3</sup> Social-emotional engagement is about how connected students feel to their school and the people in it. This sense of connection helps create a positive, inclusive environment where students feel safe, valued, and recognized for their unique cultures, which fosters a deeper sense of belonging and strengthens overall engagement.
3. **COGNITIVE ENGAGEMENT:** Cognitive engagement is about how much students mentally invest in their learning. It's when they're curious, asking questions, and really thinking about what they're learning, not just memorizing facts. Students are more likely to stay focused, enjoy learning, and work through challenges when they find the material interesting and relevant to their lives. This type of engagement helps them stay motivated and eager to learn more.

## KEY STRATEGIES FOR PROMOTING AUTHENTIC ENGAGEMENT

- **STUDENT VOICE IN DECISION-MAKING:** Involve student voice and values—specifically and intentionally those from focal student groups—in shaping policies, designing learning experiences, and participating in governance processes. Empowering students to contribute to decisions that affect their lives fosters ownership and accountability. Elevating student voice should be an integral, continuous part of school culture, not a one-time effort.
- **STUDENT-CENTERED LEARNING:** Create learning environments where students have choice, agency, and opportunities to pursue their interests. Integrate students' diverse identities and backgrounds into the curriculum through culturally-responsive pedagogy and practices. Project-based learning, collaborative activities, and real-world applications make learning more relevant and engaging.
- **BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS:** Strong, trusting relationships between students and educators are at the heart of authentic engagement. Build safe spaces where students feel comfortable sharing their experiences and ideas with the confidence that those perspectives are prioritized.
- **CONNECT ENGAGEMENT TO ACADEMIC SUCCESS:** Recognize that when students feel heard and connected, they are more likely to perform better academically, attend school regularly, and develop crucial social-emotional skills. Enhancing student engagement contributes to a better educational experience and better educational outcomes.

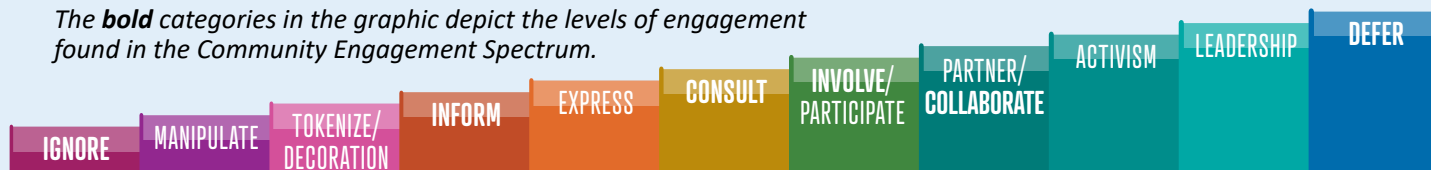
## LEVELS OF STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

Building upon the Community Engagement Spectrum outlined in the [Aligning for Student Success: Integrated Guidance 2025-27](#), this graphic represents a spectrum of student engagement, illustrating different levels of how students can be involved in decision-making processes, ranging from **no engagement** to full **youth leadership**. It shows the varying degrees of student voice, agency, and power in educational and institutional settings.

3 [https://www.oregon.gov/ode/educator-resources/standards/SEL/Documents/ODE\\_Oregon%27s%20Transformative%20SEL%20Framework%20%20Standards\\_FINAL%20\(2\).pdf](https://www.oregon.gov/ode/educator-resources/standards/SEL/Documents/ODE_Oregon%27s%20Transformative%20SEL%20Framework%20%20Standards_FINAL%20(2).pdf)

## STUDENT ENGAGEMENT SPECTRUM

The **bold** categories in the graphic depict the levels of engagement found in the Community Engagement Spectrum.



- **IGNORE** (bottom): No engagement. The student's voice is completely disregarded, with no consideration of how decisions impact them.
- **MANIPULATE**: Adults use students in a superficial way to support adult-driven projects, making it appear as though students were the inspiration or drivers behind them, even when they were not.
- **TOKENIZE/DECORATION**: Students are given limited roles where they simply support or implement projects planned by adults, but their involvement lacks meaningful input or decision-making power.
- **INFORM**: Students are informed about what tasks they need to complete and why. There is no opportunity for them to give input or influence the decisions being made.
- **EXPRESS**: Students volunteer their opinions, and while their contributions are acknowledged by adults, the decisions remain in adult hands.
- **CONSULT**: Students are consulted on decisions, with adults seeking their input. However, the final decision-making still lies with the adults.
- **INVOLVE/PARTICIPATE**: Students participate alongside decision-makers, having a say and being involved in discussions, but still under adult guidance.
- **PARTNER/COLLABORATE**: Students share joint decision-making power with adults in an institutionalized process, contributing equally to decisions.

- **ACTIVISM**: Students take the initiative in identifying problems and advocating for change. Their involvement is driven by their own experiences and perspectives.
- **LEADERSHIP**: Students co-plan, co-execute, and share responsibility for outcomes, working collaboratively with adults to achieve shared goals.
- **DEFER** (top): Students are fully in control, leading and deciding without direction from adults. This represents the highest level of student empowerment, where they have full agency over decisions.

This further-detailed spectrum adds more specificity to levels of student engagement and illustrates how student engagement can range from **superficial involvement** to **full empowerment**, emphasizing the importance of moving towards higher levels of student voice and leadership to foster meaningful, authentic engagement in educational settings.

### CONCLUSION

Authentic student engagement is essential for fostering equity, inclusion, and academic success in schools. By centering students in their own learning, embracing culturally responsive practices, and creating environments where every student feels valued and heard, educators can promote deeper engagement and lasting positive outcomes. Authentic engagement is not a one-time strategy but an ongoing commitment to creating meaningful, student-centered learning experiences.

**Endnote:** This expanded spectrum was informed by the following resources:

- [Integrated Guidance: Community Engagement Toolkit](#)
- [Healthy Transitions Oregon: Youth and Young Adult Engagement Toolkit](#)
- [With Learners, Not For Learners: A Toolkit for Elevating Learner Voice in CTE](#)
- [Oregon Transformative SEL Framework](#)



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