RADICALLY REIMAGINED RELATIONSHIPS: THE FOUNDATION OF ENGAGEMENT

Center for
**Inspired
Teaching**

The Astra Center for
Innovative Education

On the cover: L - Stacy Joslin, a teacher at Blackstone Academy Charter School in Pawtucket, RI, with one of her senior Advisory students at Purgatory Chasm in Sutton, MA. R - Codman Academy Charter Public School in Dorchester, MA, is the only high school in the U.S. located within a community health center. Here, students from the K-8 campus across the street spend time with health center staff.
Photos courtesy of Blackstone Academy Charter School and Codman Academy Charter Public School

This is the digest version of the report. If you are interested in reading the full report,
we invite you to access it at
astra.education
inspiredteaching.org

A student performs at the Inspired Teaching Demonstration School's Learning Showcase in Washington, DC. Open to the community, the Learning Showcase celebrates student work at the end of each trimester.

INTRODUCTION: WHY ENGAGEMENT?

Credit: Inspired Teaching Demonstration School

Think about a moment when you were so deeply absorbed in something that you lost track of time. What was it, and where were you? What created that sense of absorption--was it a new topic that fascinated you? A breakthrough in mastering something that had really challenged you? A conversation with another person that generated exciting new ideas or collaboration?

Did your moment of deep engagement happen in a classroom or a school? For too many of us, including today's students, the answer is no. One measure of this is regular Gallup polling, which reveals that less than half of US students feel actively engaged at school. Gallup Senior Editor Jennifer Robison writes with some concern that "actively disengaged students are nine times more likely to say they get poor grades at school, twice as likely to say they missed a lot of school last year, and 7.2 times more likely to feel discouraged about the future than are engaged students. Disengaged students are the least likely to say they get to do what they do best every day, feel safe, have a best friend at school, or that their teachers make them feel their schoolwork is important."(1)

The impact on individual students, particularly those who are experiencing economic hardship or other challenges, is often life-altering. Research tells us that the mental and emotional consequences of disengagement include boredom, hopelessness, frustration, and depression, often made manifest in behavior issues, truancy, academic failure, and dropping out.(2) These consequences are particularly dire

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(1) Robison, J. (2018, August 9). Academic ranking may motivate some students, alienate others. [Blog post]. Gallup.com. Retrieved from https://www.gallup.com/education/239168/academic-ranking-may-motivate-students-alienate-others.aspx.
(2) Balfanz, R., Herzog, L., & Mac Iver, D. J. (2007). Preventing student disengagement and keeping students on the graduation path in urban middle-grades schools: Early identification and effective interventions. Educational Psychologist, 42(4), 223-235.

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for students who lack the family and community safety nets that help them persist and complete their education.

The good news is that, as a nation, there are many positive signs that we're moving in the right direction and acknowledging the real importance of engagement. Over the past few decades, many organizations and initiatives including the Coalition of Essential Schools, the school systems within the Deeper Learning Network, the Buck Institute for Education, the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, Education Reimagined, and the Aspen Institute have in various ways moved to envision and implement more engaging forms of teaching and learning.

Our own two organizations have been part of this movement as well. Founded in 1995, Center for Inspired Teaching defines an excellent education as students excelling in the 4 I's: Intellect, Inquiry, Imagination, and Integrity. To achieve these outcomes, Inspired Teaching believes teaching and learning in schools should be built around five core elements: Mutual Respect; Student as Expert; Purpose, Persistence, and Action; Joy; and Wide-Ranging Evidence of Student Learning. Through Inspired Teaching's teacher preparation and professional learning programs, we help teachers embed these elements across content areas, grade levels, and hand-in-glove with rigorous standards.

The Astra Center for Innovative Education, a program of the Astra Foundation, is committed to promoting engagement-based and student-centered education and educational reforms so that all students get what is rightfully theirs: an education that prepares them to be thoughtful, joyful, critical thinkers and citizens in a complex world. We believe that all students have strengths to develop and passions to pursue, and that in order to help students thrive, we must know them well.

ABOUT THIS PROJECT

When our two organizations began our collaboration in 2018, we wanted to build on our existing commitment to engagement-based education, connect with other organizations doing similar work, and understand what lies at the heart of this movement to change teaching and learning. We wanted to know:

- What are the hallmarks of engagement-based education? What elements unite the different initiatives and approaches that are present today?
- Are there conditions that must be in place before a school can become an engagement-based learning community? Can anybody do this, or does it require a special set of circumstances?
- What are the challenges and rewards for the adults and youth involved?

We began a yearlong project that involved surveys, interviews with 28 schools, and school site visits in six states plus the District of Columbia. Of the 12 schools we visited, five are public, six are public charters, and one is a private independent school. Five schools were majority-minority and four schools had student populations in which over 50% of students qualify for free and reduced-priced meals (FARMS).

Readers with a deeper interest in the demographics of each school, as well as our interview and site visit protocols, can find that information in the Acknowledgments and "More About Our Methods" appendix at the end of the full report.

Our journey confirmed much of what we already believed about engagement-based education, but it has deepened our understanding in two important ways. First, we've been able to distill a set of commitments that we believe are the definitive hallmarks of engagement-based education: in schools that have embraced engagement-based education, these commitments drive everything they do. We describe each of these below and share examples of how schools are living out each of these commitments in the full report.

The second and more important learning is about the central and critical importance of radically reimagined relationships. In the most transformative schools we visited, we witnessed **a profoundly different and meaningful relationship among teachers, students, administrators, and families characterized by mutual respect, reciprocity, trust, and autonomy.** In these schools, great care is taken to cultivate and sustain strong relationships among all members of the school community, with an intentionality that influences everything from daily schedules to curriculum to how success is measured, and by whom.

All the other commitments depend upon and are strengthened by these reimagined relationships at the center. Our journey has convinced us that a school can have all of the other commitments in place-- authentic learning experiences, holistic and meaningful outcomes, and more--but if it hasn't made the core commitment to relationships, it can't truly engage its students, staff, families, and community.
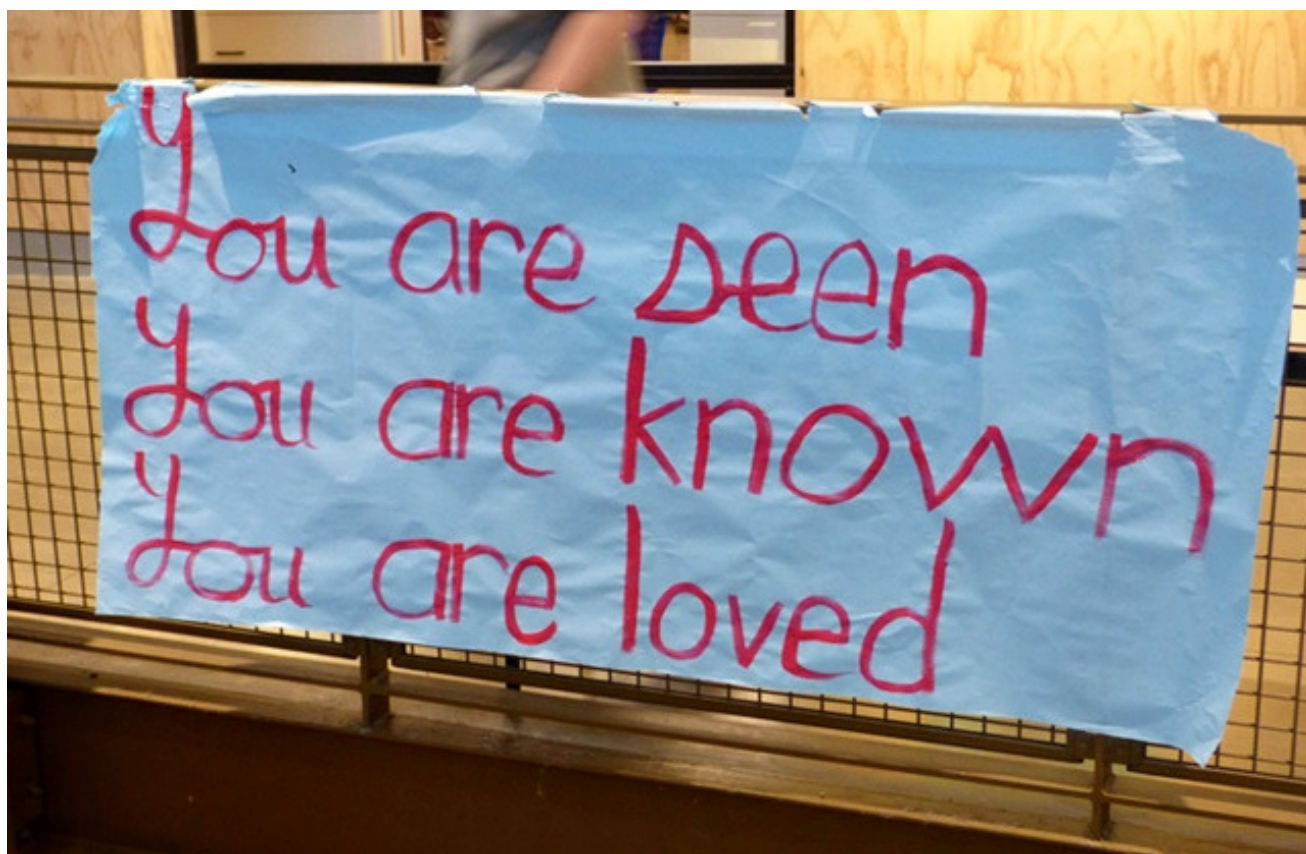

Second grade teacher Kate Kelliher reads with a student at Grace Episcopal Day School in Kensington, MD.

Credit: Grace Episcopal Day School

ENGAGEMENT-BASED EDUCATION: SCHOOL COMMITMENTS

SAFETY FOR RISK TAKING

- Learning from mistakes
- Honoring persistence
- Bravery is possible, cultivated, and celebrated

RADICALLY REIMAGINED RELATIONSHIPS

- Humility and curiosity
- Deeply knowing individuals
- Shared decision making
- Shared accountability
- Trust, autonomy, and agency

EQUITY

- Opportunity
- Inclusivity
- Individual fit

AUTHENTIC LEARNING EXPERIENCES

- Student-driven
- Teacher as facilitator
- Real-world relevance
- Crafted, not scripted

HOLISTIC AND MEANINGFUL OUTCOMES

- Ability to thrive in the present and the future
- Outcomes for students, staff, families, community
- Multi-dimensional, whole-person
- Individual, not standardized

A student-created sign hanging in the hallway at the Tacoma Science and Math Institute (SaMI) in Tacoma, WA.
Credit: NAEBE

CORE COMMITMENT: RADICALLY REIMAGINED RELATIONSHIPS

Many groups talk about the importance of relationships in teaching and learning, but too often limit that consideration to the relationship between teacher and student; for example, greeting each student individually by name at the start of the day, or knowing something about a student's hobbies so that the teacher can create projects or learning extensions that feel relevant and appealing. In other cases, organizations have focused on teacher leadership models and teacher collaboration as ways to modernize the adult relationships within a school building.

We mean something beyond adding a few tools to a teacher's or administrator's toolbox. What we experienced in our journey is something much more significant: a way of being that permeates all the relationships in the school and encompasses administrators, teachers, other staff members, students, and their families. Cultivating strong teacher-student and teacher-leader relationships is important and

will yield some benefits, but not nearly as much as if all relationships are reimagined. David Bromley, executive director of Big Picture Philadelphia, put it this way: "We are a relationship-based school. Everything we do supports the development of really authentic relationships. That means students connecting with each other, with advisors, staff members, staff members connecting with each other, with leadership, and how they all connect with the world, with their community."

In the schools we talked with and visited, we observed that the building blocks of these radically reimagined relationships are:

1. **Humility and curiosity:** In the schools we visited, radically reimagined relationships grow out of genuine humility, a belief that each of us--adults and students alike--has something valuable to contribute to the school community, and a curiosity to learn what those unique contributions might be.

2. **Deeply knowing all members of the community:** The most engaging schools we visited take the time to know each member of the school community in order to understand what each child needs and how other community members can use their talents and experiences to support that child. This takes time, effort, and skill. In schools that are doing this well, we found an intentional and explicit focus on this, even when it might take away from traditional instructional time.

3. **Shared decision making:** If we begin from a place of humility and curiosity and acknowledge that each member of the school community is a valuable contributor and has things to teach us, then it follows that schools should embrace distributed leadership and shared decision making. Deeply knowing each member of the community will help us identify the expertise she can contribute towards the greater good, and we'll want to have structures in place that encourage her to do so. We saw that students shared power with adults in developmentally-appropriate ways in many areas including teacher hiring and evaluations, curriculum and course design, school budget and policy development, and conflict resolution.

4. **Shared accountability:** At the schools we visited, the corollary to shared decision making is shared responsibility and accountability: If I helped build it, I'm invested, and now I want to make sure it thrives.

5. **Trust, autonomy, and agency:** The most engaging schools we visited operated with shared decision making and shared accountability, but also with a considerable degree of trust, autonomy, and agency within that shared structure. Teachers are able to design highly relevant learning experiences and choose the right resources to support individual students. Because there is trust, autonomy, and agency, school leaders trust teachers to exercise their professional judgment, take risks, and experiment to achieve the best possible student outcomes.

Robotics teacher Cyndy Hagin works with a student at Vancouver iTech Preparatory School in Vancouver, WA.

Credit: Vancouver iTech

COMMITMENTS GROWING OUT OF RADICALLY REIMAGINED RELATIONSHIPS
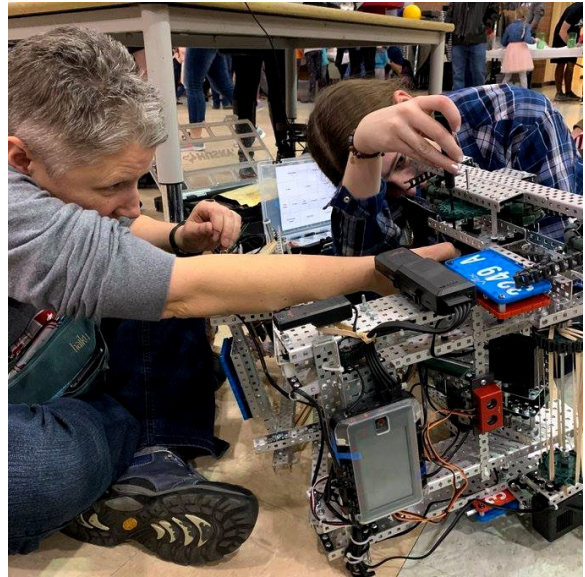
Safety for Risk Taking

We argue that safety for risk taking grows out of radically reimagined relationships because those relationships provide a safety net. If all members of the community are known and valued, then none is expendable; we can embrace productive struggle, but reject the idea that anyone should be defined by or limited because of their failures alone. One student at Vancouver iTech in Tacoma, WA, described it this way: "Everyone here knows each other. That means no one falls through the mesh, and the mesh is held up by the teachers." Relationships are also key because they allow us to scaffold risk taking: that is, if we deeply know each member of the community, we know how and when to push her based on her strengths, needs, and zone of comfort. The other way we saw schools create safety was to normalize risk taking and failure. At these schools, failures and struggles are expected, publicly acknowledged, and framed as an essential part of an authentic learning process.

We'd be remiss not to acknowledge the very real constraints that many schools face around risk taking, experimentation, and accountability. School-, district-, and state-level accountability systems may be more nuanced and comprehensive under the federal Every Student Succeeds Act than they were under No Child Left Behind, but most still significantly emphasize student performance on standardized tests and may have a chilling effect on the necessity and acceptability of risk taking and occasional failure. The school leaders we spoke to had a range of responses to this, which we describe in more detail in the full report. Inspired by what we saw during our school visits, we'd encourage readers of this report to normalize risk taking and failure to the fullest extent possible in your particular circumstance, and advocate for changes in policy at all levels that will catalyze more experimentation and risk taking.

Authentic Learning Experiences

Many other organizations have already done a lot of great work to describe the nature of authentic learning experiences. Their work has called attention to the following elements of authentic learning: Inquiry, hands-on experiential learning, project- and problem-based learning, real-world community connections, and student voice and choice.

We argue that the most powerful authentic learning grows out of the kind of radically reimagined relationships described above. Deborah Williams, head of school at the Inspired Teaching Demonstration School in Washington, DC, says, "It's the responsibility of the adult to help construct learning experiences that build a way for kids to investigate and create… The curriculum shifts over time because it has to be what kids are interested in."

In Portland, OR, Opal School's director of professional learning Matt Karlsen shares, "We're trying to present an ecosystem for learning that allows everybody who comes here--children, educators, parents, visitors--to build on what they already know towards something they didn't even know they are interested in." He adds, "We are helping children know that their ideas are a gift to the world that the world needs. People will feel more connected to any community that they are contributing to. Because these children see their ideas being seriously considered by people outside their community, they become engaged with seriously considering others' ideas as well."

10th graders at Blackstone Academy Charter School in Pawtucket, RI, use the federal court house in Providence to conduct a mock trial. Judges working at the court house volunteered to preside over the trial.

Credit: Blackstone Academy

Holistic and Meaningful Outcomes

As schools and other education organizations have embraced and promoted authentic learning experiences, there's been a parallel movement to develop more authentic assessments of student achievement and teacher performance. In our experience, the best of these employ backwards design and ask the question, "What knowledge, skills, and dispositions will students need in their adult lives, and how successful are we in helping students develop those?"

At the same time as they attend to students' ability to thrive in the future, the most engaging schools are mindful that we also want students to thrive in the present. These schools understand that students are not clay that becomes fully human only at age 21, but see students as humans with needs, abilities, and potential that is manifest today. They ask, "Are students getting what they need in the moment and for their futures?"

Additionally, we found that these schools have a more holistic definition of success and thus are asking whether staff members, parents, and other members of the school community are getting their needs met as well. These holistic measures of success take on particular urgency in light of teacher strikes around the country, a crisis in teacher retention, and the majority of Americans' belief that schools in some communities offer fewer opportunities and have lower expectations.

Radically reimagined relationships are important here, because if we are operating with humility and curiosity, we'll acknowledge that we are always learning--from all members of the school community--and improving. If each member of the community is valued, then their engagement with us and their success matters.

What's more, deeply knowing each member of the school community means that we clearly see their unique set of talents, needs, and abilities, and we measure growth accordingly. We can move beyond standardized and one-dimensional views of talent and potential.

In summary, we've learned that engagement-based schools that have committed to radically reimagined relationships are measuring success along several dimensions: How well is the school meeting its mission? How well is the school equipping students to thrive, both today and in the future? And how well is the school recognizing the needs of each individual within the school community, including staff and family members, and working to the best of its ability to see that these needs are met?

Students from Bronx Community Charter School create socially-themed stencil art in Norwood, a working-class neighborhood in The Bronx, NY.

Credit: Devin Dae Tucker / Norwood News

Equity

Equity is a term that's often defined by different people in different ways, so we want to begin by being clear about our own understanding of equity. Based upon our conversations and school visits, we see equity as an asset-based commitment that includes Opportunity, Inclusivity, and Individual Fit.

With regard to Opportunity, our own organizations have always understood engagement-based education to be a social justice issue, and one that transcends politics. : We believe that all students, regardless of zip code and other factors, deserve to find challenge, joy, and purpose in the work they are doing.

Research suggests that low- and middle-income students may be getting the opposite. One recent study of preschool programs shows that those schools serving low- and middle-income students and students of color feature less unstructured play, less care for students' emotional, cognitive, and other needs, and less use of open-ended questions to stimulate higher order thinking.(3) Across grade levels, a number of studies show that teachers are less likely to have asset-based attitudes towards and strong relationships with students of color and low- and middle-income students.(4) Additionally, we've seen the proliferation of no-excuses, zero-tolerance schools and practices for urban students, driven by a belief that these practices are somehow necessary to 'get through' to students with certain demographic profiles.(5)

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(3)Valentino, R. (2018). Will public pre-K really close achievement gaps? Gaps in prekindergarten quality between students and across states. *American Educational Research Journal, 55*(1), 79-116.

(4)Muller, C. (2001). The role of caring in the teacher-student relationship for at-risk students. *Sociological Inquiry, 71*(2), 241-255.

(5)Zirkel, S., Bailey, F., Bathey, S., Hawley, R., Lewis, U., Long, D., Pollack, T., Roberts, Z., Stroud, R.S., & Winful, A. (2011). 'Isn't that what "those kids" need?' Urban schools and the master narrative of the 'tough, urban principal.' *Race Ethnicity and Education, 14* (2), 137-158.

During our journey, we were struck by the significant and explicit social justice orientation at many of the schools we visited. Jeannine King of the Bronx Community School says, "We are rooted in progressive pedagogy. And we are rooted in that pedagogy for families that are underrepresented in that world--bringing independent and private school experiences to kids who would never be able to afford them. Kids are having profound and rich experiences. Also, every adult in the building is invested in the work and helping families navigate through the system and beyond."

Inclusivity means that all students and their families feel welcome and valued at school, and that diverse viewpoints among members of the school community are respected and thoughtfully considered.

With regard to Individual Fit, if we believe that the goal of education is to help each student thrive, now and in the future, and if we accept that each student comes equipped with a unique set of needs, interests, and abilities, then we'll need to chart different paths towards 'success' for different students and provision ourselves accordingly. The alternative is the familiar refrain that "school works for some kids, but not for others."

A student from Harvest Collegiate High School in New York City tells hundreds of students from other NY schools about her cousin, a student at Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, FL, at the time of the February 2018 school shooting there.

Credit: Harvest Collegiate High School

CONTEXT MATTERS: PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE

When we take the time to build relationships and really know each member of the school community, we quickly realize that individuals, groups, and perhaps even the entire student population (for example, in schools explicitly designed for students affected by trauma) need particular things. This means that the manifestation of the commitments described above--the particular strategies supporting each, and the extent to which they can be fully implemented on any given day with any given student or group--will differ from one school to another.

Kate Burch, principal and co-founder of Harvest Collegiate in New York, observes, "Excellent schools can't be excellent at everything." We found this to be true in our conversations and school visits; depending on a wide variety of factors, including the needs of the student population, the school's organizational affiliations, the school's governance and oversight, and how long the school has been in existence, we saw that each school excelled in certain aspects and that all schools were at different points in their journey to fully realize each of the commitments described above.

BIG QUESTIONS & NEXT STEPS

During our journey last year, we learned a lot--and of course, we're still learning. Our experiences have raised a number of questions we want to explore, either through our own investigations or by learning from other organizations doing similar work. Those questions include:

1. What does engagement look like and how are our commitments manifested where "school" takes a very different form--for example, in homeschool or online environments?
2. Are there limits to how this might scale? How does a large school or a whole district do this?
3. What does it take for an existing, conventional school or district to pivot and reinvent itself in this way, versus organizing a brand-new school or system from the ground up for this purpose?
4. What are the primary factors that prevent schools from embracing an engagement-based approach?
5. Are there certain essential outcomes for engagement-based education tied to each of the commitments, and how are these being measured? What new methodologies should be considered?
6. How have teacher preparation and professional learning supported or hindered wide adoption of engagement-based education? What would teacher preparation look like if 'radically reimagined relationships' formed the core of new teachers' coursework and clinical practice? How would professional learning be different if relationship-building played a significant part of teachers' continued development?
7. What mindsets do families bring to this kind of educational experience for their children? How does that affect the relationship between home and school, and families' support for engagement-based education in their communities?

Our two organizations, Center for Inspired Teaching and the Astra Center for Innovative Education, welcome collaboration with other individuals and organizations that are interested in engagement-based education. We want to push our own thinking, explore the questions outlined above, and identify the supports that educators need in order to help them make this shift: what policies, programs, and resources exist, and what needs to be developed?

Many of us on the team are parents, and all of us have been or are currently classroom teachers. We share the hope of every parent who sends their child to school that school will be a place of safety, belonging, intellectual challenge, and joyful discovery. As educators, we've felt the rich sense of accomplishment and excitement when we've created environments and experiences that truly engage and inspire. Like you, we look forward to the day when engagement-based education becomes the rule rather than the exception, and we acknowledge and deeply appreciate the efforts of the educators, students, and families in the schools we visited and others just like them who are leading the way.

Staff members celebrate the tenth anniversary of City Neighbors Foundation, which runs three public charter schools in Baltimore, MD.
Credit: City Neighbors Foundation