



**VOLUME ONE**

# **SECURING LEARNING SUCCESS**

**IMPROVING STUDENT  
OUTCOMES *SERIES***

Series Editor Gavin Grift

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# INTRODUCTION

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This first publication from our *Improving Student Outcomes* series provides stimulus for educators to think about how they might secure learning success for all. More than any other time in education, schools are being asked to address the challenges of ensuring we leave no students behind in their pursuit for success – regardless of their background, previous achievements and dispositions. As we collectively attempt to raise the bar in education, issues that have perhaps always existed become more prevalent and we are learning more about what we can do to address them.

*Securing Learning Success* looks closely at some of the important factors leaders and teachers require to put learning first. This in itself might sound like an obvious statement. Don't all educators put learning first? The answer to this question will obviously vary and remains complex. However, we now know – through the work of researchers, practitioners and personal experience (some of whom we draw from in this publication) – that for a school to genuinely say they put learning first, and can substantiate the claim with consistently increasing results, they commit to four key elements in their approach. These four elements form the basis of this anthology.

## 1. Learning Led Leadership

Leaders who provide high levels of learning for all students and teachers (including themselves) are more likely to succeed. These leaders commit to supporting the evolution and revolution of schools using collaborative teams as the lever to cultural change; they have the courage to disrupt the status quo in order to achieve this mission. They reflect with data, approach change with rationality, act with purpose and model collective responsibility for meeting the learning needs of all students.

## 2. Successful Learning and Teaching

Learners can only be successful when they have teachers who are effective in their practice. To thrive, teachers need high levels of support, not just accountability. Teachers need to be adequately supported to: understand conditions for learning; embrace strategies for engaging the learner; find effective collaborative approaches to curriculum planning and assessment that impact on the incorporation of embedded formative assessment uses.

### 3. Healthy Culture for Learning

Related to building successful learning and teaching environments is the notion of having a healthy culture for learning *with* students, as opposed to teaching *to* students. This includes encouraging self-regulated learning that leads to academic and social success. Healthy cultures also embrace restorative approaches to relationship and classroom management. This asks of educators to ensure their practices build a culture of self-directedness and empowerment, rather than conformity, through punitive approaches. Healthy cultures are collaborative problem solvers – not complainers.

### 4. Highly Engaged Community

School, family and community practices have the power to debilitate or rejuvenate school cultures and the learning inherent within them. For learning excellence to flourish, schools embrace these opportunities and use them as a way of sharing responsibility, immobilising resources, building high levels of support and collectively celebrating success. The highly engaged community ensures the student has all factors that influence their success through a collaborative approach to education.

Sometimes the challenge in seeking resource support in schools is not a shortage of information but knowing which information is most relevant to their school improvement efforts; that is the main purpose for publishing this anthology. Readers have the chance to either read this as a book in its own right or select the areas that meet their own contextual needs. It is equally applicable to teams operating as professional learning communities as it is to individual leaders and teachers committing to developing their professional practice.

*Securing Learning Success* includes chapter extracts from leading international and Australian authors in each of the four elements outlined above. They have been compiled to provide leading research and practical strategies for teams, or individual leaders and teachers, in their pursuit of securing learning success for the students they serve in their communities.

Gavin Grift  
Author and Editor

# COMMITMENT 2:

## Find the courage you need to lead

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*The courage to lead is forged when something personally meaningful is at stake for you and for those in your sphere of influence. The vision must really matter to you ... Courageous leadership action comes from your commitment to your deeply held beliefs about the issue.*

– Timothy D. Kanold (2011, p. 40)

In reference to urban education, Pfeffer (2007) once described improving student achievement as a hill to be climbed:

People have built quite successful careers – describing the hill, measuring the hill, walking around the hill, taking pictures of the hill, and so forth. Sooner or later, somebody needs to actually climb the hill. (p. 137)

In our view, leading a professional learning community (PLC) can also be described as a hill to climb – although given the challenges involved, some may maintain that PLC leadership would be better termed a *mountain* to climb. Indeed, the following are just some of the difficulties that leaders face when it comes to transforming a school into a PLC:

- to release ownership over the collective inquiry to all the members of the learning community and resist the temptation to take control of the process
- to promote mutual responsibility for moving the inquiry process forward and resist the temptation to provide solutions
- to embrace conflict as a way to solve problems while resisting the temptation to advocate personal preferences
- to articulate and model a clear understanding of collaborative inquiry and resist the temptation to revert to quick fixes
- to lead a learning culture and resist the temptation to leave learning-centred leadership to others

Just like climbing a mountain, the notion of transforming a school into a high-performing PLC can seem daunting and overwhelming. Many questions enter our heads: 'Where do I begin? Where is the correct path? How long will it take? What if I fail or get lost?' Like mountain-climbing, the commitment to lead a PLC requires the strong belief that the effort is worth it – that the summit will unveil new vistas, and that we will be rewarded when we reach our ultimate goal.

# RESEARCH AND THEORY

Student engagement has long been recognised as the core of effective schooling. In the book *Engaging Schools*, the National Research Council's Committee on Increasing High School Students' Engagement and Motivation to Learn (2004) explains that "research on motivation and engagement is essential to understanding some of the most fundamental and vexing challenges of school reform" (p. 14).

Despite its obvious importance to teaching and learning, engagement is not an easily defined construct. As Ellen Skinner, Thomas Kindermann, James Connell, and James Wellborn (2009) stated, "There is, of course, no single correct definition of *engagement*" (p. 224). They noted that a variety of constructs seem to overlap in meaning and use – specifically *motivation, engagement, attention, interest, effort, enthusiasm, participation* and *involvement*. Because our audience is the classroom teacher as opposed to researchers and theorists, we do not attempt to reconcile differences among researchers and theorists regarding Skinner and her colleagues' constructs. Rather, our attempt is to articulate an internally consistent perspective on engagement that F–12 classroom teachers can use to plan and execute specific strategies that enhance student engagement. We first examine the four topics that constitute our model of attention and engagement and are typical aspects of any engagement discussion: (1) emotions, (2) interest, (3) perceived importance, and (4) perceptions of efficacy.

## Emotions: How Do I Feel?

With every new situation, feelings affect human behaviour. In a sense, we ask the question "How do I feel?" If our emotions are negative in that moment, we are less likely to engage in new activities or challenging tasks. Skinner et al. (2009) associated the following emotions with engagement:

- Enthusiasm
- Interest
- Enjoyment
- Satisfaction
- Pride
- Vitality
- Zest (p. 227)

In addition, they associated the following emotions with a lack of engagement, or "disaffection" as they referred to it:

- Boredom
- Disinterest
- Frustration
- Anger
- Sadness
- Worry/Anxiety
- Shame
- Self-blame (p. 227)

It is certainly true that the first set of emotions can be considered effects of high engagement – when students are engaged, they tend to experience enthusiasm, enjoyment, and the like. However, teachers can also think of these emotions as affective states that set the stage for engagement – when students feel enthusiastic or zestful, they are more disposed to engage in new behaviours and tasks.

In his review of the research on motivation, Reinhard Pekrun (2009) explained that emotions affect a wide variety of human behaviours, one of which is engagement. Indeed, Gary Ladd, Sarah Herald-Brown and Karen Kochel (2009) identified emotional engagement as one of a number of types of engagement (others include cognitive engagement and behavioural engagement). The classroom certainly influences many aspects of emotional engagement. Here we consider three: (1) students' energy levels, (2) a teacher's positive demeanour, and (3) students' perceptions of acceptance.

### Students' Energy Levels

One primary factor in how students answer the question "How do I feel?" is the level of activity in the classroom (National Research Council, 2004). The activity in a classroom affects students' energy, or what some psychologists refer to as *arousal*. Elizabeth Styles (1997) explained arousal in the following way:

[It] is rather like a limited power supply: if you turn on the rings of a gas cooker, and the central heating boiler fires up, the height of the gas jets in the cooker rings goes down. There is only a limited supply of gas to these two appliances, and the demand from the boiler reduces the amount of fuel available to the cooker. (p. 140)

Styles's characterisation indicates that any classroom task that raises the level of activity in the classroom can help heighten students' energy levels. Maintaining a lively pace can help keep energy high. Edmund Emmer and Mary Claire Gerwels (2006) explain that "the teacher needs to keep the activity moving and avoid interruptions to the activity flow by using good pacing" (p. 423). Pacing is key when transitioning from one activity to another. Poorly orchestrated transitions can waste time and create a lull in classroom activity, making it difficult for students to stay engaged (Arlin, 1979). Efficient transitions that teachers have practised in class allow students to quickly respond to brief signals.

Another classroom factor related to energy level is the amount and type of physical movement that occurs within the classroom. Eric Jensen (2005) cited a number of studies that connect physical activity to enhanced engagement (Dwyer, Blizzard, & Dean, 1996; Dwyer, Sallis, Blizzard, Lazarus, & Dean, 2001). Jensen (2005) explained this connection in terms of oxygen: "Oxygen is essential for brain function, and enhanced blood flow increases the amount of oxygen transported to the brain. Physical activity is a reliable way to increase blood flow, and hence oxygen, to the brain" (p. 62). Jensen (2005) also noted, "Amazingly, the part of the brain that processes movement is the same part of the brain that processes learning" (p. 61).

Supporting Jensen's assertions is the fact that regular physical exercise has been associated with improved cognitive functioning (Colcombe & Kramer, 2003). Physical activity seems to have a particularly beneficial effect on executive functioning. According to Sabine Kubesch et al. (2009),

## FOCUS AND SIMPLICITY

We believe that student frustration, failure and many disability diagnoses are the result of schools going too fast, trying to cover too much. We firmly subscribe to the following belief and set of corresponding practices: teach less, learn more.

We must plan for greater focus in our curricular units. When we favour covering a large number of standards, quality suffers. The need to focus becomes more immediate when we acknowledge that we have not sufficiently prioritised behavioural outcomes, behaviours such as those associated with self-regulation and executive functioning (time management, organisation, self-monitoring, self-concept, use of strategy, metacognition and volition). To those who would categorise some of these skills as more academic than behavioural, we say, “fine”. They still have not been sufficiently prioritised within our teaching and learning scopes and sequences. We must also prioritise, define, model, teach, assess, as well as provide feedback and differentiated supports for other behaviours, such as those associated with social and emotional learning (self-control, coping, self-advocacy, empathy and resiliency). These behavioural skills are also as critical as academics. Students may earn high test scores and marks based on their demonstration of academic skills, but they succeed in university and life due to their display of behavioural skills. Devoting the appropriate time to behaviours will necessitate that we prioritise academic content and skills to an even greater extent.

Further prioritising the content and skills (academic and behavioural) upon which our teaching and learning focuses will allow teachers and students to go deeper, developing the critical thinking and problem solving that will serve students most significantly as adults. School days and school years are unlikely to grow longer in the near future. There are those who argue that today’s high-stakes tests dictate the breadth of our curricula, to which we say: the worst way to prepare students for a test that assesses everything is to try to teach everything. The worst way to prepare students for tests that inappropriately assess shallow levels of understanding is to teach to shallow levels of understanding. We lament that assessments too infrequently match the curriculum that we know we need to embrace and the realities of adult life, but trying to teach everything will all but guarantee that students learn and retain little. Teaching students to think critically and problem solve will enable them to answer questions for which they may not have received direct instruction.

The key to unclogging a crowded content-driven curriculum is to create a clear conception of a few really important ideas and essential questions in order to focus on understanding and integrate 21st-century skills ... teachers have time to “uncover” it by engaging students in analysing issues, applying critical and creative thinking to complex problems working collaboratively on inquiry.

**MCTIGHE AND SEIF, 2009**

A note on our most vulnerable students: it is probable that students experiencing some form of crisis will require more time to master fewer priorities. We should plan and prepare for this reality. It is misguided to expect vulnerable students to master the same quantity of content as less vulnerable students. Quantity is not the goal, however. When, with the best of intentions, we expect vulnerable

students to master the same quantity of content, they fall further and further behind over time. Students with vulnerabilities in behavioural areas will likely require more time and support in this area. So be it. This modification will serve them well as developing humans and will help them master academic content and skills at a greater level than if behaviour needs were not acknowledged and met. Students with vulnerabilities due to deficits in prerequisite skills will need us to build this background knowledge. This modification will both ameliorate gaps in prior skills and equip students to master the prioritised outcomes of a given year level or course, albeit not as many outcomes. These modifications will result in “covering” fewer standards; it’s the right thing to do for our most vulnerable students, and it requires courage and conviction. Depth is more important than breadth; mastery more important than coverage.

Another area in which focus is critical and too infrequently practised is in intervening and remediating for students for whom the need had been identified. The best support is a targeted support. Reteaching the entirety of a preceding unit of instruction, when evidence suggests that a sufficient level of mastery was not attained, is impractical and inefficient. Instead, we must focus on the specific outcomes with which students require assistance, and focus on the causal factors (e.g. the way we taught, gaps in necessary prerequisite skills) of the difficulty. Similarly, when a student reads far below the level at which they ought to read given their year level or age, providing a broad, intensive reading intervention is impractical and inefficient. Reading is a complex set of skills, but a complex set of skills about which we know a great deal. Instead of providing intensive supports in all domains of reading, provide targeted supports in phonological awareness and/or single-syllabic phonics and/or multi-syllabic phonics and/or fluency and/or vocabulary/comprehension based on a fifteen minute reading inventory conducted with the student that reveals and diagnoses an immediate and antecedent need. Always remember that teams within Collaborative Systems of Support do not just identify students who struggle to learn, they search relentlessly to find the causes of why students struggle, and then provide the necessary time and supports needed for them to achieve success in our schools.

Lastly, we must focus the initiatives that we invite or require schools and educators to implement. Initiative fatigue, or in its most severe form, death-by-initiative, is a very real concern in education. Let’s embrace the wisdom of the Pareto Principle (McKeown, 2014) and focus on one or two improvement efforts for which we have evidence of need and for which there is a high likelihood of profound impacts; other areas not directly impacted by the improvement effort will, in our experience and based on the Pareto Principle, similarly improve. For example, students with more well-developed behavioural skills learn more academic skills; students who can comprehend texts more confidently and competently are likely to perform better in the sciences and social sciences; students with more mature behavioural and academic skills will probably be more engaged and less likely to exhibit asocial behavioural skills. Instead of new initiatives, let’s continue to work together, systematically, to improve the significant improvement efforts to which we have, after gathering evidence, researching, collaborating and planning, dedicated ourselves.

Educating students is complex; let’s not over-complicate it. As we will attempt to clearly describe, the tasks associated with organising ourselves on behalf of students, and of organising teaching and learning, are simpler than we have allowed it to be.