Meaningful Student Engagement

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Student engagement in learning and educational change management can look different depending on the role that the student enacts: in their own learning; supporting the learning of another student; teaching adults; advising change management or program improvement processes; working on policy change; or other roles. Student engagement that is meaningful and effective holds at its core the act of listening and then responding.

Infants and toddlers look to their caregivers' faces in order to make meaning, and that exchange of attention is characterized by "serve and return" communication and relationship-building. When young children become students, they need this same type of exchange. As they enter and move through adolescence, they require increasing levels of participation and control in order to build self-direction and autonomy (Knowles).

On a practical level, students know when the engagement process is meaningful. They show up. They exhibit behaviors associated with curiosity and motivation. They can tell us whether (and how much) they enjoy the process. They ask for opportunities, and can ask for changes in the learning or change management process when they need it. They begin to ask for (and demand) opportunities that help them build more relevance and meaning. They learn their rights, and what they should be able to expect. They also learn their responsibilities, and see their own role in making the class (virtual or in-person) a better place to learn.

Schools offer so many opportunities for young people to engage, and for adults to learn. Adults can create the container for meaningful student engagement to happen, in one class period or over a school year or several years. Ultimately, we can share these processes with the students, and let them "take the wheel" of their own learning, as we dive into our own curiosity. When we ask young people what they would like to see, then respond to their ideas, and ideally, give them an opportunity to help create the solution with us, repeating the "youth voice and action" process can build trust.

Young people may need several tries; there are reasons that they might not trust adults or school systems right away. Adults may also need practice; there are reasons adults don't always feel "heard and responded to" either. If we ask young people for ten ways to make school more supportive of their learning, some of their ideas may not be practical, or we may not have the authority to make the change they seek. Sometimes we need to change a law, or somebody's mind. Young people don't need us to say "yes" to their every idea. They need us to respond when we ask for their participation. With real answers, and to offer them a role in the design and delivery of our educational program.

Change happens for individuals, classrooms, families and communities. Meaningful engagement processes designed for any of these levels share common best practices. Some of the most exciting systems change principles support the work of meaningful engagement. When we don't have answers to complex adaptive problems, we can "share the work" with our students. When we don't have the perspective we need, we can create "requisite variety" by including more voices and perspectives. When we see patterns happening among educators or administrators, those patterns will influence student behavior, and the opposite is true. Many times, listening and responding to students can provide the solution to a challenge or opportunity facing the school, or at least give the adults a place to start.