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Engaging Schools: Fostering High School Student's Motivation to Learn

By Committee on Increasing High School's Engagement and Motivation to Learn

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Engaging Schools: Fostering High School Students' Motivation to Learn

Committee on Increasing High School Students' Engagement and Motivation to Learn

On the surface, the recommendations made by the National Research Council in its December 2003 report, Engaging Schools, seem reasonable enough.

The report deals with student motivation and ways that high schools can foster it.

One cannot argue with its goals: to create schools that are engaging, have ongoing, comprehensive assessment, provide knowledgeable teachers, help all students to meet challenging standards, create smaller learning communities, eliminate tracking, provide more counseling services, and establish greater communication between schools and the communities they serve. But the devil is in the details.

Most of the committee's suggestions are not innovations. Rather, they are calls for methods that are currently in use or that have been used for years without notable success. They include teaching in the native language of students who are learning English (bilingual education), using black dialect (Ebonics), offering longer classes (block scheduling), encouraging students to discover mathematical principles through their own explorations (constructivist, otherwise known as fuzzy, math.), linking education to jobs (school-to-work) , learning in groups (cooperative learning), and self-esteem building.

Some of the committee's recommendations contradict one another. For example, the committee recommends both block scheduling (ninety minute classes), which allows students to spend more time per day with each teacher, and looping, which allows students to remain with the same teacher for two or more years. Apparently, the committee failed to consider that classes taught on a block schedule are one semester in length and that looping would keep students with the same teacher, in multiple subjects year after year.

Another contradiction is implicit in the committee's recommendations on teacher training. Education reformers have debated about whether secondary-level teacher training programs should emphasize subject-matter expertise or expertise in pedagogy. The committee's solution is to emphasize both. It urges pre-service teacher preparation programs to provide high school teachers deep content knowledge and a range of

pedagogical strategies suited to adolescent learning styles. It says nothing about how this exhaustive training would be fitted into one program.

Perhaps the two most persistent themes in this report are its calls for standards-driven instruction and the elimination of formal and informal tracking. The committee wants high academic standards, but it is skeptical of the standards movement and it opposes any attempt to group students according to ability or prior knowledge. Teachers are left to resolve the problem.

One of the great challenges of teaching is the question of how to adjust instruction to student abilities while trying to reach a standard within a limited amount of time. Teachers in so called heterogeneous classes frequently have students who read at a lower elementary school level working alongside ones who read at a college level.

The committee makes recommendations--individualize instruction, offer tutoring, and prepare teachers to work with students who have different needs—but all have been known for decades and all are workable only in very small classes.

Teaching students with greatly differing levels of knowledge and skill involves more than merely understanding the individual learners. For example, teaching algebra to students who have not yet mastered factoring requires building a foundation before instruction can begin. While tutoring can be helpful with students whose skills are only a year or two behind, an hour or two a week cannot overcome deficiencies that have cumulated over a period of years. There is a substantive skill gap between long division and quadratic equations.

The committee resolves this and related problems by recommending that teachers do it all—i.e., meet "high but achievable standards". While this goal is noble, its practicality should be questioned. Within a given class, some students would be reading Faulkner's sophisticated *The Sound and the Fury* while others would be struggling with *Charlotte's Web*.

Engaging Schools also recommends that high schools be smaller. It is a recommendation worth considering, but it is at odds with its recommendation that schools increase the variety of their classes. Academically demanding classes, it suggests, should be available for all--along with internships, job shadowing, and school-to-work, etc.

In addition to its curricular suggestions, the report says that schools should become agents of community service. These include medical and social needs, and the coordination of agency contacts. Also, it calls for adding school counselors and for diffusing traditional counseling duties among other school professionals, including teachers. Schools should become one-stop mental health centers.

Apparently, the committee overlooked the oft repeated criticism that schools are failing in their educational mission because they have taken on too many non-educational responsibilities.

Some of the committee's recommendations are worth considering, but most are simply rehashed fads or resuscitations of the progressive view that has dominated American education since the days of John Dewey.

Engaging Schools offers little that is new with respect to student motivation.

The Education Consumers Consultants Network is an alliance of experienced and credentialed educators dedicated to serving the needs of parents, policymakers, and taxpayers for independent and consumer-friendly consulting. For more information, contact J. E. Stone, Ed.D., at (423) 282-6832, or write: professor@education-consumers.com