

## CHAPTER TWO

# Conditions

## High Expectations, Attendance, and Participation Are Necessary for Engagement



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In this chapter, you will learn about . . .

- Condition 1: Communicate high expectations
- Condition 2: An investment in attendance
- Condition 3: Active participation in learning

There are several conditions that are important if students are to engage in meaningful learning experiences. At the most obvious level, if students are not attending classes, it's hard for them to engage. Assuming there are meaningful experiences to be had in the classroom, missing class stalls learning. Of course, just showing up is not enough. Students also need to participate in the various tasks designed by their teachers. There are a number of effective participation techniques that invite students into thinking and learning, as well as techniques that ensure students interact with their peers in meaningful ways. The tasks and experiences that are assigned to students convey the expectations that educators have. The question is whether these experiences are challenging and convey the belief that students can perform at high levels.

Importantly, what we expect of ourselves at the organizational level influences what we expect of our students. The limits that we place on ourselves constrain what we expect from learners (Mehta and Fine 2019). In this chapter, we use the lens of high expectations to address issues of attendance and participation in engagement.

### **CONDITION I: COMMUNICATE HIGH EXPECTATIONS**

Much has been written on the influence of expectations on student learning. At the individual level, the expectations a teacher has for a student impact their performance, for better or worse. Hattie's mega-meta-analysis of teacher expectations, comprising 613 studies, yields an effect size of 0.42, meaning that it holds the potential to accelerate student learning ([visiblelearningmetax.com](http://visiblelearningmetax.com)). An effect size is a statistical tool that demonstrates the power of a given influence. When several individual studies are aggregated, the effect size across the studies allows for generalizations that explain the overall impact.

However, supporting research demonstrates that a teacher's expectations of students can be influenced by biases and by past performance (see Murdock-Perriera and Sedlacek 2018 for a review). What can emerge is a complex stew where the

characteristics of the student become the explanation for why they fail to progress. In doing so, teachers dismiss their influence on students' learning. In dismissing their influence, they turn away from the truth about their own power—that “achievement for *all* is changeable (and not fixed)” (Hattie 2009:35). When attribution for success is focused on student demographics to the exclusion of what a skilled teacher can accomplish, subconscious beliefs about progress take hold. It becomes the luck of the draw. The relative progress of students is viewed as fate rather than opportunity. This undermines the oft-expressed sentiment that “I believe all children can learn.”

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### High-Expectation Teaching

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Do our practices match our words? Researcher Christine Rubie-Davies has dedicated her work to understanding how teacher expectations influence the achievement of students. It comes as no surprise that students whose teachers have lower expectations of them learn less than peers in high-expectation classrooms. Our behaviors telegraph our beliefs. She found that low-expectation teachers

- Use ability grouping for activities
- Rarely provide students with choice
- Ask more closed rather than open-ended questions
- Praise or criticize based on accuracy
- Ask other students for the correct answer when a student is wrong
- Manage behavior reactively

The good news is that high-expectation practices can be taught. Students in one study whose teachers were trained in high-expectation practices increased their math scores

equivalent to three months' worth of gains compared to peers in other classrooms (Rubie-Davies et al. 2015). The secret? Professional learning linked to self-assessment. Teachers watched videos of themselves and scored their own observed practices against what they had learned. The result was that they made changes to their classroom practices that, in turn, elevated their expectations.

### High-Expectation Practices in the Classroom

The ways we organize our classrooms for instruction, partner with students in their learning, and use language to uplift have the cumulative effect of communicating what we expect of our students. These three dimensions of practice distinguish the differences between high- and low-expectation teachers.

- **Nondifferentiation of learning.** High-expectation teachers avoid ability grouping students within the classroom during learning tasks. True to the work of Tomlinson (2014), but too often misinterpreted, is the central principle that all learners engage in complex and challenging tasks. In low-expectation classrooms, the misapplication of differentiation is used as an excuse for assigning low-level, repetitive assignments to some students as a tool for remediation. High-expectation teachers adopt an acceleration mindset for all learners and create a range of experiences that students can choose from. The result of using choice is that students are more likely to complete tasks they have selected.

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- **Warm classroom environment.** The second feature of high-expectation classrooms is the emotional climate of the classroom. This comes from an emphasis on knowing each child well and developing a positive relationship with them. Because these teachers use a proactive approach to potential problematic behaviors, they spend less time reprimanding, repeating directions, and

reteaching procedures. Perhaps most importantly, they ensure that all students have opportunities to learn. High-expectation teachers are emotionally responsive and use respectful and caring language with all their students.

- **Goal setting and feedback.** The third dimension of high-expectation practices is aligned with setting goals with students, monitoring progress with them, and promoting autonomy and decision making. Many of these practices center on the use of formative evaluation as a tool for students to gauge their own progress. In doing so, high-expectation teachers create a space for young people to view their own learning, rather than being wholly dependent on the teacher to tell them when they've learned something. The net effect is that students become intrinsically motivated. Their sense of agency (which is to say, their belief that they can achieve their goals) increases.

## CONDITION 2: AN INVESTMENT IN ATTENDANCE

At the risk of stating the obvious, engagement can't happen if a student isn't there. Even as schools have reopened, districts around the country report unprecedented levels of absenteeism. The reasons are varied, but the picture is complicated by COVID-19 mitigation techniques including quarantining, as well as surges such as those witnessed in January 2022 when many districts reported that daily attendance dipped below 70%. One immediate result was that teachers were faced with an even more challenging landscape as they tried to predict who might be in attendance on a given day and who had missed instruction.

However, these more recent developments magnify an already troubling attendance picture. According to the Civil Rights Data Collection (2019), during the 2015–2016 school year, more than 7 million students representing 16% of the population were chronically absent, defined as missing 15 or more days in a single school year. This varies by grade level and peaks in high school, with 20% of students chronically absent. And

this is not uniformly distributed. Students of color, Indigenous students, and students with disabilities are more likely to be chronically absent. Those numbers represent 100 million days of instruction lost. That's 100 million unrealized opportunities to engage learners.

### Responses to Chronic Absenteeism

Conventional responses to absenteeism have been confined mostly to the individual students and their families and are primarily punitive in nature. Truancy boards are particularly prevalent in districts that report high levels of chronic absenteeism. However, these and other interventions seem to have relatively little impact. A meta-analysis of 22 studies on attendance interventions grouped them into three categories: behavioral interventions, family-school partnerships, and academic interventions (Eklund et al. 2020). They reported that most studies (64%) were behaviorally oriented, with the rest comprised of interventions that involved a family member or teaching the student-specific academic skills. Regardless of the approach, all had only a small positive effect on changing the attendance trajectory of students.

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**Chronic absenteeism is a sign that positive conditions for learning are missing (Chang et al. 2019).**  
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Perhaps something is being overlooked. Chronic absenteeism is a sign that positive conditions for learning are missing (Chang et al. 2019). Rather than relying solely on the individual student as the unit of analysis, we are challenged to view chronic absenteeism through the lens of engagement and high expectations. We invite you to reconsider the markers of high-expectation teachers through the lens of our institutions:

- Nondifferentiation of high expectations for all students
- Warm school environment
- Bidirectional goal setting and feedback to improve school conditions while strengthening students and families

Students vote with their feet. A business that lacks foot traffic must either adapt or disappear. Blaming the customer without examining the business model is a recipe for failure. The extent to which students fail to engage with schooling is feedback to us about the conditions of schooling. We need to add to our toolkit by expanding our view to look closely at individual student factors while also having the courage to examine how we might improve the conditions needed to bring them back.

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### A Coordinated System of Supports for Attendance

There has been promising work on re-engaging students who are chronically absent at a systems level. The Early Warning Intervention (EWI) team consists of a multidisciplinary team of academic and nonacademic personnel (Davis et al. 2019). This system was developed by researchers at Johns Hopkins University and the National High School Center to provide a more coherent means of assisting students who are showing a higher risk of academic failure (Marken et al. 2020). It has since been implemented for middle grades as well and is now being used in 31 states. The indicators fall across three broad categories, called the *ABCs*: attendance, behavior, and course completion (Davis et al. 2019). Each of these is predictive of falling behind and dropping out; the risk increases exponentially when multiple indicators are present:

- **Attendance.** The student is absent (excused or unexcused) for 20% of instructional time.
- **Behavior.** According to locally validated measures, the student has been suspended (in-school or out-of-school) or has received multiple behavioral referrals.
- **Course completion.** The student has failed a mathematics or English course.

The team is led by an adult in the school who serves as a facilitator for team meetings and is a central figure for coordinated communication. In addition, there is a member of the team who can serve as a liaison between home and school. This person might be a full-time parent education coordinator, or the role might be spread among several school members assigned by grade level.

Unlike other models, re-engagement is not the sole responsibility of those one or two people. Rather, every adult in the school is a potential member, depending on the student. These teams meet biweekly to discuss interventions, progress, and barriers across three markers (Davis et al. 2019). Importantly, these provide schools with feedback to them about the levers of schooling, namely high expectations for all, and a warm school climate, using a continuous cycle of improvement fueled by feedback and goal setting for the organization.

### CONDITION 3: ACTIVE PARTICIPATION IN LEARNING

Getting students to school is an important condition that must be present for engagement in learning. Once they are in a learning environment, whether in-person, online, or blended, students need to participate in learning tasks. Of course, those tasks need to be worth their effort, and students who find relevance in their learning are much more likely to participate. We are not suggesting that participation equals engagement, but rather that participating in learning tasks is a condition that can foster engagement. As Chickering and Ehrmann (1996) noted, “learning is not a spectator sport.”

#### Universal Response

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As an example, universal response opportunities provide all students a chance to participate at the same time. This reduces the fear that some students have that their answers will be judged and that they are wrong. Later in this book, we will focus on creating an environment in which struggle is expected and honored, but too many students come to school



afraid to participate because they do not want to be wrong, or they are accustomed to others in the class taking charge and sharing answers first.

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Universal responses are those techniques used by the teacher to allow for simultaneous replies from every member of the group, rather than isolated answers. A goal of universal response is to solicit answers from all the students to check for understanding and obtain a sense of whether the instruction is sticking or not.

The benefits of universal response opportunities are twofold:

- They provide you a chance to get a quick read on student understanding in real time.
- These micro-assessments prompt learners to consider their own knowledge in the moment.

The cognitive dissonance that comes from finding out that the reply was incorrect can open a dialogue as they ask questions and seek clarification. In other words, it shifts learning from a passive to an active endeavor. A meta-analysis of 18 studies on the use of preprinted and write-on response cards showed that they were associated with higher achievement on tests and quizzes, higher levels of participation, and lower levels of disruptive behavior, compared to individual hand raising to answer a question (Randolph 2007).

Examples of universal response abound in face-to-face classrooms. Teachers routinely use response cards and student whiteboards to gain a sense of what each child can do. Another example is when students use hand signals, such as a fist-to-five signaling their agreement about a statement, or a thumbs up–thumbs down response for dichotomous questions, such as yes/no or true/false. We can also use polls and chat features of online programs for universal response.

The key is to invite students to participate in universal response opportunities at least every 10 minutes (and maybe more frequently). In doing so, you can start to build a memory trace because of the multiple opportunities students have to retrieve information from their brains. Parenthetically, this allows you to adjust the lesson based on the responses you receive from students, which can keep the students focused on new learning rather than things that they already know. In doing so, students are much more likely to be engaged.

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Cole (2017) organized active participation techniques into three categories (for a list of their techniques, see the appendix):

1. Active participation through oral responses
2. Active participation through written responses
3. Active participation through action responses

There are so many techniques that educators can use to invite students to participate. The point is that we need to use them. In fact, we probably need to redouble our efforts to invite students to participate, especially through universal response tools.

### Increasing Student-to-Student Interaction

We imagine by now that you are wondering when we are going to utter the word most associated with engagement: *motivation*. How often have you heard a student described as “unmotivated”? Further, their “lack of motivation” is the reason why they aren’t engaged. To us, it is a version of the statement, “I taught them. They just didn’t learn it.” In the motivation version, it’s “I teach lessons. They just aren’t motivated.”

We must be intentional in our efforts to create opportunities to foster motivation. This isn't about the extrinsic rewards of points, grades, and "Fun Friday" but rather ensuring that there are lots of opportunities for student-to-student interaction. In fact, meaningful learning interactions with peers are associated with motivation and school satisfaction. As one example, a study of fourth through sixth graders found that students of color in math classrooms that used cooperative and collaborative learning reported significantly more positive attitudes about the subject (Vaughan 2002).

### **Develop Routines That Convey High Expectations**

We'll return to Rubie-Davies' (2014) work on high-expectation teaching, this time through the lens of student-to-student interactions. Among her findings in this realm are to

- Use mixed-ability groupings and change groupings frequently
- Encourage students to work with a range of their peers
- Give students responsibility for their learning
- Allow all learners to engage in advanced activities
- Establish routines and procedures at the beginning of the school year

This last indicator bridges theory to practice. Identify routines that promote meaningful interaction for all students. In doing so, learners experience more frequent touchpoints of active engagement with peers rather than passive reception of information. These routines, once taught, provide the additional benefit of recouping time that is otherwise consumed by giving instructions while sacrificing peer interactions. Don't fall for the canard that you need to "change it up" all the time to "keep it fresh." Identify a handful of high-utility collaborative routines that you can utilize frequently. While by no means

an exhaustive list, we have developed a range of student-to-student interactions that promote elements of high expectations and increase active participation.

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- **Busy bees.** This routine is useful in primary classrooms. Students mimic the buzzing sound and slow movement of bumblebees as they buzz around the room to find a partner. When the teacher says, "Busy bees, fly!" students move around the room and buzz until they hear, "Busy bees, land!" The "bee" they are standing next to becomes their partner for a brief learning activity such as giving an opinion, answering a question, or solving a math problem.
- **Inside/outside circles.** Two concentric circles of students stand or sit to face one another. The teacher poses a question to the class, and the partners respond briefly to one another. At the signal, the outer circle rotates one position to the left to face a new partner. The conversation continues for several rounds. For each rotation, students may respond to the same prompt or to a different but related one.
- **Collaborative posters.** In groups, students create a poster representing the main ideas of the concept. Students are given a rubric that describes what must be included in the poster. After thinking individually about how to represent their ideas, each student selects one color of pen and uses only that color on the chart. All students must contribute to both writing and drawing on the poster and sign it. Posters are displayed in the room so that students evaluate their own poster and at least one other using the rubric.
- **Explorers and settlers.** Assign half the students to be explorers and the other half to be settlers. Explorers seek

out a settler to discuss a question. Repeat the process one to two times to discuss the same question or a new, related question.

- **Four corners.** Assign each corner of the room a category related to the topic. Tell the students the four categories and ask them to write down which category they are most interested in, along with two to three reasons for their choice. They then form groups by going to the corner of the room labeled with the category they selected. In groups of three to four students, they share their reasons for their selection. This is also another way to form groups to complete an assigned task.
- **Reciprocal teaching.** Students work in groups of four with a common piece of text. Each member has a role: summarizer, questioner, clarifier, and predictor (Palincsar and Brown 1986). These roles closely mirror the kinds of reading comprehension strategies necessary for understanding expository text. The reading is chunked into shorter passages so that the group can stop to discuss periodically.
- **Jigsaw.** Each student in the class has two memberships: a home group and an expert group. Each home group of four members meets to discuss the task and divide the work according to the teacher's directions. After each home group member has their task, they move to expert groups comprised of members with the same task. The expert groups meet to read and discuss their portion of the assignment and practice how they will teach it when they return to their home groups. Students teach their expert portion to home group members and learn about the other sections of the reading. Finally, they return once more to their expert groups to discuss how their topic fits into the larger subject (Aronson 2002).
- **Discussion roundtable.** Students fold a piece of paper into quadrants and record their thinking in the upper left quadrant. This could be from a reading or video. They then take notes in other quadrants as students share their thinking. The final product is then a record of the viewpoints of each member of the group.

- **Text rendering.** Students read a piece of text, focusing on key points. When their group members have finished, each student shares a significant sentence. In the second round, each student shares a significant phrase, which does not need to be within the sentence they chose (and they record these). During the third round, each student shares a word from the reading that resonated with them (and they record these). The group then discusses the ideas generated.
- **Five-word summary.** Students read a piece of text and choose five words that summarize the reading. They then talk with a partner to reach consensus on five words that summarize the reading before joining another partnership. Now the four students reach agreements on the five words that represent the text. From there, they create their own summary of the text, using the five words agreed upon by the group.

Again, these are examples of routines that promote student-to-student interaction and capitalize on motivation and engagement for students. There are many others. But identifying and teaching routines for these interactions makes it more likely that they will be utilized regularly.

## WHAT TEACHERS AND LEADERS CAN DO NOW



Commit to creating the conditions necessary for promoting engagement through high-expectation actions.

1. Inventory your high-expectation practices by recording and viewing a 20-minute segment of your instruction. Look for indicators profiled in this chapter, including grouping arrangements, opportunities for interactions, a warm classroom climate, and goal setting and feedback.

2. Do the same at the school level. Revisit your annual school climate survey and examine it through high expectations. How are students grouped across the school? What do families say about how inviting the school feels to them?
3. Examine your attendance data and identify who your chronically absent students are. What does your attendance data look like? Do you have comprehensive supports for chronically absent students?
4. Meet as departments or grade levels to discuss participation practices and routines. Discuss the role of universal response opportunities in the context of your students. Identify and commit to some high-utility student interaction routines and teach them. Schedule follow-up meetings with colleagues to discuss your observations as they relate to engagement.

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