

In this issue...

A national expert in the field of engaging families in education, Steve Constantino examines how the interaction of family involvement practices and peer relationships affects the engagement of individual high school students in both instructional and cocurricular settings.

The Five Forces for Student Engagement

By Steven M. Constantino, Ed. D.

During the ensuing years after the millennium, I formulated a study of high school students to determine how and why they were engaged with the academic, cocurricular and social aspects of their schooling. As a result of that study, The Five Forces for Student Engagement were created. The five forces model implies that a student's school, meaning their experiences that make up their time associated with school, acts as an overlapping sphere of influence along with the individual student, peers, and family. Outside influences are better described as a macrosystem that encompasses the overlapping spheres. The interaction of the school, family, individual student, and peers within the context of outside influences is the catalyst that created the five forces for student engagement. These resulting forces then determine the degree to which students are engaged with their school (Constantino, 2002, 2003). Figure 1 depicts the model for the five forces for student engagement.

Description of the Study

The purpose of this case study research was to examine how the interaction of family involvement practices and peer relationships affected the engagement of individual high school students at a particular school in both instructional and non-instructional or cocurricular settings. The study involved the collection of data through a case study involving 20 high school students at a high school in northern Virginia, an exurb of Washington, D.C. Data analysis began with the transcription and coding of the first interview and continued throughout the study until the final report was completed. The research resulted in a conceptual model of understanding how the interaction of schools, families, individual students, and their peers acted as a catalyst for five forces for engagement that examine how a high school student is engaged in instructional and non-instructional activities.

A Discussion of the Model

Each of the spheres of influence represented in the model depict a possible conduit to individual student engagement whether acting alone or in tandem with one or more of the other spheres. Each of the circles will be discussed separately as to their relationships to student engagement followed by a discussion of their overlapping properties.

Peers

Students identified their peers as important components of their own school life and engagement. There were those occasions that suggested peers and peer relationships alone defined the engagement practices of individual students. Peers with similar values and interests tended to be described as close

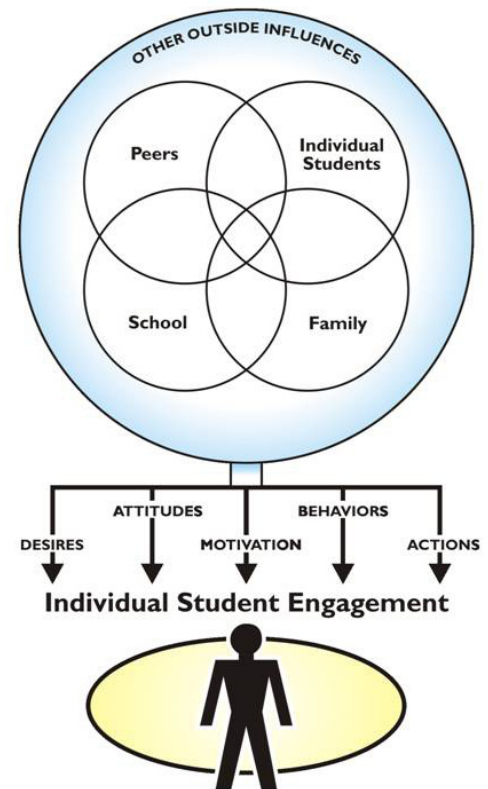


Figure 1. The five forces for student engagement in school as a result of the interaction of schools, families, peers, and individual students

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friends while others were acquaintances, but also important to the individual student. Discussions of future plans and goals often take place between students and their close friends. Homework assistance, class choices, cocurricular involvement and in many cases achievement were all influenced by close friends and acquaintances.

Interacting with friends is almost universally seen as important in the life of a high school student. Whether that interaction takes place in school, in homes, or in other public places, it seems to be a key component of an individual student's interest in instructional and non-instructional activities. There are some students who can be heavily influenced by friends in a very positive or negative, even destructive manner. Families and schools seem to have minimal impact on those students who place great value and emphasis on friendships and listening to friends to make decisions about school. The power of peers and peer relationships can act as a single force in determining the degree to which an individual student is engaged with their own learning and school cocurricular activity.

Individual Students

Individual students themselves, in some cases, can determine their own level of engagement without the influence of schools, families, or peers. Even though these students do not seem isolated from the other spheres of influence their individual determination to either succeed or fail rests with themselves. Some students indicated it was their own inherent desire to do well or participate in school that shaped their engagement. Students in this category interacted with family and friends but displayed enough resiliency and self-efficacy to make conscious decisions about their engagement with school.

Individual students who acted as their own catalysts for engagement tended to have unique circumstances in their lives. Whether it was the death of a parent, drug addiction, the death of a friend, or other life-altering situation, these students showed a general tendency to think, act, and respond more independently rather than rely on family, friends, or school, or the interaction of these entities.

As students grow older and mature through high school they tend to rely less on family, peers, and school and more on their own decision-making processes to determine the outcomes of their school experiences. Seniors often reported that they under-

stood the ramifications of failure or the need to do well in particular courses due to college admissions or other post-high school opportunities. In some cases, older students reported that their decisions were theirs alone even though their close friends and families may have worked to persuade them otherwise. Older students seem more comfortable with their opinions and are not easily swayed by peer groups or adults who may see the situation from a different perspective.

School

Most significant in the data collection and analysis is the emergence of the school as a sphere of influence rather than a component of the macrosystem of outside or other influences that surrounds the overlapping spheres. It became clear that the school plays a more central and prominent role in shaping engagement practices of students. The definition of school is the combination of curricular and cocurricular activities in which students can be involved and engaged.

Students in this study see the role of teachers as a critical aspect of the school's influence upon them. The school environment and efforts to promote a positive culture are noticed and appreciated, but teachers are clearly a driving force within the school sphere as to the individual engagement of students.

Teachers who recognize them for their efforts and assist them with their work, decisions, and socialization in school motivate students. Teachers who are seen as friendly and caring play an important role in determining the degree to which a student will provide the necessary effort to be engaged and successful in a class. Students quickly understand teachers who may not be engaged with their own teaching and thus provide no encouragement for engagement in learning. However, even in those cases where a teacher may not be providing the necessary motivation, it is the notion of the importance of school that seems to provide the motivation to engage and be successful among some students and overrides negative teacher, family, or peer forces.

The school's efforts to promote positive peer relationships and provide avenues for students to participate and garner a sense of belonging do not go unnoticed. Students report a high level of interaction with programs designed to help them acclimate into the school culture and fulfill a basic sense of belonging. Coupled with this are efforts to provide

an inviting and inspiring environment within which students can take ownership and pride. Generally speaking, students reacted favorably to these school practices and in some cases found them to be a strong motivational force in their quest for success.

Family

The involvement of families in the lives of their children remains a strong component to student engagement in school and school-related activities within the sample of students interviewed. Families who are involved and engaged with their child and their child's school can provide their children motivation to do well and achieve to their highest level. Family expectations alone can be a driving force in student engagement.

It was obvious in the case study that the vast majority of students had strong feelings about their family and their family's involvement with school. For example, even though students were not overly enthusiastic about their parents' ability to access grade and attendance information with technology, they welcomed their parents review either to celebrate their successes or to openly discuss problems in school. This interaction between students and their families seemed to be important in determining the engagement level of students. If parents used the information to praise their child or help their child, the interaction was welcome. However, if the information was used to belittle their child, demean their child, or punish their child, the information then became a deterrent to school engagement. Whether viewing this phenomenon positively or negatively one cannot discount the important relationship between children and their parents.

Families who maintained a positive attitude about their child's school helped their child be more engaged and successful. In some cases, students reported that there was a time when their families argued with school personnel and that terse relationship resulted in the student's withdrawal from school and specific classes. Students in the study were cognizant of the school's efforts to promote family involvement and in those cases where students reported no real encouragement for engagement from the school, they did report that the positive relationship between the school and their family helped promote more positive parent-child communication.

Students found that their parents' encouragement and goals for the future assisted them in focusing on

their own school engagement. Parents who shared their dreams, goals, and desires with their children, as well as continuously reaffirming the importance of education, were a prime force in the engagement of many students. Parents who chose to compare their children to other children or who fixated on certain aspects of school provided a clear deterrent to their child's engagement with school.

The Four Spheres of Influence

There are numerous points where peers, individual students, schools, and families overlap their influence that ultimately results in a continuum of student engagement from minimal engagement to significant engagement. What emerged from this study was a phenomenon that occurs as a result of the interaction of families, peers, individual students, and schools. Data that emerged from the study clearly show that student engagement in school is predicated on five forces for engagement, those being desire, attitude, motivation, behaviors, and actions. Schools can promote the engagement of students by encouraging the involvement of families in the educational lives of high school students and by supporting program offerings both of an instructional and non-instructional (cocurricular) nature. Families of students do have influence on their children's relationships with peers and there is significant interaction between students and the families of their peers.

The Forces for Engagement

Distinct themes emerged strongly suggesting that high school student engagement was not a direct result of family and peer interactions, but that those interactions acted as a catalyst for the emergence of forces that when identifiable in the life of a high school student were a measure of the level of student engagement with school. These forces were labeled desire, attitude, motivation, behaviors, and actions.

Definitions of the Forces for Engagement

■ **Desire** as a force for engagement can best be described as the degree to which individual students have an intrinsic wish to be successful in their school life and establish future goals for themselves. Dreams of what the future can hold are also an important component of desire.

■ **Attitude** as a force for engagement describes individual students' feelings and thoughts about their engagement with school and school-related activi-

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ties. Attitude is largely based on their own experiences and those of their friends and families.

■ **Motivation** as a force for engagement describes the extrinsic influences in an individual student's life that help to shape their engagement with school and school-related experiences.

■ **Behaviors** as a force for engagement describes the students' emotional association with school and how they act toward school and the manner in which they participate in school and school-related activities.

■ **Actions** as a force for engagement are students' dealings with school and school-related activities and how those dealings positively or negatively affect their own engagement with school.

In the next issue of *The Advocate*: The Five Forces of Engagement Explored: Desire.



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Author's note: *The research constructs that serve as the basis for these series of articles began as a study of the impacts of family engagement on the achievement of high school students. I wish to acknowledge and thank Mike Smith for his ideas and persuasive powers to expand beyond families to peer groups and influences within the context of school and beyond. The resulting study and findings were very different than my original thinking and design. I appreciate the thoughtful and contextual conversations with Mike and dedicate this series of articles to his selfless work with student success through engagement with school cocurricular activities.*

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