

Quality High Schools

In recent years, there has been considerable research into what makes a quality high school. The research is showing a number of factors that are common to high school quality. First, quality high schools meet the needs of all students, from those heading towards four-year colleges to those who may be in danger of never graduating. They provide students with challenging intellectual work, authentic experiences that will apply in life outside of school, and opportunities for collaboration. (The Gates Foundation dubs this the “New 3 R’s”: rigor, relevance, and relationships.) Quality schools engage students so that they don’t feel simply like they are jumping through hoops. Such personalization is evident when students feel they are well known by staff, and programs of study are organized around student needs and interests rather than subjects or teachers. In these schools, teachers feel a part of a professional community.

High school improvement efforts share some common reform strategies to maximize student engagement:

- The organization is communitarian rather than bureaucratic. Teachers work in teams and have power for decision-making, from discipline to curriculum. Student performance is boosted through increased use of effective pedagogy and increased social support for student learning. Teachers have professional development opportunities.
- The curriculum has interdisciplinary courses, project-based learning, flexible scheduling (more blocks, fewer transitions), mixed-ability classes, advisories led by the same teacher for long periods of time (one or more years), explicit career goal or other mentoring strategies, explicit discussion of relevance of classes—all without sacrificing excellent college-prep classes that serve a minority of the students well.
- More classes are based on discussion and expression. Student voices are encouraged (as opposed to writing towards the test) and there are lots of community-based learning opportunities (shadowing, service learning, work-based learning). There are high expectations combined with high levels of support. Teaching builds in risk-taking, revision, learning from mistakes, and culturally appropriate materials. Student learning is assessed through a variety of means, such as performance and portfolios.
- Activities such as sports, the arts, and volunteering give students an opportunity to develop social skills and “social capital.”
- The business community is involved in mentoring students. There is family involvement in upper grades through active volunteer programs, parent input on empowered committees, and guest teaching.

In order to maximize the five facets of student engagement (above), the facilities must have: flexible spaces for both content delivery and small group discussions; meeting spaces for large group discussions; plenty of labs and other places for hands-on experiences; art and music rooms; gyms and fields for exercise and organized sports; and well-equipped vo-tech spaces. Technology must stay current.