



Engaging
Every
Learner

Classroom Principles, Strategies, and Tools

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Contents

Acknowledgments *ix*

Introduction *xiii*

WHY ENGAGED STUDENT LEARNING IS SO IMPORTANT *xiii*

HOW WE DEVELOP STUDENT ENGAGEMENT *xv*

Chapter 1: Cultivating Engagement Through the Environment *1*

THE PHYSICAL CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT *2*

THE EMOTIONAL CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT *6*

THE COGNITIVE CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT *13*

Chapter 2: Setting the Course to Engage Every Learner *19*

DEVELOPING CLASSROOM ROUTINES *20*

BUILDING COMMUNITY *25*

Chapter 3: Ongoing Assessments That Engage Students *30*

DIAGNOSTIC ENGAGEMENT ASSESSMENTS *32*

ONGOING APPRAISALS: ENGAGEMENT CHECKS *35*

MILESTONE ASSESSMENTS *40*

Chapter 4: Engaging Students Through Meaningful Structures in the Classroom *43*

PARALLEL TEACHING STRUCTURES *44*

WHOLE-CLASS INSTRUCTION *50*

INDEPENDENT PRACTICE *51*

SMALL-GROUP INSTRUCTION *52*

INDIVIDUAL INSTRUCTION *54*

Chapter 5: Choice as a Principle of Engagement *61*

CHOICE APPLIED TO CONTENT *65*

CHOICE APPLIED TO PROCESS *68*

CHOICE APPLIED TO PRODUCT *72*

Chapter 6: Engaging Students Through the World Around Them *78*

ENGAGEMENT THROUGH POPULAR CULTURE *78*

ENGAGEMENT THROUGH COMMUNITY *85*

Appendix: A Blueprint for a Year of Engagement *100*

Bibliography *105*

Introduction

It is independent reading time and I sit down beside Kaitlyn. We are meeting in a quiet corner of her first-grade classroom in Newark, New Jersey. As a staff developer for Kaitlyn’s school, I have been working with Kaitlyn and her peers for the past ten months. Late on a Friday afternoon, we are working together as the other students read independently. Kaitlyn is on her third book.

Glancing over my shoulder, I see that the classroom teacher is transitioning to math. Because it is later in the day, teacher Liz Masi is using a song and one-minute game of freeze dance to transition her students and keep them engaged.

Kaitlyn notices, too, and I say, “Why don’t you go dance for a minute and then we’ll continue reading?”

Kaitlyn, with all the seriousness a six-year-old can muster, replies, “I don’t want to freeze dance, I want to keep reading.”

Kaitlyn is engaged in her work, and that is no small task. Kaitlyn is only six years old: there is no sticker, no toy or prize, not even extra fuzzy pom-pom balls in her good behavior jar as a reward for reading and spending time with me. Sure, she wants to read better and reach new milestones; however, this is not what is driving her. Kaitlyn is in what’s known as *flow*.

Named by psychology professor Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1998), *flow* is the state of optimal focus and immersion in learning. Flow is achieved when students are completely engaged in a task or activity, both cognitively and emotionally.

● WHY ENGAGED STUDENT LEARNING IS SO IMPORTANT

Engagement is the act of being invested in learning. Engaged learners are passionate, hardy, persistent, thoughtful, committed, and connected to their work.

In an article titled “Promoting Student Engagement in the Classroom,” Bundick and colleagues (2014) specify three “highly interrelated but conceptually distinct” dimensions of engagement:

Behavioral engagement refers to the various learning and academic-oriented behaviors, actions, and involvements in which students engage in school. Examples of behavioral engagement include

Behavioral engagement

includes participation, focus, and following school procedures.

Cognitive engagement

is being minds-on in academic tasks and includes willingness to challenge oneself and be reflective.

Emotional engagement

is the “relationship” part of learning and includes interest in learning, connecting with others, and having a strong sense of self.

participation in school-related activities, attending and contributing to classes, compliance with school rules, and completing assignments, as well as effort put into studying and concentrating on academic tasks. [*Pared down: participation, effort, willingness to be a part of a school community*]

Cognitive engagement involves a psychological investment in learning and mastery of academic material; desire for challenge; enacting metacognitive strategies such as planning, monitoring, and evaluating one’s thinking; and self-regulation. [*Pared down: being intent on and active in academic tasks and being willing to challenge oneself and reflect*]

Emotional engagement refers to students’ feelings about their relationships with others in the school environment (e.g., teachers, peers) and the general sense of belonging in the school context that is often derived from such relationships. Additionally, emotional engagement involves students’ sense of connectedness to and interest in the academic content, which can be accompanied by a sense of efficacy and confidence regarding their academic ability. [*Pared down: being active and connected with others in the school community and having a strong sense of self*]

Kaitlyn exhibits all three dimensions—behavioral engagement, through her effort and ability to stay focused on the task; cognitive engagement, through her self-regulation and desire for challenge; and emotional engagement, through her positive feelings toward our work together.

In *Taking Action on Adolescent Literacy*, Irvin, Meltzer, and Dukes (2007) write:

Engagement with learning is essential, because it is engagement that leads to sustained interaction and practice. Coaching, instruction, and feedback become critical to ensure that students develop good habits and increase their proficiency. Increased competence typically leads to motivation to engage further, generating a cycle of engagement and developing competence that supports improved student achievement. (30)

As teachers, we want all our students to experience this cycle. Every year we hope for a room filled with Kaitlyns. Regardless of age, grade level, geographic location, type of school, discipline, or curriculum, a student needs to be engaged in his or her learning to excel and succeed.

This book stands on the pillar of this belief.

This is my twenty-fifth year as an educator, and I have come to believe that what we want most for our students—that they be confident, connected, thoughtful, and successful—comes about as the result of their engagement in learning. Our students are relying on us to create classrooms in which this engagement can happen.

Engagement may begin with the motivation to engage further, but true engagement is all-encompassing. Motivation expert Paul Marciano (2012) compares techniques for motivating adults to windup toys, which wind down and need to be wound up again. The same is true of students in relation to learning. If motivating them to learn merely involves winding them up—providing the prize—their engagement will be short lived. Engagement is both self-sustaining and long term. It lives and breathes within students and keeps them going for the long haul.

In an article in *Gallup Business Journal* titled “Not Enough Students Are Success-Ready,” Shane Lopez (2014) shares some results of the spring 2013 Gallup poll that pertain to student engagement:

While 54% of students surveyed in the U.S. are hopeful, almost half lack hope for the future, reporting they feel stuck in their lives (32%) or discouraged about the future (14%). Hopeful students take their education more seriously and bring positive ideas and energy to the learning process, making emotional engagement in school more likely. A similar percentage of students are engaged with school (55%). But almost half are either not engaged (28%) or are actively disengaged (17%). Students’ emotional engagement with school is the non-cognitive measure most directly related to academic achievement.

Even students themselves understand how much engagement matters to their learning.

● HOW WE DEVELOP STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

Engagement is cultivated, not taught. In this book I identify and show how to apply classroom components—strategies, tools, and principles of teaching—that cultivate and develop student engagement.

Chapter 1 examines the classroom learning environment and the role it plays in student engagement. This environment begins with the physical space but goes beyond it to include emotional and cognitive space. When we establish the physical, emotional, and cognitive space of a classroom, a year of engagement can begin.

The next step is starting the school year on the right foot, which is addressed in Chapter 2. The first few weeks set the path for engagement. In both teaching and

life, there is no place to begin but at the beginning.

Chapter 3 deals with assessment. Students' learning and their level of engagement, as a community but also individually, need to be accurately measured throughout the school year.

Chapter 4 examines instructional strategies and tools that elicit a high level of student engagement. Grounded in the gradual-release-of-responsibility approach to instruction (Pearson and Gallagher 1983), this chapter provides strategies for engaging students during whole-class lessons, in small-group instruction, and during one-to-one teaching.

Chapter 5 examines the seminal principle of choice—why choice is important and how to implement it during a year of teaching and learning.

Chapter 6 looks at tools for engagement in the context of popular culture and the larger learning community. It discusses ways to use popular culture and technology to engage students and presents examples of how to enlist the larger community (families, local nonprofit organizations and businesses, a school's faculty and staff) in efforts to build and sustain student engagement.

The appendix is a blueprint for putting it all together. It reveals the scope of these principles, strategies, and tools and suggests a sequence for implementing them during a school year.

Teaching is an amazing and unique profession. We can continually widen and develop our awareness of what works best for our students. Think of your Kaitlyns. What will it take to make every student a Kaitlyn? This book will help you move forward on the path to cultivating student engagement for all learners!

Chapter

Six

Engaging Students Through the World Around Them

● ENGAGEMENT THROUGH POPULAR CULTURE

When I began teaching I wasn't much older than my students, so I knew what made them tick. I watched *Friends* and *Seinfeld*; I went Rollerblading on weekends; I even used one-on-one basketball games and World Series parties as rewards for good behavior.

My students responded, not just because it was fun to beat me 5–4 in a basketball game or receive a big wave as they Rollerbladed past my classroom window, but because they knew I understood them. I knew what mattered to them and was able to use this information to engage them in learning.

There is a lot in the world of popular culture that students connect to, and it varies by age, gender, geography, and other factors. The key to using popular culture to cultivate engagement is to think critically about cultural components that resonate with students and will be appropriate and effective ways to engage them in the classroom. Regardless of age, gender, and geography, two areas of popular culture that consistently resonate are technology, including gaming and social media, and popular literature.

Technology

When my daughter was seven, we pulled into the driveway on our mostly calm suburban street and she saw her friend Claire. “Mommy,” Rhiannon asked, “can I go across the street to talk to Claire?” “Sure,” I replied, then quickly panicked when I realized she

didn't know how to cross the street, and that I had never taught her. I could recall being specifically taught how to cross the street. It was a lovely day in the spring of 1973 and my mother was teaching me, a slightly precocious and determinedly independent four-year-old, how to cross the street properly and safely. "Look right first, Tricia, and then look left. Then look one more time to the right. If all is clear and no car is coming, then you can cross over to Uncle Tony" (not actually my uncle, but a neighbor and the father of my across-the-street friends, who was usually waiting on the other side). How remiss it was not to have taught my daughter this important and seminal life skill. How was it that at seven years old she could download her iPod but not cross the street?

Panic and guilt aside, the occurrence was logical. It was 2007, not 1973, and Rhiannon had not once needed to cross the street by herself. However, she quite often wanted to download her iPod. My children's generation and the one before it are digital natives. They grew up using technology every day. As educators, we can embrace that. We have seen how technology has improved our lives and how it has kept us connected and informed in a way we never imagined.

In a study commissioned by Apple Computer, Inc. on technology and student engagement, Judith Haymore Sandholtz, Cathy Ringstaff, and David Dwyer (1994) endorse the use of technology as a way to increase student engagement, which they define as "initiative, self-motivation, independent experimentation, spontaneous collaboration and peer coaching, and enthusiasm or frustration." They found that technology, when used appropriately and integrated into the long-term aspects of curriculum and learning, had positive impacts on student engagement and outcomes:

The introduction of technology into the classrooms described in this study brought about numerous changes in student engagement. Students displayed increased initiative by going beyond the requirements of assignments, and by independently exploring new applications. The time students spent on assignments and projects increased when they used the computers, and they chose to work on the computers during free time and after-school hours. Students' independent experimentation at the computer led to spontaneous peer coaching and cooperative learning. Increased student enthusiasm facilitated their learning and reinforced the teachers' efforts. The enthusiasm of individual students also motivated other students in the class.

Yet when thinking about how technology can engage and positively impact our students, we sometimes shy away from certain types as distractions. This is natural and not altogether untrue. In *From Fear to Facebook: One School's Journey*, Matt Levinson (2010) writes, "The shift in thinking from fear to Facebook (or opportunity) takes time for school communities to work through, and schools nationwide must steer a new course with technology right there to help navigate the sea change" (5). He also suggests, "But schools also need to draw boundaries for students around issues like chatting, texting, downloading, and gaming, much to the chagrin of freewheeling students, many of whom are accustomed to more lax rules at home surrounding technology." He goes on to tell how his school embraced and included technology more fully into its instruction, practice, and culture and what that journey was like.

We need to take a similar journey. The key is to remember that technology is a tool, a means to an end, not technology for the sake of technology. Just like the sharpened stick, the piece of chalk, the number two pencil, or the dry-erase marker, technology is a tool for learning and should be seen as such.

In an *Education Week* blog interview with Eric Sheninger, author of *Digital Leadership*, Larry Ferlazzo (2014), asks about using technology as a learning tool and letting students bring their own devices to class, wondering how teachers "effectively deal with the nonacademic temptations." Eric explains:

Our school emphasizes that student-owned devices will be used to enhance learning, increase productivity, and conduct better research. [This] focus . . . has reduced this temptation, but not eliminated it. For change in this area to occur we must recognize that this is not a solely a technology issue as there have always been off-task behaviors prevalent in our schools since the beginning of time. Remember the days when archaic technology in the form of a pencil and paper was used to satisfy the same nonacademic temptations? . . . [P]roper policies, procedures, and support structures must be researched and put in place before adopting a BYOD [bring your own device] initiative. If this is done then BYOD can and will succeed in any school.

A particularly engaging element of technology is gaming, sometimes referred to as *gamification*. Who doesn't like to play a game? We all do and have preferences for the games we like to play. In recent generations, games are less about cards, words, or even outdoor sports, more about gaming via technology. Many teachers use games that are infused in popular culture to engage students in learning. One example is the use of games such as Minecraft. Why Minecraft? When considering gaming

and learning, it is important to understand that the game not only should interest students but also should hold potential for engagement and ultimately potential for learning. In Minecraft, there is the ability to increase complexity for the student and the opportunity for students to collaborate. I have seen teachers use Minecraft to teach and practice scale, the formula for volume, and basic algorithms in math; develop depth of understanding of the traits of character and setting in language arts; and practice the skills of geography or demonstrate understandings of a civilization and culture in social studies.

These games should not only resonate with students but also contribute to their learning. In a blog post titled “Four Important Reasons to Pair Mobile Devices with Interactive Whiteboards (and How to Do It!),” Christie Neumann (2014) identifies four key functions of technology in instruction: collaboration, evaluation, demonstration, and engagement. It all comes down to meaning, purpose, and audience. Technology can lead to meaningful learning and, like all learning tools, should achieve a desired purpose for a specific group. The decision to use gaming, and games like Minecraft, is based on providing structures that both challenge students and enable them to collaborate.

Jordon Shapiro (2014) defines gamification as the gaming of elements or aspects of our everyday lives: “In general, gamification attempts to superimpose the stimulating motivational aspects of the game world onto the life world.” There are many sites that gamify learning. One is Kahoot (see the screenshot in Figure 6.1), where teachers can take their content and create game-based learning endeavors. Students are able to work toward

Sites like Kahoot bring the elements of gaming to students in interactive and engaging ways.

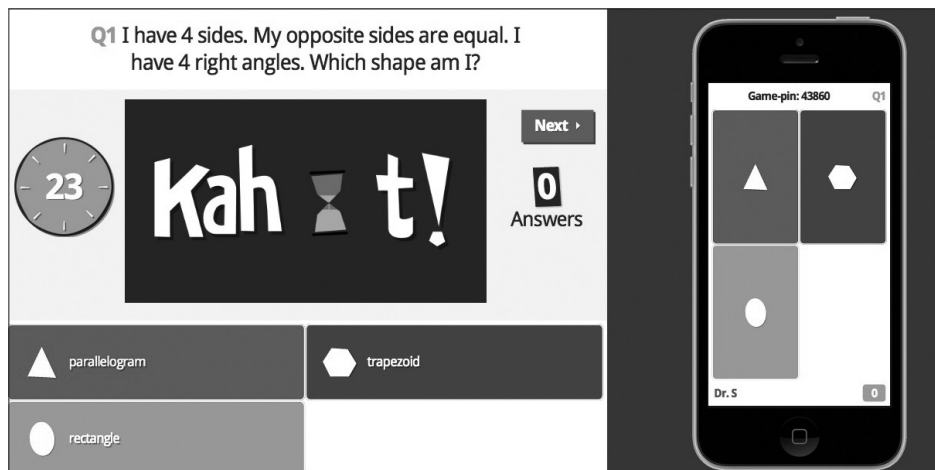


Figure 6.1 Screenshot of Kahoot

mastery of material and build understanding in their own ways, taking ownership of their learning.

Social media are other powerful twenty-first-century tools. Our students use social media every day and need to learn to interact with them in positive and appropriate ways. Something so present and so powerful should be used in the classroom to engage students. What stops us is our fear of the perils. The way to get past the fear is to understand this popular culture tool and use it to cultivate engagement.

Classrooms should have wikis, blogs, Facebook pages, Twitter accounts—whatever builds and sustains community and engagement. We have the option to use the actual social media sites or sites that engage students in using and developing the same competencies and provide the same benefits less publicly. Figure 6.2 lists the social media sites most prevalent in our culture, along with learning possibilities, benefits, and alternatives.

Many teachers use social media effectively and well. When I first began working with Cortney Steffens, she taught first grade. One year, she created a wiki with her students (see the screenshot in Figure 6.3) that proved to be an amazing tool that accomplished many goals. The key is to establish a purpose for the technology. For Cortney and her first graders:

- Students learned how to create and use a wiki.
- They had a digital forum for explaining their thinking and demonstrating their learning.
- The wiki captured a year of learning with and for her students.

She currently teaches third grade and continues to use technology to engage and excite her students. Her class uses class blogs (<https://sites.google.com/site/steffensclassroomconnections/home>) to capture, share, assess, and extend their learning. Students:

- share presentations and projects
- post musings on learning
- respond to posts by other students
- share the responsibility of uploading to and managing the class blog.

Gaming and social media are engaging tools for learning. The key is to use these tools to cultivate and engage students wisely and well. Figure 6.4 list some tenets to follow to achieve this aim.

Social Media	Learning Possibilities	Benefits	Alternative
Facebook/ Instagram	<p>Class Facebook page announcing class events/news</p> <p>Class Facebook page containing pics of student work and projects</p> <p>Student-created Facebook page for fictional or historical characters</p>	<p>Parents and community members keep up with and respond to important events and learning</p> <p>A forum for positive feedback from a real audience</p> <p>Students demonstrate their understanding of a character by posting from the character's point of view</p>	<p>Fakebook (classtools.net)</p> <p>Edmodo</p>
Twitter	<p>Class Twitter page</p> <p>Student-created tweets sharing ideas or demonstrating learning</p>	<p>Parents and community members keep apprised of learning and events</p> <p>Family members get a glimpse into the learning taking place; teachers can base instructional decisions on them</p>	<p>Faketweet (classtools.net)</p>
Blogs	<p>Class blog</p>	<p>Students learn online communication and collaboration tools</p> <p>Parents are kept apprised of student learning</p>	<p>Kid Blogs, Edublogs</p>
Wikis	<p>Class wiki</p>	<p>Students demonstrate their understanding of what they are learning</p>	<p>Wikispaces</p>
Google Classroom	<p>Teacher–student and student–student collaborations</p>	<p>Members of a learning community can collaborate on documents and projects</p>	<p>Google Play for Education account</p>

Figure 6.2 Social Media Chart

The screenshot shows a web browser interface for a Classroom Wiki. The page title is "Rainforest Animals". On the left, there is a sidebar with navigation links: "Wiki Home", "Recent Changes", "Pages and Files", and "Members". Below these is a search bar. The main content area lists three types of animals:

- red eye tree frogs**: have sticky pads on their toes so they can climb trees easily.
- Boa constrictors**: are brothers with anacondas. They can squeeze their prey very very hard. And they can swallow it hole. They can also climb up trees and chase mice.- Gabe c Boa constri. Boas are one of the largest snake in the world.
- anacondas**: anacondas are largest snake in the world there is the green anaconda and yellow anaconda the green anaconda is bigger then the yellow anaconda

At the bottom of the main content area, there are two more lines of text: "geckos eat insects geckos grow back theirtails." and "a tarantula can live over 30 years thar is abot 300 speshes of tarantul". The top right of the page has a user menu with "guest", "Join", "Help", and "Sign In". Below the title, there are icons for "Edit", "0" comments, "8" views, and a menu icon.

Figure 6.3 Screenshot of Classroom Wiki

Tenet	How It Engages Students
Establish a purpose for the tool.	Purposeful use of technology, including gaming and social media, leads to sustained engagement, not temporary engagement based on novelty.
Make this purpose explicit to students.	When students know the purpose of the technology (collaboration, challenge, evaluation, presentation, etc.) they will use it more skillfully and appropriately.
Find an audience for the tool.	Authentic audience drives purpose and creates a real context for learning. Consider who the audience is and what students will share with this audience.
Instruct students on how to use the tool.	Not all students are adept at using all technology, nor are they adept at using technology for educational purposes. By providing direct instruction in how to use the technology, we ensure proper use, effective outcomes, student ownership, mastery, and sustained engagement.
Minimize distractions.	Engage students in conversations that establish boundaries and ask students to use the technology fairly and honestly. This will minimize distractions and inappropriate use.

Figure 6.4 Tenets for Using Technology Effectively

Popular Literature

Many of us remember staying up until midnight to buy the next Harry Potter book or rushing to catch the first showing of *The Great Gatsby*. My kids loved *Ramona and Beezus*, and my daughter and her friends talked incessantly about Katniss' exploits in the Hunger Games trilogy. Literature engages us. Inside a good story we find our own story, our own voice, our own hopes and dreams, our own struggles. Over the years, countless books, alone or as part of a series, have resonated with our students. What better way to tap into popular culture and connect with our students? (Ways and rationales are summarized in Figure 6.5).

First, and most obviously, we can use these texts as instructional tools: study the change in Harry Potter's character from book one to book four; close-read the scene in which Katniss and Head Gamemaker Plutarch Heavensbee share a dance and Plutarch shows her the watch bearing the image of a mocking jay; compare scenes in *The Great Gatsby* with those in the recent movie version.

We can also build community and collaboration around popular literature. What better way to engage reluctant readers than with the most enticing literature? For our youngest students, it might be reading *The Day the Crayons Quit* by Drew Daywalt

to reach them through humor. For our upper elementary students, it might be putting the Little League series by Matt Christopher or *One for the Murphys* by Lynda Mullay Hunt in their hands. For middle school or high school students, it may mean introducing them to edgy and fast-paced novels such as the Maximum Ride series by James Patterson or *Black Ice* by Stephen Teshler.

Students can form book clubs centered on the literature they read and love, perhaps debating the integrity of both good and evil characters or comparing a contemporary dystopian text to an earlier example of the genre (*The Hunger Games* and Shirley Jackson's story "The Lottery," for example). We can use events or ideas from popular books to explore important contemporary or historical events or ideas, perhaps referencing the Hunger Games when exploring the Bill of Rights, civil disobedience, or human empowerment. Or we can use the names of characters or places in these books for elements of our classroom structure: name classroom learning stations or tables after the houses at Hogwarts, or imagine the classroom as a new society with rules and customs similar to the worlds in dystopian novels.

Weave popular culture literature into your classroom to excite and engage students.

Use	Why This Engages Students
Choose popular books as instructional tools.	These texts resonate with students. They invite students into learning a familiar and admired pathway.
Use literature to build community and encourage collaboration.	Good literature builds community and brings students together around common ideas.
Use popular books to explore contemporary or historical ideas or events.	Connections breed engagement. Connecting an engaging element of popular culture to current or historical events leads not only to engagement but to deeper learning.
Incorporate popular characters, settings, or plot elements into classroom structures.	Used this way, these features personalize classroom management.

Figure 6.5 Ways and Reasons Popular Literature Engages Students

● ENGAGEMENT THROUGH COMMUNITY

It takes a village to cultivate engagement. Part of this village comprises parents and caregivers. Another part of the village comprises the businesses, not-for-profit organizations, and individuals who operate and live there. Ways we can cultivate engagement through the community include reading programs, community "adopt a classroom" programs, and direct connections with students' families.

Community Reading Programs

It's early Saturday morning and I'm in the cafeteria of the Camden Street School, in Newark, New Jersey. My colleagues and I are setting up tables of books by grade level, anticipating the kinds of books students will want to read. We arrange them in crates organized by both grade level and genre, covers facing out. We place a sign on each crate indicating the kind of books it contains. Principal Sam Garrison is awaiting a food delivery. This event is part of a program called Literacy Lunch—Food for Thought. It's sponsored by LitLife West Hudson, Hope International, and AmeriCorps, a community effort to improve our students' attitude toward and proficiency with literacy. The goal is to give students and their caregivers lunch, time to read, and a model for building lifelong literacy habits. Reading on a Saturday is not an easy sell. Some students have other obligations on Saturdays, many parents work, and getting to the school can be difficult.

I'm here as a volunteer reader, but I also train the volunteers and introduce them to effective, easy-to-implement literacy strategies. Any time spent with text is beneficial, but if we really want to impact student achievement, engagement, and attitude toward literacy, volunteers and caregivers need to be familiar with strategies for literacy development. Three such strategies are explained in Figure 6.6.

Research supports this kind of programming. In a National Center for Family & Community Connections with Schools document reporting on community engagement programming and the effect it has on communities and student achievement, Anne Henderson and Karen Mapp (2002) summarize the research of Joyce L. Epstein and Mavis G. Sanders (2000):

To understand the positive effects of family-school collaboration, Epstein developed a new perspective to show that families, schools, and communities have a common mission around children's learning and development (Epstein 1987). This view recognized that home, school, and community act as overlapping spheres of influence on children. Social capital (the benefits of interactions among people) increases when well-designed partnerships enable families, students, and others in the community to interact in productive ways. Social capital may be invested in ways that help students learn, strengthen families, improve schools, and enrich communities. Children grow up in multiple contexts that are connected by a web of networks.

The literacy lunch program brought together volunteers from community organizations in a way that supported students and families, but more importantly, it impacted the ways that students and caregivers interacted outside school. Another

way for students and caregivers to interact together inside and outside of school is through celebrations. One such type of celebration is World Read Aloud Day, a global celebration of reading started by LitWorld. Information on how to create a community reading program is available at www.communityplanningtoolkit.org/sites/default/files/Engagement.pdf.

READ ALOUD

Reading aloud to a child is the single most important thing a caregiver or volunteer can do to develop a reader. It models good reading habits and behavior, provides positive reading experiences, develops vocabulary and literary language, and encourages a lifelong love and habit of reading.

When reading aloud, you:

- Establish a context for the reading. Choose the text together and browse it. Look at and comment on the cover (title, author, illustration), notice parts of the book, make predictions about the book, and make connections to the book.
- Read aloud in a clear and engaging voice. Everyone loves a performance!
- Stop at intervals and talk about what is happening. Discuss the plot, information, characters, and so on. Ask questions, but don't quiz your listener. You want this to feel like a conversation.
- After reading, discuss the text. What were your favorite part(s)? Did you learn new or interesting information? Did the ending surprise you? Reread parts or all of the text!

BE THE PERFECT PARTNER

Reading with a child is a way to cultivate a child's reading skills in a friendly and engaging way. A "perfect partner" reads with a child, sharing/dividing the reading and assisting as necessary.

When reading with a child as a perfect partner, you:

- Establish a context for the reading. Choose the text together and browse it. Look at and comment on the cover (title, author, illustration), notice parts of the book, make predictions about the book, and make connections to the book.
- Read with the child in a way that is most comfortable for him or her: alternating pages, having the child "echo" what you read, asking the child to join in on parts or pages (a repeated word, phrase, or sentence, for example).
- Help the child when she or he gets stuck on a word. Encourage the child to look at the picture or parts of the word. If she or he cannot determine the word, say, "Could the word be [such-and-such]?"
- Stop at intervals and talk about what is happening. Discuss the plot, information, characters, and so on. Ask questions, but don't quiz the child. You want this to feel like a conversation.
- After reading, discuss the text. What were your favorite part(s)? Did you learn new or interesting information? Did the ending surprise you? Reread parts or all of the text!
- Accept and praise your reading partner's contributions.

(continues)

(continued)

BE A BOOK CLUB BUDDY

Reading and discussing a text with a child is a powerful way to develop comprehension skills, build student engagement, and encourage a love of different types of texts and genres. A book club buddy reads with but mostly discusses a text with a child in the way of an adult book club. The goal is to talk about and collaborate around the text!

As a book club buddy, you:

- Establish a context for the reading. Choose the text together and browse it. Look at and comment on the cover (title, author, illustration), notice parts of the book, make predictions about the book, and make connections to the book.
- Read with the child in a way that is most comfortable for her or him: alternate pages, simultaneously read parts of the text silently, read aloud.
- Plan how to discuss the text. Think about when you will stop and what kind of conversation you will have.
- Stop at intervals and talk about what is happening. Discuss the plot, information, characters, and so on. Ask questions, but don't quiz the reader. You want this to feel like a conversation.
- After reading, discuss the text. What were your favorite part(s)? Did you learn new or interesting information? Did the ending surprise you? Reread parts or all of the text!
- Reread and/or celebrate favorite parts. Plan your next reading/conversation.

Figure 6.6 Ways to Share Reading

Adopting a Classroom

Members of the larger community can also support student engagement by volunteering in classrooms. During the 2014–2015 school year, I participated in the adopt-a-classroom program at the Camden Street School, in Newark, New Jersey. Assistant principal and director of innovation Meredith Foote reached out to community members for volunteers who would spend time in a classroom each week supporting struggling readers. Although I am an educator by profession, this was by no means a requirement of the program. For these programs to truly cultivate student engagement, the conditions listed in Figure 6.7 should be present. The goal is to interact with students during the school day, caring about them as individuals, supporting their learning, and engaging them as learners.

Making Home–School Connections

Perhaps the most important way to engage students is to develop a connection with their families. Raising a child is hard! There is so much to think about today—both good and bad—that earlier generations didn't have to deal with. We need to make strong positive connections to students' home life by: building relationships, fostering communication, and creating home school initiatives such as a summer reading initiative to bring this about.

CONDITION TO BE MET	RATIONALE
Stress commitment.	Although it wasn't mandatory that I go to my classroom each week, I did. The students, the teacher, and I all looked forward to it. Without this consistency, results will be unpredictable.
Set goals.	The teacher and I set goals for our time together. For me, it was improved reading for students, measured by a formative reading assessment. Goals can focus on student achievement, efficacy, attitude, and so on.
Interact with students directly.	Interaction with students is a must. I spent between sixty and ninety minutes in the classroom working with individual students for twenty or twenty-five minutes each.
Keep records and monitor goals.	I recorded the work I did with students in a Google document (see the example in Figure 6.8) so the teacher and I could then look at these notes together and plan future instruction.
Communicate with teachers and parents.	I also met with the teacher and communicated with parents so everyone was on the same page.

Figure 6.7 Conditions for Effective During-School Programs

5/7/2014
<p>Read words with Telena by picking words from our word jar: <i>with, at, he, they, and no</i>. She needed to correct each first attempt, and I had to review the long <i>e</i> in connection with <i>he</i>. Read <i>A Rainy Day for Sammy</i>. Working on favorite part and retelling. Misread the title. Did not know Sammy ends in the <i>e</i> sound. Talked about the different sounds for <i>y</i>. Excellent picture walk. Talked about beginning, middle, and end of picture walk. Kept saying <i>run</i> for <i>ran</i>. Occasionally self-corrected but not always. Favorite part? My favorite part was when Sammy was running through all the rooms. Why? I liked it. Talked him through that it was funny and he liked how Sammy was getting away from Grant. Asked him to compose sentences on the whiteboard using the words from the word jar and any other words he needed. He liked composing sentences and worked through quite a few variations (<i>I, I was</i>) before he settled on one: <i>They are at the playgrande</i>. Read three titles together and chose two additional books for home reading.</p>

Figure 6.8 Sample Records of Classroom Work

Building Relationships

There are a variety of ways to build connections and build relationships with families. It's important to gather information about each family so we truly understand the home life of the child. When Liz Masi talked with the parents/caregivers of her first graders who were not reading at home, she discovered that many of these homes lacked reading material (one family had recently moved to a shelter). She then initiated a home-school reading program: she sent each child home with a sealed plastic baggie containing three or four books to read that night and a log to be signed by both the student and a caregiver.

However, many teachers are uncomfortable sending books home or investigating why their students are not reading at home. We needn't be. All families regardless of socioeconomic status benefit from conversations about obtaining reading material best suited to their children and setting aside time in the day or evening for their children to read. And in my twenty-five years in education, I can count on one hand the books lost or not returned by students.

Becoming personally involved in home reading is another possibility. My friend and colleague Sally Rubin-Richards is a reading teacher and literacy coach in Rockland County, New York, who works with struggling readers. When she meets parents and caregivers at the beginning of the year, she explains that she will call their homes periodically and ask to speak with their child, and that she and the child will then read together and discuss what they've read. After each session, Sally either talks with the caregiver or follows up with an email. Students and parents alike are excited when Sally calls, and this connection builds student and family engagement in reading and learning.

Building relationships, through daily interactions or occasional and special check-ins, keep engagement high.

Fostering Communication

There are so many ways for educators to communicate today, including a school or classroom Facebook, Twitter, or other social media page and a class Web page. A class Web page is essential: parents and students can find all sorts of engaging information there. (See the home page screenshot of Cortney's class website in Figure 6.9.) The key to using this tool as a method of family engagement is to create a site that is both communicative and interactive.

Another way to engage families is through newsletters and other written communications, printed or digital. The key is to do so with purpose—telling families what their children are learning and giving them opportunities to interact with this

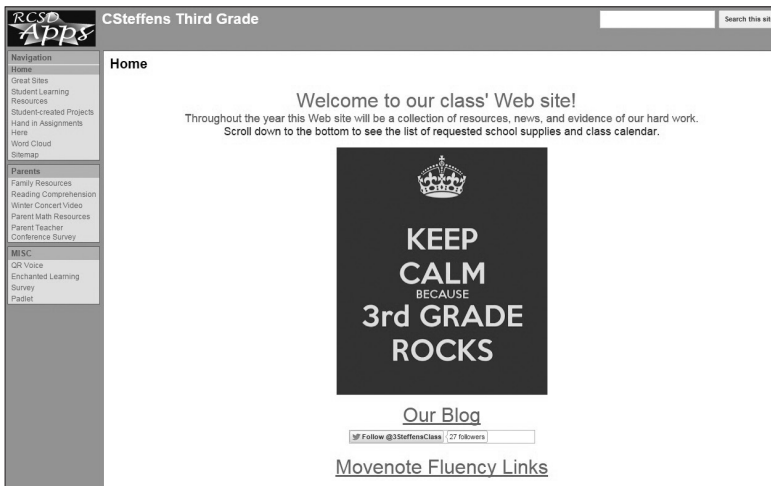


Figure 6.9 Sample of an Interactive and Communicative Class Website*

learning. When I taught fourth grade in Tenafly, New Jersey, every five or six weeks my colleague Anna Reduce and I sent a letter to parents and caregivers asking that they interact with some aspect of student learning—play a math game, study for an assessment, examine their child’s portfolio, or visit the classroom. Figure 6.10 is the letter we sent home before the fall parent–teacher conferences.

Parent letters, either print or digital, can inform parents and caregivers of learning in the classroom or create a context for a shared and reflective exercise.

Creating a Summer Reading Initiative

Another opportunity to forge home–school connections is during times the students are not in school during the school year and over the summer. Alicia Eames (2013) explores the impact of summer reading and the disparities in summer reading opportunities for students of different socioeconomic groups in a written interview with Richard Allington. In her introductory remarks, she writes, “Schools sending students off on summer vacation and public libraries gearing up to get kids excited about summer reading programs are both in the business of making sure children become fluent, engaged readers. Unfortunately, the results of those efforts aren’t necessarily equal for kids in lower-income situations.”

*<https://sites.google.com/a/ramapocentral.net/csteffens-third-grade/>

November

Dear Parents/Caregivers,

We've been in school for only a few months, yet we have noticed changes and growth in ourselves as learners and as people. It seems only yesterday that we first set goals for ourselves and already it is time to evaluate where we are in reaching them and plan for the next few months. It is also time to share our accomplishments and plans with you.

In preparation for the upcoming parent–teacher conferences, your child and I have selected samples of work depicting the learning taking place in literacy, inquiry, and math and assembled them in two portfolios. The pieces were selected carefully to present a clear and accurate picture of your child as a learner. Along with the samples is a rationale explaining why the particular piece was chosen.

Your child is bringing home his or her portfolio this weekend, before we meet for our conference, and presenting himself or herself to you as a learner. One thing to notice about this working portfolio is that it is a full and “busy” collection that promotes self-analysis, not some tidy showpiece prepared for display. This is the major purpose of portfolios, to develop self-assessors, people concerned about becoming better readers, writers, and thinkers.

Your feedback is very important. After your child has presented her or his portfolio to you, please write her or him a brief letter detailing what you have noticed about his or her growth. Your comments, suggestions, and encouragement are an important part of your child’s continued growth and will be extremely helpful as she or he sets goals for the coming months. All portfolios need to be returned to school, with your letters enclosed, by Monday, November 11th.

The children and I are looking forward to sharing with you the goals, the things we have noticed, and the growth we have experienced over the past months.

Best,

Figure 6.10 Sample Parent/Caregiver Letter

Alexander, Olson, and Entwisle (2007) have found that the gap between higher and lower socioeconomic students widens considerably each summer. We need to build family engagement through programming and support during vacations—especially summer reading.

A few years ago I presented this idea to all my partner schools. We began by examining both the negative impact of not reading and the positive impact of reading

during the summer months. I then recommended that as a learning community each school create a summer reading protocol that:

1. connected one year of learning to the next and school reading to summer reading
2. included titles of specific texts that matched readers' interests, level, and purpose
3. supported the lending, purchasing, and borrowing of texts for students.

Student engagement is a year-round endeavor, and summer reading is a key component to maintaining student engagement levels.

Figure 6.11 outlines essential components of a summer reading program, along with suggestions for making it manageable.

Essential Component	Management Suggestions
Teachers and students together create a list of summer reading possibilities for each reader that matches reader interest, level, and other pertinent factors (a fall literacy unit, for example).	This personalization doesn't need to be cumbersome. Collaboratively, create lists by grade level that are appropriate for a variety of readers. Then personalize the lists with a particular reader considering their interests or upcoming curriculum element in mind. Text titles will overlap between readers; the key is to create lists of texts that enable them to continue to read long and strong during summer months.
Teachers and readers set goals for when and where reading will take place (see the first grade example in Figure 6.12).	Wrap up the year during the last two weeks of school with a unit on reflection; include time to look back and celebrate the year of learning and set goals for the summer.
Students receive books to take home or are given digital links to them. More often than not, students don't read during the summer because they do not have materials to read.	Enlist local bookstores or public libraries. Send over lists of reading materials and have these facilities order or gather them. Multiple copies of hot titles ensure the maximum number of interested students have access to them. Use school materials. One of my partner schools had a book room with many unused books left over from the days of ordering sets of class novels. We sent them home with students. Approach book publishers. Some have community engagement programs that provide students with books at no cost.
Parents and caregivers participate in the planning through letters, the school website, or social media.	Administrators or other building leaders can compose the appropriate letters or blog posts. At the Dwight-Englewood School, in Englewood, New Jersey, assistant principal Susan Abramson took the lead in communicating reading expectations to parents (see Figure 6.13).

Figure 6.11 Essential Components of a Summer Reading Program and How to Manage It

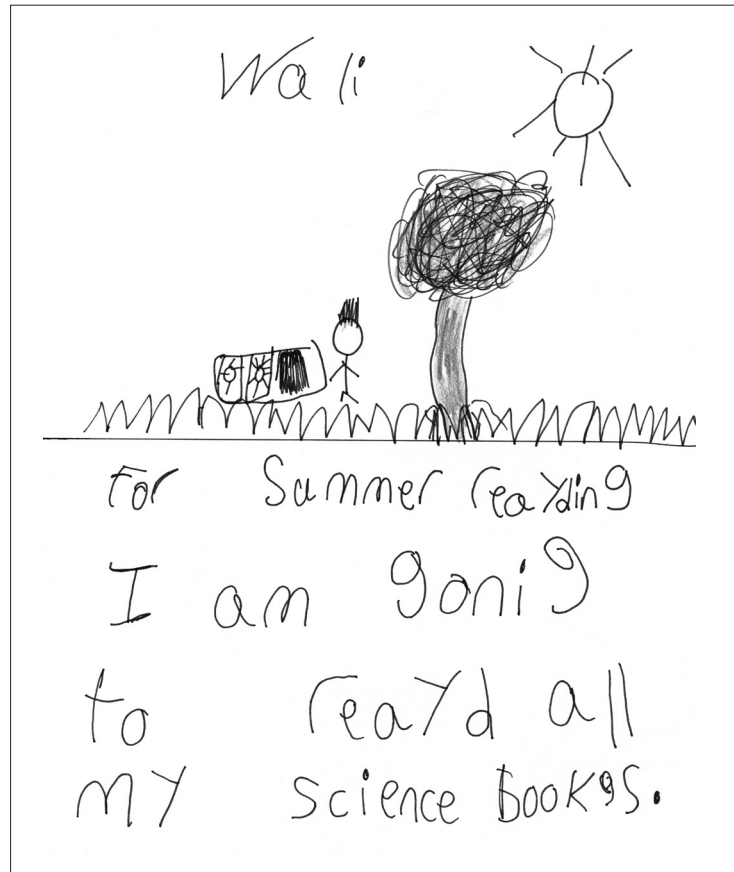


Figure 6.12 First-Grade Student Sample—Goals for Summer Reading

The Teacher as Engaged Learner

The first time I flew with my now fourteen-year-old daughter, she was a baby, only nine months old. I listened attentively to the flight attendant as she went through the drill of what to do in an emergency and was appalled by the direction that if the oxygen in the cabin dropped I was to put the oxygen mask on myself first, then my child. How could I deny this precious nine-month-old baby oxygen while I was breathing? But then I realized that if I did not give myself oxygen first, I would not be able to care for my child. What at first felt counterintuitive suddenly felt right.

As teachers, we encounter this same phenomenon. We want to be there for our students and for our school community, and sometimes we forget to take care of ourselves. Therefore, when we consider our students' engagement, we need to start with ourselves as engaged learners. We can do this in three ways:

1. Find our teaching passions, the things that will keep us focused and interested as educators.
2. Maintain a rich professional reading and learning life.
3. Create a network of like-minded professionals with whom we can collaborate and commiserate.

Dear Parents,

Each year in the Lower School we have a small assembly on Mr. Rocky's Field to celebrate the end of another year, in particular the fifth graders' transition from the Lower School to the Middle School. Fifth graders plant a tree to commemorate their journey and release butterflies to symbolize their "flight" to a new home. Students naturally experience mixed emotions about leaving the safety of the Lower School, and this important ritual helps them acknowledge their experiences and emotions in a calm, joyful way while preparing them to embrace new ones.

Although this assembly focuses on our fifth graders, our reading and writing curriculum provides a similar experience of reflection and anticipation of what's to come through a unit of study we call Reflection and Celebration. This unit is an opportunity for students in kindergarten through fifth grade to reflect on their work over the course of the year, as well as notice and celebrate how they have grown as readers and writers. As readers, students will think back to their favorite titles and authors and begin to consider the genre they prefer. They will think about the times reading was hard, as well as the times they felt like "strong" readers. They will ask similar questions of themselves as writers, and all students will select a writing piece that will be shared with their next-year teacher. The unit connects one year to the next and gives students and teachers alike time to remember, reflect, and celebrate their shared journey while preparing for the next steps.

As part of their next steps as readers and writers, students make plans for summer reading and writing. Classroom teachers provide students with tools to continue developing their reading and writing identities over the summer. We hope you will encourage your children to write about their summer adventures in words and pictures and to continue reading independently. The attached list includes titles and authors your child and their teacher selected together. These are example of books that will help your child sustain the growth and momentum she or he has worked so hard to achieve all year! We invite you to use these tools, and hope your family will share our commitment to summer reading and writing.

Students entering third through fifth grade are expected to select, read, and bring to school in September one of the books on the suggested reading list. Conversation around these books is part of our work toward building a community of readers in September.

We wish you all the best for a happy and safe summer, one that is filled with lots of memories that will become stories for years to come!

Figure 6.13 Letter to Parents About Summer Reading

Finding Our Teaching Passion—Our *Drishti*

In yoga, when you are trying out poses that require balance, it is helpful to focus on one spot in front of you on the floor, the wall, or some other area. Staring intently at this spot, known as a *drishti*, helps you remain balanced and thus implement and hold the pose.

The same is true of teaching. As educators, we need to find our *drishti*—a focal point or point of interest that keeps us well balanced and positioned. As with our students, this tends to be what interests us most, something about which we are passionate. In today’s teaching world, that may seem difficult. There are so many initiatives, mandates, and changes that it is hard to stay focused and find passions. But to be a connected teacher, we need to find the focal point that will keep us engaged in our own teaching and learning.

I do this by identifying a “topic of the year”—a big idea that I am “on about.” It can be something large (rethinking my formative assessments or how I use my instructional time) or something smaller (how I wrap up each class period). I started doing this after a conversation I had with my own staff developer, Shirley MacPhillips, in which she commented, “You’re interested in so many things!” This isn’t a bad thing necessarily, but it didn’t lead to productive outcomes. I was constantly switching gears, running from one topic to another, without achieving depth of understanding or clarity.

This doesn’t mean that there is only one thing I think and learn about throughout the year or that I am unable to join in when my school or grade-level colleagues or any other community I’m a member of is focusing on a certain topic. It just means I have a teaching *drishti* that keeps me engaged as a learner.

Maintain a Rich Professional Reading and Learning Life

Teachers are and should be readers. We should be well read and well informed, modeling the behavior we want our students to exhibit. Therefore, we need to live full and rich professional reading and learning lives. I do this in three ways:

1. I belong to professional organizations. As a consultant and a teacher I have always belonged to the International Reading Association (IRA), now called the International Literacy Association (ILA), and the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), and as a leader, to the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD). Being part of organizations allows me to keep up with what matters most to me and others in education.
2. I attend professional gatherings held by these organizations. I present at conferences, but it is just as important that I participate as an attendee. I

also try to look beyond the usual conferences to new learning ventures. A few years ago, my colleague Jaime Margolies and I attended the Learning Forward conference in Boston for the first time. It was invigorating to attend sessions in a new learning community.

3. I read widely every week, ranging from social media sites such as Twitter to the New York Times to professional magazines and blogs, including *Harvard Education Letter*, *Educational Leadership* (ASCD), Edutopia posts, *Education Week Teachers College Journal*, the *Marshall Memo*, and the IRA periodicals *Reading Today* and *Reading Research Quarterly*.

These three regular and routine aspects of my life keep me an engaged learner.

Jessica Espinoza and Liz Veneziano, New Jersey school administrators, know how to cultivate professional reading and learning lives. When Jessica and Liz were working together in Emerson, New Jersey, they offered their teachers great professional learning opportunities during the school year and created learning contexts for them each summer as well. One summer, they created a blog on which teachers could post musings about summer reading. Another summer, each teacher launched a Twitter page; tweets from teachers and administrators in this district are among my favorites.

Professional reading and learning can take many forms, but reading and learning every day keeps us growing and engaged.

Find Your Professional Posse

I am a very collaborative person. I am the seventh child in a family of nine; I grew up on a baseball team and enjoy having people to learn and think alongside. I operate from the belief that I will learn something new every day, at work and at home. To that end, I have a group of individuals—my teaching posse—who I turn to when I have questions and ideas.

When I am grappling with a struggling reader, I call Sally. She is my reading friend, the one I talk to about all things reading. When I am thinking about work with my client schools, I call Jaime. Jaime and I have never taught together, but people who have been in both of our classrooms remark on how similar our teaching is. She reminds me of what I value in teaching and helps me think through the particulars of being a coach to many different school communities.

When I want to imagine a new adventure or talk with someone who knows what great teaching looks like, I call Bev: hers is an amazing classroom. She is the one I go to when I want to float an idea or be reminded of what matters most. She and I have recently created a blog together (<http://whatmattersmostinteaching.blogspot.com>) where we continue to develop and grow ideas together. When I want advice,

especially from a leadership perspective, I call Ella. Ella was my principal when I taught in Tenafly, New Jersey, both a colleague and mentor, the person who best knows my teaching. She gives me advice based on her own experience. When I am looking to innovate or start a new project, I call Pam. She and I have worked together for many years, but we began our collaboration decades ago, when she first visited my classroom. She is a kindred spirit.

Some of these women don't know each other, but they have one thing in common: me. They think with me and laugh with me and learn with me and commiserate with me and evolve with me and keep me the most engaged I can be in my learning.

To be the most energized and engaged learner, you need to form your own teaching posse. I recommend the following steps:

1. Identify the people in your teaching and learning life who motivate and engage you. Think about what you love about this learning relationship and what it has to offer you.
2. Name what that person offers you and what you have to offer that person.
3. Look for people outside your school or organization community to learn with and from. You push your thinking when you go outside your daily community.
4. Find ways to interact with these learning buddies. Make space to learn with and from them in person or virtually.

Engagement begins with us. When we recognize this, we start within and build engagement outward to include our learning communities and our students.

ENGAGING STUDENTS THROUGH THE WORLD AROUND THEM CHECKLIST

Engagement Through Popular Culture

- Engaging Through Technology**
 - Have you considered using gaming to engage students in learning content and in practicing skills?
 - Where can you use gamification and gamelike features to motivate and engage students in lessons and independent practice?
 - What social media will you use to create structures for collaboration, challenge, presentation, and interaction at home and school?
- Using Popular Literature**
 - What popular culture texts resonate with your students? How can you use a component of the story—the setting, the characters, the theme, the lessons they teach—to engage students?

Engagement Through Community

- Community Programs**
 - Are there opportunities to engage families in after-school or weekend programs?
 - Can you create a program whereby the larger community can support your students and their learning?
- Cultivating Home–School Connection**
 - How do you build relationships with families?
 - In what ways, both digital and print, do you communicate with families?
 - How do you support and create summer learning opportunities?
- The Teacher as Engaged Learner**
 - What are your teaching passions? What can you make your teaching focal point?
 - In what ways are you learning and growing?
 - What professional reading do you do?
 - Who are the colleagues with and from whom you learn the most?
 - What opportunities do you have to learn with and from them?