

Education expert urges schools to help their students feel more involved

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New research from a University at Buffalo expert on classroom education has identified six factors that affect whether elementary, middle and high school students will engage in the activities of their schools or feel alienated.

Students who feel "disengaged" from school are at greater risk for dropping out, avoiding challenging courses, scoring low on standardized achievement tests and achieving less as adults, according to researcher Jeremy D. Finn, professor of counseling, school and [educational psychology](#) in the UB Graduate School of Education.

"Disengagement is the failure to develop a sense of school membership, failure to participate actively in class and school activities, or failure to become cognitively involved in learning," says Finn. "Different degrees of disengagement may be exhibited by [students](#) at all stages of schooling. The extreme of disengagement is leaving school without graduating, thus severing connections with school, teachers and activities that support learning."

The six factors that can contribute to student disengagement are:

1. Failure to provide early school experiences that can impact engagement in later grades
2. School conditions that are inconsistent with the needs of

adolescents

3. School conditions that produce feelings of anonymity
4. Rules and disciplinary practices that are unclear, too harsh or administered unfairly.
5. Inadequate academic and personal support for students at risk of "disidentification."
6. Course work that may be seen as irrelevant to the needs of the students (upper grades).

These six factors and solutions are drawn from Finn's research on the effects of class size, from an analysis of published research on the subject and from the "Dropout Prevention Guide," published by the What Works Clearinghouse of the U.S. Department of Education, which is authored by six experts including Finn.

He is presenting the research in September at an international education symposium on student engagement in New Zealand called "Engaging Young People in Learning: Why Does It Matter and What Can We Do?" The presentation identifies school practices and policies that exacerbate student disengagement. His paper was co-authored with UB student Karin Kasza.

Each of the six factors, Finn notes, can be addressed by changing school policies and/or practices to affect student behavior. Among his recommendations to teachers and administrators:

1. Foster engagement, student persistence and academic performance through high-quality preschool programs and

reduction in class sizes for at least the first three years of school.

2. Prepare teachers to acknowledge adolescents' struggle for independence and avoid excessively harsh punishment. They can provide extra help with difficult course material.
3. Increase personal contact between administrators and counselors with students. Assign an advisor or staff "advocate" to each student at risk of disengagement.
4. Clarify discipline policies to teachers and students. Minimize zero-tolerance and "no pass-no play" rules that sever what may be many students' last remaining connection to school.
5. Encourage teachers to recognize small accomplishments such as attending classes regularly and getting a passing grade. Provide and promote catch-up opportunities and afterschool assistance for students who miss school for any reason.
6. Train teachers to demonstrate the real-world connections of [classroom](#) material. Increase student involvement on setting goals and planning course work. Remember to include internships and technical education for non-college-bound students.

Finn stressed that solutions need to be tailored to meet the needs of particular schools and that multiple approaches are needed.

An expert on the effect of class size on learning, academic performance, graduation rates and future employment, Finn is one of the principal investigators in the largest randomized study ever done in American education on class size. The landmark longitudinal study of 12,000 students started in 1985 and is ongoing, as researchers assess whether there is a connection between class size and other life characteristics

such as employment and mortality rates.

"The study has followed the students through high [school](#) and found long-term effects of attending small classes in elementary grades," he says.

"These benefits of small class size include higher test scores, higher rates of taking advanced course work and higher rates of taking the SATs and ACTs.

"It is usually the lower-income students, the minorities and the at-risk students who benefit the most." Finn says increasing class size, even in the face of state budget pressures caused by the economic downturn, goes against the long-term interests of these students and society.

"The classic complaint about small classes is that they are expensive because you have to hire more teachers, you have to find more classrooms -- it's one teacher for 20 students rather than one teacher for every 30 students," he says. "But the benefits of small class size, and the payback to society have been found by economists to far outweigh the additional cost of smaller class sizes."

Finn has been widely cited in scholarly as well as prestigious general interest publications for his expertise on class size. These include a recent nationally circulated story about how declining state budgets are forcing schools to increase class size, despite research that definitively states the adverse effects of large class sizes on everything from students' academic performance, to graduation rates, to aspiring to enter college, to longer-term effects on these former students as adults.

Source: University at Buffalo ([news](#) : [web](#))

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