

# Students & Schools: Moving Forward

(March, 2025 Vol. 29 #6) – 39 Years & Counting

## Featured

### **Engagement Is an Even Greater Concern over the Coming Months**

#### Also in this issue

>Quick links to online resources

>A Few Stories Excerpted from Various News Sources

>Comments and sharing from the field

### **Engagement Is an Even Greater Concern over the Coming Months**

Teachers have long experienced a “Spring Slump” among students. It happens in the weeks before and after a school’s spring break. Productivity slows, and drops in attendance are common. Some students feel worn out; some are bored by the routines at school; some are having academic and personal problems. Approaching summer, the thought of being free of school fills the heads of others. “Senioritis” kicks in for many as high school graduation nears. (“Four years of high school is half a year too long,” says one senior. “I’m already accepted for college,” says another. So they hope to coast through and survive the last few months.)

And as Miriam Plotinsky notes, it’s not just the students: Around this time of year, teachers are particularly prone to burnout, more so than in May or June. When Presidents’ Day hits in the frigid darkness of February, teachers are looking at about a six-week stretch of school until spring break, which doesn’t sound too horrible until we think about some of the other factors. For starters, testing often takes over in the spring months, and that alone adds pressure to the already fast-paced world of instruction. With up-and-down weather patterns, viruses tend to run rampant, and now that we face this year’s addition of Covid-19 worries, anxiety is at a premium.

As the school year progresses, an increasing concern is not only on how to enhance engagement, but how to reengage those who have become actively disengaged. Among students, psychological disengagement may be internalized (e.g., boredom, emotional distress) and/or externalized (misbehavior, frequent absences).

**This is a good time for school staff to discuss how they understand reduced engagement (energy/motivation/effort) and then plan ways to counter the "slump" through strategies that enhance motivation.**

From a motivational perspective, engaging and reengaging students in classroom learning requires increasing ways at school for students to *feel*

- >self-determining
- >competent, and
- >connected to significant others

And at the same time, they need the school to *minimize experiences that threaten such feelings.*

All this calls for a greater focus on practices that

- >personalize options and choices,
- >ensure students have a consequential role in decision making,
- >minimize coercive interactions,
- >emphasize real life interests and needs and related enrichment opportunities,
- >provide special assistance (supports/guidance) as needed using a continuum of structure

**A note about those who have become *disengaged*:** It is unlikely that these youngsters will be open to schooling that looks like "the same old thing." For such students:

- >Major changes in approach are required if they are even to perceive that anything has changed. Minimally, exceptional efforts must be made to have these students (a) view the teacher as supportive and (b) see content, outcomes, and activity options as personally valuable and obtainable.
- >New and mutual agreements must be developed and evolved over time through conferences with the student and where appropriate including parents. The focus throughout is on clarifying awareness of valued options, enhancing expectations of positive outcomes, and engaging the student in meaningful, ongoing decision making. For the process to be most effective, students should be assisted in sampling new processes and content, options should include valued enrichment opportunities, and there must be provision for reevaluating and modifying decisions as perceptions shift.

For more on enhancing engagement, see our online clearinghouse Quick find on

***>Motivation, Engagement, Re-engagement***

Among the many resources listed there is a Center developed resource designed for professional development

***>Engaging and Re-engaging Students and Families*** (four Modules)

Also see: ***>Addressing student burnout***

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*Connecting learning to the real world is very important. It can be the difference in some students learning a skill or not. It makes them realize that what we do in school matters.*

Allison Johnson Neal

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*Are you experiencing a spring slump?*



*No, I'm just in my usual school funk.*

**>Quick Links to Online Resources**

- >>Gangs in schools
- >>Academic Achievement Among a Sample of Youth in Foster Care: The Role of School Connectedness
- >>Applied Behavior Analysis in Children and Youth with Autism Spectrum Disorders: A Scoping Review
- >>Controversy around applied behavior analysis
- >>Social Media and Youth Mental Health: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory
- >>Helping Children Cope After a Traumatic Event

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*In the middle of difficulty lies opportunity.* – Albert Einstein

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**Here's what was discussed in the Community of Practice during February**

- *Are schools responsible for supporting staff mental wellness?*
- *Supporting students during and after a crisis*
- *Including Youth in Deciding on How to Improve Schools*
- *Youth need to feel useful*
- *Supporting Social and Emotional Development in 2025*
- *Advocating for Change in Providing Student/Learning Supports*

Note: All community of practice editions contain Links to relevant shared resources.

If you missed the resources and news in previous issues of the Community of Practice, see <https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/practitioner.htm>

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**>For more resources in general, see our website**  
<https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu>

**>For info on the status of upcoming conferences**  
<https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/upconf.htm>

**>For info on webinars**  
<https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/webcast.htm>

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*Children are born with their own optimism.  
They have a clarity and a simplicity that we can only wish for.* – Meshell Ndegeocello

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>Calls for grant proposals  
<https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/upcall.htm>

> job and training opportunities  
when available  
<https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/job.htm>

**National Initiative for Transforming Student and Learning Supports**  
<https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/newinitiative.html>

Our Center emphasizes the opportunity to start now to transform how schools address barriers to learning and teaching and reengage disconnected students.

**Let Us Know about what ideas are being proposed for moving in new directions for transforming how schools address barriers to learning and teaching.**

And if anyone is thinking about increasing the capacity of a district or school with respect to developing a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student/learning supports, we can help. Send all info to [ltaylor@ucla.edu](mailto:ltaylor@ucla.edu)

>**A Few News Stories** (excerpted from various news sources)

**How Enrollment in the 100 Largest School Districts Has Changed Since the Pandemic.**

Most of the country's 100 largest districts by enrollment have seen declines since the 2019-20 school year. The National Center for Education Statistics released its data for 2023-24. Nine out of the 10 biggest districts — including New York City, Los Angeles and Miami-Dade — have seen enrollment dip by up to 13 percent compared to the year that COVID-19 first closed schools. The think-tank Empire Center for Public Policy cites a confluence of factors that are leading to the enrollment decreases, including fertility rates, less immigration and an increase in homeschooling and microschools supported by more parents' ability to work from home. .

**School struggles with high absenteeism, poverty, and potential gang threat.**

While urban and even suburban school districts across New Jersey continue to grapple with a major, disturbing fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic — high rates of chronic absenteeism — Paterson's School 6 in particular faces a barrage of hurdles that has exacerbated its absenteeism problem. Poverty, transience, homelessness, illness and transportation issues are among the many obstacles facing Paterson's school-age children. Some longtime Paterson residents and community advocates said generational poverty, the breakdown of family and disengagement among a mostly young population of parents whose children attend School 6 are stubborn problems that the school district cannot fix alone. Only if the school, businesses, stakeholders and parents whose kids struggle the most join forces will they be able to tackle some of the many challenges that exacerbate high absenteeism.

**Fires scorched campuses across Los Angeles. Many schools are seeking places to hold classes.** Thousands of students' schooling was turned upside down by wildfires that ravaged the city, destroying several schools and leaving many others in off-limits evacuation zones. Educators across the city are scrambling to find new locations for their students, develop ways to keep up learning, and return a sense of normalcy. Many schools have held off on resuming instruction, saying their focus for now has been healing, and trying to restore a sense of community. Some are organizing get-togethers and field trips to keep kids engaged in activities and with each other as they look for new space. Schools that did not burn down were damaged by falling trees, debris, ash and smoke that requires extensive cleaning and environmental testing. Hundreds of school staff members citywide lost their homes or had to relocate, compounding the challenges.

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Here's what a student shared in the fire story above:

I feel so out of it, every day. Do I cry? Do I mourn the loss of my home and school? I am trying not to think about it. As time is passing I'm realizing this is going to be my reality for the next year or two. I am not going to have anywhere to live permanently for a while. And what am I going to do for school now? It's going to be online? Where will the temporary campus be? How far away is it?

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### >Comments and sharing from the field

(1) About: *Public Education on the Brink. How are/will schools be affected by the current actions of the federal government?*

On 2/16/25, we shared an analysis from a colleague with extensive experience working at a state department of education (see <https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/2-16-25.pdf>).

And we invited anyone who has direct information and analyses of implications to send their material to us for sharing with the field and as a stimulus for others. A compilation of what we received initially is online at <https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/2-20-25.pdf>.

#### Here are four more comments received last week:

>I appreciate the timeliness of this discussion and offer a voice from a rural northern CA county/district. I am a former county superintendent, life-long special educator, regional center board member, and most importantly, the parent of an adult child with autism. My opinion on the abolishment of the US Department of Education is informed through these lenses. PL 94.142 and subsequent disability legislation establishes that all children with a disability have the right to a free and appropriate public education. For the most part, it has been the federal government through the Dept of Education that has interpreted these laws and built in safeguards to ensure student rights are met. In doing so, they have established "one size fits all" requirements for students who are supposed to be viewed as individuals with unique needs. This has resulted in very expensive litigation that small counties such as ours simply cannot afford. What I would like to see happen if control of special education policy decisions are given to the state, is that the state considers the uniqueness of each person with a disability and avoids creating policies and mandates that are not applicable to the student and harmful to the county/district.

>This is a ridiculous email. I can't believe all of the what if's you placed in this email. I am astounded by the fact that this has been sent to try and strike fear in schools. Please do not send this type of political nonsense any longer. (from a principal of a small AR school)

>The Federal Department of Education is a middleman for our federal funding. Removing the middleman will free us of the inordinate amount of administrative burden the Department of Education imposes on us. It will also allow for more local control, which is necessary to resolve the modern problems in public education. All too often the federal department throws funding at problems when it would be more beneficial to throw money at solutions, and solutions come from within the local education agency. I hope this helps.

>The situation you outline is deeply troubling, and I see striking historical parallels to the late 19th and early 20th centuries when industrial magnates-our original "Robber Barons"-sought to shape education into a system that primarily served their economic interests. John Dewey and other progressive educators of that era resisted this push, arguing that education should serve democratic society rather than private enterprise. We may now be witnessing a resurgence of those same forces, as privatization and deregulation threaten to dismantle the very foundation of public education in favor of market-driven alternatives.

If the U.S. Department of Education is abolished or defunded to the point of irrelevance, public education will fragment, with policy and funding decisions left entirely to states that vary dramatically in their commitment to equity and access. This would not be a return to "local control" in any democratic sense; rather, it would be a strategic weakening of national accountability structures, leaving vulnerable students-those with disabilities, those from low-income families, and those facing systemic discrimination-without consistent legal protections or funding. The result would be precisely the kind of educational inequality that Dewey and his contemporaries fought against: a tiered system in which only those with financial and social capital can access high-quality education.

However, California has a unique opportunity in this moment. As the fifth-largest economy in the world, it has the capacity to develop alternative funding structures and global partnerships to sustain public education independently of federal interference. If we accept that the federal government is actively hostile to public education, then California must adopt a strategic stance: treating Washington not as a reliable partner, but as an external force whose influence must be minimized. This means:

1. Building an international education and research network - Forming direct partnerships with global universities and organizations to ensure continued investment in higher education.
2. Expanding state-funded financial aid and research grants - Reducing reliance on federal financial aid programs like Pell Grants by bolstering the Cal Grant system and securing alternative funding sources.
3. Enshrining legal protections at the state level - Codifying Title I, IDEA, and OCR-equivalent protections into state law to prevent the erosion of civil rights in education.
4. Investing in educator recruitment and retention - Creating new state-funded teacher pipelines to counteract the anticipated collapse of federal teacher support programs.

This is not just a defensive measure-it is an opportunity to redefine California's role as a global leader in public education. If we navigate this moment strategically, we may not only preserve the integrity of our institutions but also set a precedent for how states can sustain equitable education in an era of federal abandonment.

I would love to remain part of this conversation and how we can collectively organize to mitigate the damage.

## (2) About supporting students during and after a crisis

...The personal support and relationship camaraderie with the Complex Area staff and community agencies on Maui who lost homes and family as well, were truly heartfelt. Keeping that relationship support and check-ins with each other in the school district and community during a time of crisis will help provide the support for staff and in turn support for the students and families in the long run. ...

...One of the celebrations of Maui, is the community experiences that have pulled folks together. Encourage people to participate and convene and share stories....

## (3) Response to the 2/5/25 practitioner: *Are schools responsible for supporting staff mental wellness?*

>Thank you for including the topic of educator well-being in your newsletter. There is a very helpful report from AIR that outlines the need to look at both the individual skills, as well as the working conditions that teachers experience. The newsletter fails to address that many of the

issues that cause high levels of stress and burnout come from policies, practices, and work expectations within schools and districts, not a lack of skill from the educator's perspective. When the problem is widespread, we know that it is a collective challenge, not an individual matter. At the same time, we do have new teaching standards in California that articulate the need for educators to have social and emotional skills. It's a missed opportunity when we see addressing educator wellbeing as a liability when it should be part of the preparation and support of teachers. In my work, I support teachers in developing their own SEL skills. For the last two years, and in coordination with County Offices of Education, we have hosted Communities of Practice to support educators' social and emotional growth. Many report that they have not been taught the very skills they are asked to teach students and are thirsty for this type of support and community.

### To Listserv Participants

- **Please share this resource with others.** (Everyone has a stake in the future of public education and this is a critical time for action.)
- **Let us know what's going on** to improve how schools address barriers to learning & teaching and reengage disconnected students and families. (We can share the info with the over 130,000 on our listserv.)
- **For those who have been forwarded this and want to receive resources directly, send an email to [Ltaylor@ucla.edu](mailto:Ltaylor@ucla.edu)**
- **Looking for information?** (We usually can help.)
- **Have a suggestion for improving our efforts?** (We welcome your feedback.)

***We look forward to hearing from you!***

Send to [Ltaylor@ucla.edu](mailto:Ltaylor@ucla.edu)

### THIS IS THE END OF THIS ISSUE OF ENEWS

Who Are We? Recently renamed the Center for MH in Schools and Student/Learning Supports, our national Center was established in 1995 under the auspices of the School Mental Health Project (which was established in 1986). We are part of the Department of Psychology at UCLA. The Center is co-directed by Howard Adelman and Linda Taylor.

**For more information about the Center and its many resources, go to the website at <https://smhp.psych.ucla.edu> or email [Ltaylor@ucla.edu](mailto:Ltaylor@ucla.edu) or [adelman@psych.ucla.edu](mailto:adelman@psych.ucla.edu)**

**Send info to share with others or ask for specific resources by email to [Ltaylor@ucla.edu](mailto:Ltaylor@ucla.edu)**