

# Education Matters

December 2011

A publication of the Association of American Educators Foundation

## Becoming an Engaging Teacher

**14** things the  
best teachers  
do to create  
the conditions for highly  
engaged classrooms

By Dr. Kevin Daniel



**W**ant to start a great debate? Start a conversation with a few teachers, educational leaders, or parents and ask them to describe what a classroom with highly engaged students looks and sounds like. The opinions will surprise you. Ranging from students sitting quietly and paying attention, to students being up out of their chairs and creating something, there seems to be no agreed-upon definition of the highly engaged student as well as what the students are doing and thinking in the highly engaged classroom.

And therein lies the problem: no clear-cut definition that can be agreed upon. While the opinions on the topic of student engagement are wide and varied, there is no debating the fact the best teachers are consistently able to have highly engaged students.

The best teachers view it as their responsibility to create the conditions in the classroom for high engagement by doing certain things while the not-so-best teachers have a lower standard definition for student engagement, see it as the student's responsibility to be engaged, have excuse after excuse for why students are not, and tend to have a victim-like mindset about the topic.

For the purposes of this article I would like to use the following vocabulary and definitions:

**Highly engaged students** – students who are clearly interested and enthusiastic about what is being learned, and are required to consistently think at high levels and use their brains well. They would be doing assignments that require thinking at Depth of Knowledge (DOK) levels three and four; and understand that the fundamental purpose of homework is practice for learning concepts. They would be described as committed to the learning taking place in class and see the purpose of the learning.

**On-task students** – students who appear to be paying attention to the teacher and the work they are supposed to be doing. They would be described as compliant, quiet, and not bothering others. They would frequently be required to do assignments that are ambiguous in purpose, considered busy work or mundane, and homework is viewed in the context of getting points for a grade. It would be hard to tell if they are actually focused on the learning or understand the purpose of the learning. These students can easily be confused (and often are) with highly engaged students.



### **A look at the classroom and mindset of the best teachers**

So, what do the best teachers do to create the conditions for a highly engaged classroom? It starts with a strong belief system and mindset that they are the key variable in creating a highly engaged classroom. They believe it is their responsibility to do the following every day:

- 1** Build and sustain positive relationships so that each student feels valued and welcomed to class every day.
- 2** Have the Five Ps: Proper preparation prevents poor performance. The best simply understand that planning and preparation are critical elements toward a highly engaged classroom. They understand that it takes focus and purposeful planning to get today's student highly engaged.
- 3** Design lesson plans that are challenging and stimulating with a differentiated approach to meet the needs of learners below, at, and above grade levels.
- 4** Design lesson plans that create excitement and curiosity, stimulate thinking, and have relevance and applications to the real world.
- 5** Create assignments that are challenging and stimulating with a differentiated approach to meet the needs of learners below, at, and above grade levels.
- 6** Create assignments that generate excitement (Blackburn, 2005) and curiosity, stimulate thinking, and have relevance and applications to the real world.
- 7** *Have self-efficacy, and build efficacy and self-confidence in their students.*
- 8** Provide students with effective feedback (timely, specific, and tied to a standard) that creates a growth-minded and interested student.
- 9** Have excellent questioning skills that include higher order thinking questions, good wait time for responses, and appropriate selection of students' strategies.
- 10** **Help students establish, monitor, and celebrate goals.**
- 11** **Help students track and monitor their own progress.**
- 12** Get students to think more about learning and less about grades.
- 13** **Use technology as a tool for teaching rather than just as a tool for management tasks.**
- 14** Communicate the following key messages everyday:
  - Our work is important and I expect your best effort.
  - You will be challenged and stretched, but I will provide the extra time and support needed for you to succeed.
  - I will never give up on you.

It is obvious the best teachers have an attitude that “it’s my responsibility to get and keep the students highly engaged.” They own it and by practice, live it.

### Inside the classroom and mindset of the not-so-best

Conversely, the not-so-best teachers have a completely different belief system and mindset. They have a view that it is the students’ responsibility to get engaged and when they don’t, the responsibility is on them rather than the teacher. They tend to confuse the aforementioned vocabulary and substitute on-task for highly engaged student. They tend to have an if-only view of the world, their classroom, and the students that can sound like:

- If only these students would get focused and be quiet. These students just don’t pay attention any more.
- If only these students wanted to learn. I’m not an entertainer.

- If only the teachers before me would have held these students to higher standards for behavior and taught them this material. They are not ready for my class.
- If only the parents would get these students ready to come to school, be more supportive, and do their jobs.
- If only society would...
- If only, if only, if only...



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*Originally published in School & Community, a magazine of the Missouri State Teachers Association.*

## Students’ perspective and final thoughts

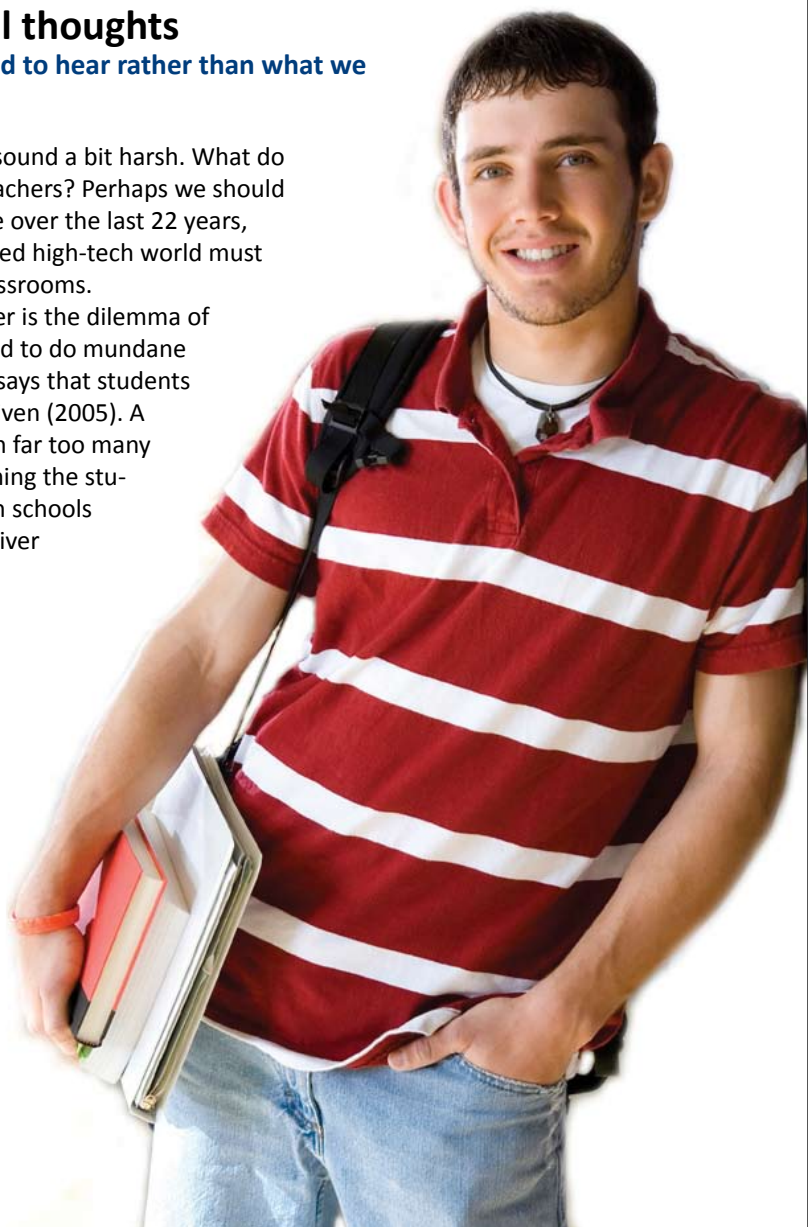
**Sometimes we need to be told what we need to hear rather than what we want to hear. This is that moment!**

**WARNING:** The following is reality and it may sound a bit harsh. What do students have to say about the best and worst teachers? Perhaps we should ask and have the courage to listen to them! I have over the last 22 years, and a growing number of students in our fast-paced high-tech world must unplug and slow down when they enter some classrooms.

One of the toughest issues facing today’s learner is the dilemma of boredom. Many students feel they are being asked to do mundane tasks that insult their intelligence. Grant Wiggins says that students can be no better than the assignments they are given (2005). A growing number of students are near comatose in far too many classrooms and the not-so-best teachers are blaming the students. This is a particular challenge in today’s high schools where students still are exposed to stand-and-deliver teaching over 70 percent of each day all day.

Have you ever followed a high school student through a day of school? I have and it is amazing what we ask them to do and it is amazing how well behaved and compliant they are given what they are asked to do in some classrooms. Yes, we are preparing students for the real world and there are times when you have to do some things you do not want to do, but let’s not get carried away! Please do not shoot the messenger!

While many of us know the significant differences between a highly engaged classroom vs. the rest, knowing is not good enough. We must close the knowing vs. what is actually done gap by focusing on developing the strategies to have highly engaged students every day. Many tempting parking spots are on the road to consistently having a highly engaged classroom. Don’t park!





# The Phantom Teacher

New report sheds light on teacher lay offs during the recession

As widely reported this fall, President Obama warned that without his now-failed jobs bill, nearly 280,000 education jobs would be lost this year alone. In reality, since the recession began, a culture of anxiety regarding teacher layoffs and the effects on our nation's schools has set in nationwide. With the federal government repeatedly coming to the rescue regardless of need, a new report by the National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ) examines the real numbers behind teacher jobs and reports of massive lay offs.

Regardless of President Obama's apocalyptic outlook for teacher jobs, the media has not reported on massive lay offs this back-to-school season like in years past. Last spring, reports about school districts handing out pink slips by the thousands were plentiful, with little follow-up about incorporating those teachers back into the work force. This fall, the silence was noticeable and left experts wondering what really happened and the overall impact on the teacher work force.

In recognizing these trends and the gaps in these unnerving stories, NCTQ surveyed school districts around the country to find out what really happened in the wake of these reported budget cliffs. To paint an accurate picture, surveys were sent to seventy-eight large urban districts, located in forty-two states. While not a representative sample of the entire country, the survey respondents reflect the large urban districts that are most affected by financial cuts.

In the seventy-four districts that responded, 9,545 teachers—about 2.5 percent of the total number of teachers in these districts—were either laid off or were probationary teachers who were not renewed for budget reasons. Excluding California districts as outliers, the rate falls to 1.5 percent. Additionally, about half of the districts reported no layoffs whatsoever.

Following these shocking results, NCTQ dug deeper to find out what districts were doing to combat the reportedly unprecedented budget gaps. Further survey results indicated that many districts resorted to other strategies including central office staff lay offs, federal funding, early retirement incentives, or reduced school days, among other plans.

One particular cost-cutting strategy of note was reducing the number of teacher aides and teacher support staff. With many districts taking advantage of this plan to save money, economic experts assert that the slashing of those positions account for the vast majority of the reported 200,000 "edu-sector jobs lost" during the recession.

While this data certainly explains some of the education sector job losses and paints a picture of the reality of the situation, states and local districts are undoubtedly feeling the effects of budget shortfalls. NCTQ points out that while districts are feeling these cuts, the fact is localities have been on a hiring spree for the past ten years, with the teacher work force growing at nearly twice the pace of the growth in the student population. ■

# Why digital learning will liberate teachers

Harnessing technology, enhancing our profession

By Michael Horn

Teachers will be critical to our nation's future in a world of digital learning. Of course, teachers' jobs will also be quite different from the way they look today—and if we do this right, they should not just be different, but they should also be a whole lot better, as it liberates them in many exciting ways.

Today teachers spend a significant amount of time engaged in what we call “monolithic” activities—one-size-fits-all standardized activities that are designed to reach the mythical middle of a class of students. As documented in the book *Delivering on the Promise: The Education Revolution*, this includes lecturing, managing classroom behavior, scoring papers and tests, preparing for state testing, updating grade books—and I'd add to the list lesson planning for one-size-fits-none lessons.

On top of this, a lot of demands are made of teachers—bolstering student learning being the overriding one, but there are a lot of administrative tasks that go along with the job, too. And in the construct of today's monolithic system with its limiting notion of factory-modeled classrooms with batches of students, there just isn't the time or ability for most teachers to differentiate instruction meaningfully or respond to data, let alone enhance and extend the curriculum, spend significant chunks of time working in small groups or one-on-one with students who are struggling or need enrichment, and so forth. In other words, they can't really focus on facilitating actual learning. In what is an incredibly noble field in which adults try to

**In what is an incredibly noble field in which adults try to make a meaningful difference in the lives of their students, today's system works against them doing so at every twist and turn.**



make a meaningful difference in the lives of their students, today's system works against them doing so at every twist and turn.

## Richly Rewarding Experiences

In a world where digital learning becomes the platform for our education system however, this whole notion should turn around. In a time-variable, learning-constant competency-based (or mastery-

based) system, much as the type Sal Khan has talked about, a teacher's job will be richly rewarding around these types of activities.

For example, software increasingly handling direct instruction creates big opportunities for teachers to facilitate rich and rewarding project-based learning experiences. In this way students will be able to apply their learning in different contexts and gain meaningful work in the so-called twenty-first century skills.

Additionally, as software increasingly simplifies administrative tasks and eliminates a significant need for lesson planning and delivering one-size-fits-none lessons, significantly more time for teachers will allow them to work in ways that motivated many of them to enter teaching originally. They will be able to spend more time individually and in small groups with students, helping them on the problems with which they are, in fact, struggling.

Digital learning should also create opportunities for a variety of differentiated roles for teachers. They will be able to pursue their strengths and not have to be frustrated by their weaknesses (much as happens in other fields). This will also provide increasingly creative opportunities for team teaching, both in a school environment and virtually across geographies, to make teaching far less isolating and provide far more opportunities for recognition among one's peers.

Some of the different roles teacher will have may range from content expert to learning facilitator and from mentor or motivator to caseworker, as well as roles like content creator or assessment professional.

The bottom line? Digital learning should liberate teachers' lives by making the opportunities for success far more frequent and the opportunities for teachers to pursue what they like and their passions about the teaching profession far more possible. And for those who have liked doing some of everything—there probably will continue to be a fair amount of that, too. ■



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## News from Washington, D.C. Reports from AAE's Office in the Nation's Capital

# No Child Left Behind Overhaul Underway in the U.S. Senate

By Alexandra Schroeck

This fall Washington, D.C. has seen education once again claim a foothold on Capitol Hill with the introduction of a long-awaited overhaul draft of No Child Left Behind. Although a bill has been introduced, the prospects for a bipartisan, comprehensive rewrite of NCLB moving through Congress this session still remains cloudy, as education reform advocates and administration officials claim the bill lacks key accountability provisions.

While the draft was hailed as a bipartisan victory by Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions (HELP) members, major education stakeholders pushed back on the committee's decision to ax appropriate educator and school accountability measures from the overhaul proposal.

After pushing Congress for years to renew the NCLB and fix key provisions, Secretary of Education Arne Duncan expressed his disappointment. In an interview with *Education Week*, Arne Duncan was skeptical of the bill in its current form. "I appreciate folks are working together [on K-12] education. It may be about the only issue right now," Duncan stressed. "I'm encouraged about the process, but it can't just be about the process, it has to be about the product. You don't want to have a weak bill or a bad bill at the end of the day."

With regard to accountability, Secretary Duncan called the version "a step back on raising standards and accountability. We've seen so much progress, we've got to keep getting better, not going backwards." The administration expressed its concerns with the bill's accountability provisions from the beginning, arguing that leaving the key component to the

states would ultimately be detrimental to students in failing schools. However, after emergency national teacher union lobbying efforts, original accountability language was ultimately eliminated in favor of allowing states to decide themselves.

AAE Executive Director Gary Beckner echoed Duncan's feelings, calling the draft "incomplete" without strong accountability provisions. "AAE applauds the Senate's efforts to come up with a bipartisan solution to the issues under NCLB; however, this latest draft falls short. Our membership surveys indicate that teachers want to be held accountable and rewarded for their achievements."

During a hearing on November 8, Republicans continued to express their hesitation in supporting the draft in its current form. Ranking Member of the HELP Committee Senator Michael Enzi (R-WY) said he would like to see "a much smaller federal role" in education and "fewer programs" and was sorry that "the markup moved in the opposite direction."

In defending the legislation, Senator Tom Harkin (D-IA), the committee chairman, made it clear that the measure approved by the committee in the debate known as "markup" was a definite compromise. "This bill that we have will not solve every problem in elementary and secondary education...No bill has everything everybody wants." He said the central question is: Does it advance the cause of finding proper balances between federal, state, and local?

As the debate continues, the real question is whether this legislation can be passed in time to circumvent the federal waiver process the Department of Education put in motion due to inaction this fall. Thirty-nine states, plus the District of Co-



lumbia, have announced their intention to apply for the waivers that will relinquish their state's requirement to follow current federal NCLB provisions and guidelines.

Insiders predict that it doesn't appear that the bill will be approved in time to head off the waiver package before year's end, as the Senate will be preoccupied with spending bills and long-range proposals for cutting the federal deficit.

"Ultimately, the decision to bring legislation to the floor rests with Senate leadership," said a Senator Harkin spokesperson. "Chairman Harkin is working with them on the bipartisan legislation approved by the HELP Committee last month, but he is also aware that the Senate floor schedule is extremely crowded." ■



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*for the then-ranking member of the House Congressional Committee on Education and the Workforce.*

# Giving Choices to Educators

## AAE and National School Choice Week January 22-28, 2012



will once again join with other like-minded groups in signing onto National School Choice Week this January. At AAE, we recognize that school choice is a vital component of the education reform movement. We know that students learn differently, so a one-size-fits-all learning environment is mostly counterproductive in today's world. Parents must have the choice of where to educate their children. And as educators, we must recognize the possibilities for advancement and positive growth in the profession through school choice.

AAE Executive Director Gary Beckner called the movement vital to supporting educators in all arenas. "Our primary

goal as an organization is to empower, protect, and represent all professional educators," he stated. "Once limited to rigid traditional school-terms and schedules, teachers are employed in traditional public schools, charters, private schools, religious schools, and online schools just to name a few. Educators will, in turn, have choices themselves when deciding when, where, and how to teach kids."

Politicians and education reformers are often making the decisions that directly affect teachers in the classroom without proper input from those on the front lines of implementing new policies. As a professional association of educators, AAE recognizes that we are uniquely positioned to join the conversation and

make sure AAE member voices are heard in this debate. By joining this network of organizations we can directly effect policy that will have a profound impact on improving and modernizing education.

While still in the early stages of planning activities, AAE looks forward to showcasing and supporting our member teachers in all educational settings. AAE members will appear in a new video series entitled, "School Choice in Action for Educators" planned for January. Please check in with the AAE website periodically for more information. We hope to see some of our member leaders this January! ■

### NATIONAL SchoolChoice WEEK

This January, the grassroots movement known as National School Choice Week will once again occur in cities across the country. School choice advocates across the nation will gather to shine a spotlight on effective education options for every child.

According to organizers their message is simple: "We need a K-12 education system that provides a wide array of options. We need an effective education system that has the flexibility to personalize and motivate students and allow parents to choose the school that is best for their children."

National School Choice Week was created to provide a concentrated focus on the mission—a time for the media and the public to hear a resounding message and a time to bring new voices into the chorus. No one organization is behind this effort. The majority of the organizations working

on events and rallies come from a variety of school reform organizations.

While all may have a focus including charter school growth and success, curbing out-of-control spending, or union accountability, each is equally important in broadcasting the message of an effective education system.

National School Choice Week needs your participation to succeed as a bull-horn for the school choice movement. Sign up for updates about this national upcoming event and stay tuned to learn how you and your colleagues can attend an event in your own backyard.

*For more information, visit [www.nationalschoolchoiceweek.com](http://www.nationalschoolchoiceweek.com).*

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Education Matters is a publication of  
the Association of American Educators  
Foundation (AAEF)  
27405 Puerta Real, Suite 230  
Mission Viejo, CA 92691-6388

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Presorted Standard  
US Postage Paid  
#400  
Laguna Niguel, CA

A close-up photograph of a Christmas tree branch with a large, shiny gold ornament hanging from it. The background is softly blurred, showing other branches and lights. The entire image is framed by a thin yellow border.

*Merry Christmas  
and  
Happy Holidays  
Best wishes for the new year*

*From all of us at the  
Association of American Educators*