Now is the moment to lean into student agency

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With summer and fall planning top of mind for educators across the country, one stubborn challenge is students' online attendance and engagement—or, precisely, the lack of it. In many schools and districts, half or less of their students participate in remote learning.

Many students are unable to participate virtually due to resource constraints. For those who can, it's become abundantly clear that grades alone are insufficient to motivate learning.

Take, for example, the distance learning plan created by Chaffey Joint Union High School District in California, which says that schoolwork completed by students through the end of the year can only preserve and improve grades, but not lower them. According to Rocky Bragg, a high school English teacher in the district, this policy has created some havoc. Many teachers watched their students brush off assignments and disappear from class.

The policy is pragmatic, responding to the fact that many students are dealing with stress, trauma, and extra family responsibilities that impact their ability to focus on school. But it also illuminates just how little value schoolwork has, from some students' perspectives, except to feed a grade.

But Bragg has witnessed a different reaction in his classes. He's consistently seen high attendance in synchronous online classes since the school closed, and almost all his English students submitted the epic poems they'd been working on for the last few weeks.

What's behind this rare level of engagement during such a traumatic and trying time? One factor is student agency. As it turns out, nurturing students' abilities to contribute and lead can have big payoffs as schools face ongoing uncertainty.

Agency as both a learning outcome—and a precious resource

Agency is generally defined as an important learning outcome, characterized by the ability for students to set and pursue their own learning goals. It is an ingredient for their success through college and careers, and it is also a frequently cited goal among educators working to reimagine teaching and learning. Our Canopy Project, which documented student-centered learning plans in schools, found that three-quarters of them are designed to foster student agency.

But in addition to being an important outcome, student agency may also be an undervalued resource for schools, especially when they have less control over how to structure students' time and attention. The impacts of COVID-19 are highlighting at least three ways in which schools can benefit from nurturing students' agency:

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1. Benefits to student engagement and learning

Bragg shares his classroom with dozens of other teachers: his own students. In a four-week unit on Albert Camus' "The Stranger," his senior year English students helped design guiding questions and themes, decided on daily and weekly assignments, determined how assessment and evaluation would be conducted, led each day's discussion, and held each other accountable to mutually agreed-upon expectations.

With students largely running the show, what was there left to do? Bragg described his duties as "back-seat driving"—synthesizing, challenging, questioning, and giving feedback. In cases where Bragg did have a role, like generating discussion questions, they were assigned by his students. In essence, responsibilities between the teacher and the learner flipped.

Shifting to this approach wasn't easy. "It was stressful, it was difficult, and it required a ton of energy and patience," Bragg wrote. But it also wasn't just one more responsibility on top of everything else teachers must do. Instead, Bragg's focus on agency eventually rebalanced the responsibilities in his classroom so that duties became shared between students and the teacher. In turn, students retained greater motivation to continue their learning even during the shift to remote instruction.

In a similar vein, Phyllis Lockett, founder and CEO of the education nonprofit LEAP Innovations, has argued that the charter network Distinctive Schools has had a smoother transition to at-home learning, due in part to a longtime focus on student-directed learning pathways.

How to start:

Teachers can use school closures as opportunities for what Bragg calls "unlearning" of conventional roles and protocols. Building this kind of learning culture won't happen overnight, but there are ways for teachers and parents to nurture it. Teachers can:

- introduce more student control over activities, schedules, and assessments during remote learning.

- invite students to develop homegrown projects related to their own curiosities and interests, or host a "skill share" to teach something new to their peers.

2. Benefits to social and emotional well-being

The benefits of nurturing agency can extend beyond academics, too. As educators across the country scramble to support their students' social and emotional needs during this time, they may find that students themselves can also play a big role in helping one another.

Bragg's district has restricted the use of Zoom by teachers due to privacy concerns. But he encouraged his students to set up their own video conferences for peer support. This isn't just friends getting together to chat—the students are deliberately planning the calls for all their classmates to discuss how the pandemic is affecting their learning and well-being.

How to start:

- Teachers and school administrators can incorporate students into their efforts to check in with families. Having students call each other and report back could supplement staff efforts to reach all families.

- Students can contribute or take the lead on strategies to raise morale and support well-being. For instance, students at Van Ness Elementary school in Washington, D.C. are recording videos that their teachers quickly compile into a remote-learning version of the school's daily morning routines for community-building.

3. Benefits to school operations

Even before COVID-19, teachers and staff were being asked to do more than they had time and energy for. Now, in short order, most schools have to rapidly adapt their instructional models and operations. Even with the CARES Act financial stimulus, school leaders are having trouble making the math work when facing existing capacity constraints, ongoing uncertainty about how schools can reopen, and a looming recession.

But some schools have taken the opportunity to invite students—usually considered the *beneficiaries* of resources—to pitch in and become resources themselves.

In Miami, students at Hammocks Middle School in Miami are responsible for managing a Genius Bar to support their peers and teachers with tech help, including remote support during the pandemic.

Similarly, in Massachusetts, Burlington High School has long been lauded for its student-run technology help desk, where students provide tech support and earn credit for doing so. In the

chaos caused by stay-at-home orders, the school didn't immediately have structures in place for students to respond to tech issues remotely. But the requests for help are coming in fast, and they recently created a Google Classroom tutorial video for teachers.

In addition to creating applied and relevant learning experiences for students, programs like Burlington's enable schools to rely on students to help and contribute in meaningful ways—rather than shouldering new costs for those supports.

How to start:

- Teachers, staff, and students can work together to identify operational needs—like tech support, attendance, peer tutoring, or class planning—that students can take the lead on.

- Administrators and policymakers can pave pathways for student contributions to be valued, such as formalizing them through courses that count for school credit. Creating these pathways helps reduce the risk of student contributions remaining peripheral or haphazard if not embedded thoughtfully into the core of the school's model.

In a recent Medium post where Bragg described his student-driven classroom, he wrote that conventional education wisdom "has embedded in our curriculum and infrastructure a natural tendency *to save* and *to do for* our students." There's no question that schools must equitably provide support to struggling students. But school leaders focused on building student agency during and beyond COVID-19 may see increased engagement and attendance.

And over time, they'll find that students can contribute to running the school in increasingly valuable ways.

This piece was originally published here on EdSurge.

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