



Students as Meaning Makers: Why Academic Solutions Aren't Enough

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This white paper underscores the need to create an educational culture built around hope, resilience, and belonging to address declining student motivation and engagement in PreK-12 education. It also explains how Battelle for Kids' Portrait of a Graduate and Portrait to Practice® solutions build cultures and systems that allow students to become meaning makers and enjoy personalized, impactful learning experiences.



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Introduction

Across the nation, educators are grappling with a persistent and frustrating challenge: low student motivation and engagement. Chronic absenteeism, behavior issues, and lack of effort are symptoms of a larger systemic problem—a deficit in student motivation fueled by educational models that prioritize extrinsic rewards and standardized testing while deprioritizing joy, meaning, and curiosity.

[Research¹](#) highlights the depth of this challenge: while 86% of third graders report learning a great deal in school, only 44% of 12th graders say the same. Alarming, the portion of students who say they “love” going to school plummets from 74% in third grade to just 29% by 12th grade. Additionally, only 36% of middle and high school students feel they are able to develop their own ideas at school. These figures underscore the urgent need to rethink how we engage students in their learning journeys.

To address these challenges, schools must focus on the conditions that empower students to become “meaning makers.” The concept of “meaning makers” refers to individuals who actively engage in developing deep understanding through explanation, interpretation, analysis, and problem solving, and constructing meaning based on their experiences, knowledge, and interactions with the world. In education, helping students become meaning makers means guiding them to see learning as a purposeful process connected to their lives and the broader world.

By empowering students to explore, question, and create, they transform into active participants in their own learning journey. Engaging in critical thinking, asking insightful questions, and embracing curiosity allow students to find deeper meaning and personal relevance in their studies. This cultural shift is essential to counteract the disengagement crisis and prepare students for future success by developing durable skills like critical thinking, collaboration, empathy, and adaptability.

But how do we design this type of experience when our attention is consumed by curriculum standards, school funding, transportation concerns, behavior issues, technology, and more? The solution lies in taking a deliberate, all-hands-on-deck approach to envisioning the kind of learners we want our students to be when they cross the graduation stage and equipping our schools with the tools and strategies needed to foster meaning making with students prepared to live a life of purpose.

In this white paper, you’ll learn about the systemic issues undermining student motivation and engagement, how hope, resilience, and belonging can transform learning environments, and actionable strategies for embedding these three pillars into your school culture.

¹ Mahnken, K. (2025, January 6). Report: Kids Check Out of School as They Get Older, and Parents Are in the Dark. The 74. <https://www.the74million.org/article/report-kids-check-out-of-school-as-they-get-older-and-parents-are-in-the-dark/>

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At the Root of It All:

Low Student Motivation and Engagement

Low student motivation and engagement severely impact learning outcomes, leading to lower academic performance and increased dropout rates. Students who feel less connected to people at their schools are at higher risk of disengaging entirely. A recent report found that K-12 students face “an acute crisis of belonging,” which directly impacts academic success, classroom behavior, and graduation rates. Chronic absenteeism has become another clear indicator of this crisis.

To address these root causes, schools must confront:

1

Overemphasis on Extrinsic Motivation

Two decades of standardized testing have shaped a generation of students who excel at test-taking but struggle with student-led learning, critical thinking, and adaptability. Many students feel disconnected, either “stressed about the test” or questioning its relevance to their lives. The focus on grades and scores has diminished the intrinsic joy of learning, leaving students bored and apathetic.

2

Negative Classroom Climate

When students do not feel safe, supported, or seen, the environment becomes toxic, fostering anxiety, distrust, and disengagement. This leads to diminished motivation, as students may be reluctant to participate, take risks, or form meaningful connections with the content or their classmates. Over time, such climates erode students’ confidence and willingness to persevere through challenges.

3

Disconnection Leading to Disengagement

Students increasingly report feeling disconnected from the curriculum and their school environment. The portion of students who say they feel connected to people at their school has declined since 2021, [according to Education Week](#)², highlighting the growing challenge of fostering meaningful relationships in a post-pandemic era.

Combating Low Motivation and Engagement: Hope, Resilience, and Belonging

Hope, resilience, and belonging are essential in combating low student motivation and engagement by providing a foundation for students to feel empowered, connected, and capable.

Hope is the ability to set clear goals, find pathways to achieve them, and stay motivated despite obstacles, as [defined by Charles R. Snyder](#)³. For students, this means having a future-focused mindset that empowers them to exact agency over their learning journey.

²Peetz, C. (2024, October 9). Students feel less connected to school. Here’s why that matters. *Education Week*. <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/students-feel-less-connected-to-school-heres-why-that-matters/2024/10>

³Snyder, C. R., Harris, C., Anderson, J. R., Holleran, S. A., Irving, L. M., Sigmon, S. T., et al. (1991). The will and the ways: Development and validation of an individual-differences measure of hope. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 60, 570-585.

Resilience enables hope by providing students with the perseverance and adaptability needed to navigate the obstacles of today so they navigate toward a better tomorrow. Resilient learners remain engaged even when facing academic, social, or emotional challenges, fostering a culture of continuous effort and determination. By developing cognitive flexibility, students can approach problems with an open mind, adapt to changing circumstances, and explore multiple pathways to success.

Belonging adds the final piece by creating emotional engagement within the school community. When students feel valued, connected, and motivated, they are more likely to engage deeply with their learning. Schools that prioritize belonging create safe environments where students can take risks, learn from mistakes, and experience growth. Together, hope, resilience, and belonging create a dynamic and supportive educational landscape, empowering students to thrive and achieve their full potential.

Practical Strategies for Cultivating Hope, Resilience, and Belonging

Although hope, resilience, and belonging may seem abstract, they are actually tangible skills that educators can teach and develop. By creating frameworks, processes, and tools that operationalize these values, teachers empower students to become active participants in their education. This approach fosters an environment where students see themselves as capable meaning makers, shaping their own futures and thriving both academically and personally. This can include providing and promoting:

Self-Regulation and Metacognition:

Teaching students to manage emotions and behaviors while cultivating reflective practices enhances their capacity for informed decision-making and personal growth. For instance, encouraging students to identify their thought patterns through reflection exercises and guiding them in using goal-setting frameworks equips them to tackle challenges with clarity and resolve.

Introducing pathway thinking skills helps students anticipate and navigate obstacles, building resilience for when difficulties arise. These practices not only foster emotional regulation and sustained motivation but also help develop the cognitive flexibility necessary to adapt and overcome challenges effectively.

Self-Efficacy and Agency:

Everyone needs to feel that their contributions are valued and their voices are heard. This is equally important for students in the classroom, where feeling appreciated and engaged can significantly enhance their learning experience. Encouraging students to take on leadership roles, participate in project-based learning, or collaborate on real-world problems empowers them to see themselves as capable problem solvers and innovators.

Research estimates that two-thirds of the population is unable to identify their strengths, underscoring the importance of helping students discover and leverage their unique abilities. By understanding and utilizing their “superpowers,” students can enhance their efficacy and agency, enabling them to approach challenges with confidence and a sense of purpose.

Emotional Engagement and Connection:

Creating emotionally supportive environments where students feel valued and connected is essential for fostering a sense of belonging. Schools can achieve this by implementing advisory periods, peer mentorship programs, and collaborative classroom activities that build trust and meaningful relationships among students and educators.

A key component of fostering connection is teaching students to—in essence—resource map their support networks by helping them visualize the people and places they can rely on. It is important for educators to help students build this network by expanding their knowledge of post-secondary options beyond the experiences of their parents and friends of their parents. Simply put, students cannot become what they cannot see. This feeling of “connectedness” becomes especially critical in moments of crisis or need, when diminished mental capacity can make everything seem more challenging.

Lastly, true belonging emerges when students feel empowered to show up as their authentic selves. Unlike “fitting in,” which often requires conformity, belonging celebrates the uniqueness of each student and requires the creation of spaces that honor their individuality and reflect the diversity of the community.

The Portrait of a Graduate as a Catalyst for Change

[The Portrait of a Graduate](#) initiative by Battelle for Kids can help schools and districts struggling with low student motivation and engagement by providing a clear, shared vision of what students need to succeed in the future. Battelle for Kids has helped hundreds of districts across the country shape their “north star” through a proven Portrait of a Graduate process.

The Portrait is a framework that outlines the key skills, competencies, and attributes a school or district believes students should develop by the time they graduate, going beyond traditional academic subjects to include a broader set of durable skills like critical thinking, collaboration, communication, and adaptability. This shared vision helps guide curriculum design, teaching practices, and student assessments.

By involving the entire community in developing this vision, schools can ensure their educational practices are aligned with the aspirations and needs of their students. This process fosters a sense of purpose and relevance in students’ learning experiences, making them more motivated and engaged and bringing a sense of hope, resilience, and belonging into their journey.

Bringing the Portrait to Practice®

The Portrait of a Graduate redefines the role of educators. Teachers transition from knowledge disseminators to designers of meaningful learning experiences so students actively construct knowledge through inquiry-based, self-directed learning. Students move from passive recipients of knowledge into active meaning makers, fully engaged in their educational journey.

The implementation of the Portrait of a Graduate framework is as unique as the Portrait itself, reflecting the distinct characteristics of each community, its educators, and its students. Every school community has its own set of priorities, challenges, and strengths, which shape how they integrate and apply the competencies outlined in their Portrait.

For some districts, this might involve professional development for teachers to align their instructional strategies with the new competencies. Others might focus on creating new assessment tools that measure not just academic achievement but also durable skills. By tailoring the implementation to their specific needs and context, each district can create a supportive and effective educational environment that truly instills a sense of hope, resilience, and belonging in their students.

[Glenbard Township School District 87](#) in Illinois prioritized professional development and created tools to support both teachers and students. They crafted full-day workshops focused on the competencies represented in their Portrait of a Graduate, helping teachers integrate these durable skills into their instructional strategies alongside essential core content.

Additionally, they developed an educators' guide with student self-reflection tools, which provide common language, opportunities for metacognition, and practices that lead to self-empowerment. This guide helps students monitor their growth in each competency, aligning all unit maps and teacher evaluation tools with the Portrait of a Graduate.

This comprehensive approach ensures that meaning making and the development of durable skills are intentionally embedded in the classroom, fostering a unified vision and purpose among all stakeholders.

[Henrico County Public Schools](#) in Virginia has embraced the Portrait framework to transform student assessments and promote essential life skills. They developed a learner profile, integrating competencies like adaptability, empathy, and personal responsibility into their assessment strategies. This approach includes performance-based assessments, a “LifeReady Learning Plan” for self-assessment and goal-setting, portfolios to showcase student achievements, and a tool to track growth.

By involving students, teachers, and parents through learning exhibitions and student-led conferencing, Henrico fosters a collaborative learning environment. Additionally, the district supports educators with the Henrico Teaching and Learning Framework, ensuring effective and equitable instructional practices are aligned with the Portrait of a Graduate competencies.

Measuring Impact

Fostering hope, resilience, and belonging will increase student motivation, engagement, and preparedness for life beyond school. Whether success is measured in attendance, the number of discipline referrals, student mental health, or test scores, the real impact should be whether students possess the confidence, skills, and essential academic content to adapt to a rapidly changing world. Will they leave school equipped to navigate life with a sense of purpose and agency.

Conclusion

To turn students into meaning makers and not just graduates, understanding the deeply rooted systemic issues rather than relying on superficial solutions is essential. By cultivating a culture of hope, resilience, and belonging, schools can transform their educational environments into spaces where students thrive and a sense of community and connection is clearly evident. We must nurture student agency and equip them with the durable skills necessary for employment, higher education enrollment, entrepreneurship, or service—and a happy, fulfilling life.

When students feel valued and understood, they are more likely to engage deeply with their learning and develop the critical thinking skills necessary for lifelong success. Through authentic and meaningful experiences, schools can empower students to see the relevance of their education and inspire them to make a positive impact on their world.



By collaborating with schools to integrate essential academic content with durable skills through its **Portrait of a Graduate** framework, **Battelle for Kids** empowers educators to ensure every student develops hope, resilience, and future-ready skills.

Developing a [Portrait of a Graduate](#) involves the entire district and community in creating a vision for the skills and attributes students need for future success. By engaging educators, parents, students, and local businesses, districts craft a vision that reflects their unique values and aspirations. This collaborative effort ignites a shared sense of purpose and commitment, ensuring that every student is equipped with the skills and attributes needed to thrive in an ever-changing world.

Our [EdLeader21® Network](#) is a vibrant national community of future-focused education leaders dedicated to transforming education. It focuses on implementing the “Portrait of a Graduate.” Through exclusive events, innovation groups, and resources, EdLeader21 supports leaders like you in reimagining education and preparing students to thrive in a rapidly changing world.

[The Well-Being Lab](#) is our innovation hub dedicated to developing resources, workshops, and practices to support the comprehensive well-being of students and staff. By focusing on critical issues like agency, autonomy, hope, and resilience, the Well-Being Lab gives educators and schools the tools to help students and staff embrace challenges and thrive. The innovation hub helps educators move theory into practice by creating practical, accessible strategies and approaches that empower them to make a meaningful impact in their classrooms and communities.

[Learn more about Battelle for Kids](#) and how our experienced team of educators can help you nurture the hope, resilience, academic knowledge, and durable skills your students need to thrive in an ever-changing world.



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