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How Do You Spell “Boo-Yah?”

Two students eagerly shot their hands into the air, practically jumping off their seats, yearning to be chosen. My grade eight teacher, smiling, invited them up to the front of the class and whispered some directions. Soon, they had become atoms, and were performing the “convention dance,” climbing up on a table, reaching to the roof as the teacher described how atoms rise when heated, and fall back down, cooling as they drift from the heat source. Glimpsing into a classroom of extremely engaged students, the principal’s face made the moment, and ignited the entire class into a laughter that I will never forget; nor will I forget the lesson! My generation is growing up in a world that is rapidly transforming. Mine, is a generation that desperately needs to continue to be as engaged as we were in that grade eight class because we need to learn to adapt to our environments, to face challenges, and to stand confidently on our own two feet though the ground beneath us is constantly moving. However, no matter how quickly the world develops, or how important it is for us to be actively engaged in our education and our communities, teenagers are still teenagers. The desire to stay up late, to go to a party, or to lay back and relax still exists. The key steps to creating student engagement are establishing relationships, building connections, and surrounding them with people who approach life with a unique perspective.

Tangible or intangible, everything in life seems to about value - of belongings, of others, and of ourselves. When teachers invest their time into planning exciting demonstrations, or taking us on field trips, we feel valued. When they honestly want us to be as excited as they are about protozoans, asymptotes, or tomboles, are willing to try anything to help us learn, we feel valued. When they know us well enough to incorporate our love of hockey, or obsession with superheroes into teaching us how to use similes, we feel valued. And when we get that feeling - the feeling that we are appreciated, respected, and loved - we are more likely to choose respect as a permanent “weltanschauung.” Respect ignites the aspiration of involvement. Relationships translate to students caring about the choices they make and the work they do. When our teachers are passionate about both their subject matter and their students, their enthusiasm is contagious. The virus we catch is engagement.

Connections are the result of interest, and it interest that fuels engagement. On a broader level, establishing a network of people and resources from both the school and the community teaches youth to look for support, and to step outside of their own knowledge base or comfort zone. Connections between the school and community give us opportunities to practice the skills we are learning, to approach challenges with a different perspective, and

to feel like we have an influence in society. When my leadership class became involved in planning a youth forum for our community, it was an opportunity for us to do just that. We worked with community members, teachers, and staff to put together an avenue for youth to speak out. We met new people, we tried new things, and we were able to use the skills we were learning in class to really make a difference in our community. The need for youth to feel supported by our community was something that each of us connected with, and the opportunity to make a change thrilled us. We were able to help bridge the gap between youth and adults in our community, and we were able to help bridge the gap between youth and adults in our community, and we were able to work closely with each other. As the world transforms around us, perhaps our ideas of independence and reliance need to change. Can we not accomplish more together than we can our own? Can we not learn more when we take advantage of the knowledge of others? Perhaps in school we need to be learning less about how to live on our own, and more about how to rely on each other.

Adults read articles that are relevant to their lives. They choose to be involved in things that interest them. They participate in conversations that challenge their perspective. Youth choose to be engaged for the same reasons. For students, school is a job; we are more likely to work hard at a job that we love. We need to be hooked - and not by fancy posters, candy, or prizes - but by making school a place where each of us can discover ourselves, develop new skills, and dive into a world of opportunity. This means that we need study topics that are relevant to our lives. Our assignments should challenge our beliefs and perceptions of the world. We need to be exploring - and thereby expanding our horizons.

Students must feel that they have a significant place in their environment. We need to be respected and valued by adults in our school and community. We need to be able to connect the work we do at school with the rest of our lives. And we need to be challenged in a way that encourages us to reconsider previous assumptions about the world. Creating student engagement begins with establishing relationships, connections, and creative teaching methods. Maintaining it relies on listening to the future needs of youth, understanding their interests, and acting on their input. It is essential that teachers, parents, and administrators invest time and effort into authentically supporting their students. It is essential that youth have an opportunity to use their voice, that they feel valued and needed within the education system. It is essential that every possible catalyst is used so that all learners are able to adapt, survive, and enjoy life in a rapidly changing world. How do you spell “Boo-Yah?” Engagement. ■