

K-12
ADMINISTRATORS

VAI EDUCATION SPOTLIGHT

IGNITE, ENGAGE, EMPOWER UNLEASHING STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IN THE CLASSROOM

CREATING CLASSROOMS
WHERE CURIOSITY, CREATIVITY,
AND CRITICAL THINKING THRIVE!



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When you think of education, what is the first thing that comes to mind?

From an administrator's perspective, creating an environment that fosters learning, growth, and development — leading to the overall success and well-being of students — likely comes to mind. To achieve this, student learning should involve curiosity, discovery, and the opportunity to experiment with a variety of different solutions. To put it more simply: true education requires student engagement ... and that starts with igniting and fostering curiosity in our classrooms.

According to cognitive scientist and researcher Elizabeth Bonawitz, curiosity is innate in all humans — a sensation much like hunger or thirst. “Curiosity acts as a kind of filter you put over the world to help the mind decide what information to attend to,” she says. “It’s a physiological response that helps drive action and decision-making to support learning.” (Elizabeth Bonawitz, *A Curious Mind*) Tapping into student curiosity is the first step to sparking student engagement. Giving students the opportunity to grapple with uncertainty and explore the unknown is an ideal strategy for getting them to invest in their own education.

As administrators, tapping into this innate curiosity is paramount for fostering an engaging learning environment in our schools. For instance, [Ted Ed](#) has a series of math riddles that can help students think flexibly and creatively, while also challenging them to persevere through mathematical difficulty.

Each puzzle includes a story that sets up the problem, and then a solution. Most of the solutions come in pieces and the problems involve multiple steps to solve them. This is just one example, though. Problem-solving can be done in a variety of different ways and frequently depends on the character of the class and the preferences of the teacher.

Finally, educators must empower students to embrace their own voices and choices. Doing so makes learning personal to students. They are not merely gaining new information. They are expressing themselves and pursuing their interests. This is where engagement at a deeper level begins. Students become intrinsically motivated to play an active role in their learning.

However, student engagement shouldn't end there. Administrators should encourage teachers to employ strategies that make engagement a natural aspect of learning. Share these student engagement strategies with your teachers!

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To better ignite student curiosity and interest, have your teachers consider **trying one of these strategies** that help make student engagement second nature:

Mystery Box

Have teachers start their class by bringing in a mystery box with something hidden inside. Then, have students ask yes or no questions to figure out what is in the box. To ensure this activity stays relevant, it helps to have objects in the box that loosely tie to the content and have students draw the connection. For instance, an old horseshoe could be used in a lesson about the Pony Express, or a piece of amber for a unit on fossils.

Taboo Tactics

There's nothing more tempting than forbidden fruit — so teachers should use this strategy to make knowledge a mouthwatering apple. Before your teachers teach new content, have them close the door. Have them tell students that they don't want anyone to find out that their teaching them this idea. The content should never actually be controversial, but adding an element of secrecy is enough to hold student interest.

Make a Mascot

Have your teachers invite students to build a character that represents something they're studying. Have them add constraints to ensure they think critically and creatively throughout the design process. For example, they could ask students to build a mascot that represents one way humans impact their environment. Teachers could limit students to five specific materials. Have teachers ask students to explain the symbolism behind their construction when they're done.

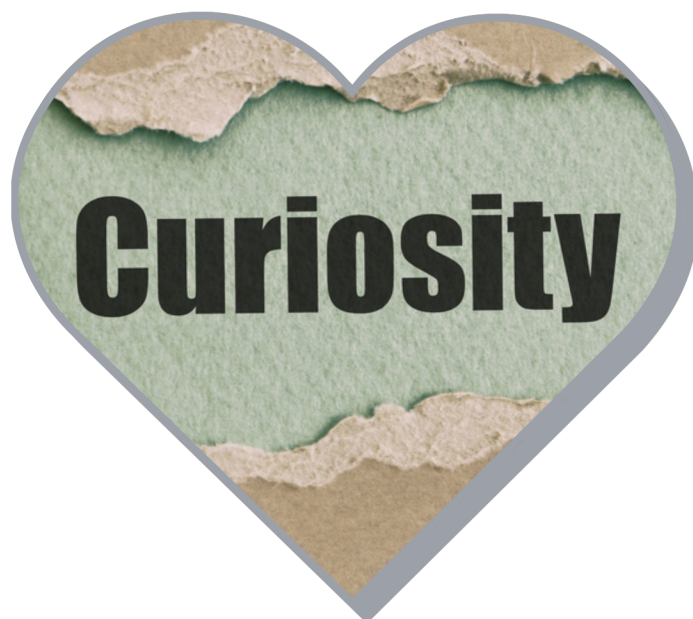
Build an Intellectually Safe Culture

Create a culture where students feel free to offer ideas and are encouraged to make mistakes. A simple change in the wording of a question can open up a comfortable space for students to offer solutions. Instead of teachers asking, *"What is the answer?"* pose the question as *"What is an answer?"* This allows students to recognize that many solutions are possible.

Engage in Project-Based Learning

Project-Based Learning (PBL) is a teaching method in which students learn by actively engaging in real-world and personally meaningful projects that — in ways both big and small — make the world a better place. Consider having teachers explore [Blue Apple projects](#), which cover everything from environmental sustainability to responsible money management!

At its heart, student engagement is about pairing students' natural curiosity with an environment where it will be allowed to flourish. Educators can create these conditions by making their classroom a place where student curiosity is welcomed, mistakes and questions are encouraged, and students know that their thoughts and wonderings matter. Not only does this make for better student engagement, but it also ensures that learning is memorable, meaningful, and fun. Simply providing criteria and constraints allows students to test the boundaries of their knowledge and explore different solutions to any problems they may encounter — both in life and in the classroom.



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