

Article

Student Engagement and Disengagement as a Collective Action Problem

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Abstract: Isolated teachers in stand-alone American schools are expected to engage diverse students in the quest to facilitate their academic learning and achievement. This strategy assumes that all students will come to school ready and able to learn, and educators in stand-alone schools can meet the needs of all students. Student disengagement gets short shrift in this framework, and so does teacher disengagement. A growing body of research emphasizes needs for nuanced engagement frameworks, better data systems, customized interventions facilitated by intervention registries, and bridge building between schools and community health, mental health, and social service agencies. Here, engagement and disengagement challenges are reframed as opportunities for collective action, including interprofessional teams, community agency–school partnerships, cross-sector collective impact formations, cradle-to-career system building, and community development initiatives. Together these collective action forms signal new institutional designs which are fit for purpose when child/family poverty, social exclusion, and social isolation conspire against student engagement and school success.

Keywords: student engagement; student disengagement; interprofessional team; school–community partnerships; cradle-to-career systems; adverse childhood experiences; collective impact

1. Introduction

External forces pose formidable challenges for educators working in stand-alone schools. The challenges start with those associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly requirements for on-line learning in homes and community organizations [1]. Other challenges include employment shifts in the global economy; changes in family system configurations and dynamics; the multiple impacts of digital information technologies and social media; an increase in culturally and linguistically diverse children, especially new immigrants [2]; demands for equitable schools with culturally competent, differentiated instruction; and the adverse effects of place-based family poverty, social exclusion, and social isolation on everyone and everything. Many of these forces conspire against the twin ideas that all students will come to school, regularly and on time, and they will be ready, willing, and able to learn [3].

Manifest discrepancies between what educators and schools provide, what students need, and what the public expects and demands give rise to a companion issue and question. Are educators working in inherited, stand-alone schools ready, willing, and able to engage all students, facilitating their learning, academic achievement, and school completion? This question shifts attention to the education workforce, schools as organizations, educational policy, and institutional designs.

Framed by a burgeoning literature on the social-ecological determinants of school success [4], this paper advances a conceptual rationale for an expanded educational research, policy, and practice

agenda. Our analysis begins with a targeted literature review of what we know about student engagement, disengagement, and its relationship to academic and social outcomes. We then build from this literature to highlight several evidence-based (and trauma-informed) intervention targets for improving engagement-related practices, processes, and outcomes [5]. Here, we emphasize the promise of research-supported, engagement-focused models that are designed to capitalize on a community's full array of formal and informal resources [6]. These collective action models offer a powerful engagement-focused reach into students' peer, family, and community ecologies [7].

A social-ecological perspective is critical to this kind of planning framework because it focuses attention on salient features of children's well-being and living conditions, particularly the characteristics of their families, homes, and residential communities [8]. School systems and their community ecologies are mutually constitutive. Contextual factors influence educators and schools, while schools influence host communities.

Social-ecological frameworks also provide opportunities to revisit the dominant, inherited idea of student engagement. Framed by research, policy, and practice in the United States, five questions launch the ensuing analysis: (1) Is student engagement exclusively "a school problem," one that educators can address alone? (2) Is student disengagement exclusively "a student problem" involving nonconforming young people? (3) Are student engagement and disengagement mutually exclusive? (4) What community resources, supports, and assistance can be brought to bear on engagement and disengagement? (5) What can be gained by enfranchising representative youths as co-leaders for engagement? (6) What policies and policy structures are needed?

These questions necessitate an expansive research, development, and planning agenda for the fields of social-ecological psychology [9], community psychology [10], and school–family community partnerships [11]. It starts with schools, but is not restricted by their boundaries, missions, resources, and "intervention reach." In other words, the desirable norm of widespread, lasting student engagement is not merely a narrow school improvement goal achievable at scale by educators working alone in stand-alone schools. It is a collective action problem, and it necessitates boundary-bridging mechanisms such as interprofessional teams, school–community partnerships, cross-sector, collective impact initiatives, and cradle-to-career education systems.

2. The Engagement–Disengagement Relationship in the Inherited Model for School

Inherited school reform models and strategies reinforce a dominant view of engagement. They direct attention and resources to what happens during the school day, emphasizing what teachers prioritize and do and how students respond. More concretely, student engagement focuses on classrooms [12]. It implicates children's designated role as a student in a formal institution—the school. Teachers' orientations, roles, and practices are assumed to be the main driver.

Consequently, principals, instructional coaches, professional developers, and researchers focus on classrooms to find out whether and how teachers manage to persuade the young people in their charge to become and remain engaged—cognitively, behaviorally, and emotionally [13]. When all three kinds of engagement are in evidence, the student role is fulfilled, teachers' work is facilitated, and academic learning and achievement follow. Moreover, when student engagement is achieved at scale, the school enjoys a positive climate, and educators' working conditions are optimized, which facilitates their efficacy and supports their retention. In brief, engaged students validate educators' dominant practices as well as the school's routines and structure [14].

In contrast, when considerable numbers of students are identified as "disengaged," important questions arise. For example, are classroom-focused interventions sufficiently potent to improve outcomes for disengaged students and entire school systems that serve considerable numbers of them? Is disengagement caused exclusively by teachers' orientations and actions? What are the impacts of students, teachers, and their relations? These questions shift attention from students to an inherited school design and conventional engagement frameworks.

3. Engagement and Disengagement Are Not Polar Opposites

Dichotomous views of student engagement and disengagement create special challenges for instructional and school improvement initiatives. [15]. Fortunately, salient research provides alternative frameworks.

To begin with, engagement and disengagement are not fixed states because student engagement profiles and trajectories may vary over time [16]. For example, students change as they mature and progress through the school system. Some of these changes may stem from altered life circumstances, some personal, some familial, and others situational. Especially when stressful situations and adverse experiences intrude in young people's lives, engaged students may become disengaged, and some may drop out [17]. To prevent these undesirable outcomes, early detection and rapid response systems are needed.

Student engagement and disengagement also are influenced by differences among their host elementary schools, middle schools, and high schools [18]. For example, the holistic, child-centered orientation of elementary schools facilitates a student's sense of attachment to a teacher, which facilitates affective engagement, and reading problems at grade four predict disengagement (because thereafter reading is prerequisite to learning).

Two successive transitions after primary school also are consequential for student engagement. Middle schools and high schools bring subject matter specializations, more complicated class schedules with more homework, teachers' expectations for student independence, and interactions with several specialist teachers. These different and changing conditions have been shown to exert powerful variations on student engagement practices and outcomes [19].

4. Beyond the Dominant Engagement Triad

Students' cognitive, behavioral, and affective engagement in classrooms is an enduring priority. Together they comprise an inherited engagement triad. More recently, researchers have emphasized two other priorities. One is students' social engagement in classrooms and schools. Peer, family, and community influences are implicated [20].

The other is students' social identities, and it is founded on identity-based motivation theory and research [21]. Students' identity formations encompass who they are, what they aspire to become (possible selves), and the identities they want to prevent (avoidant selves). All young people need help with identity development. Moreover, consistent with the classical work of Pablo Freire [22], students' positive identity constructions/formations often depend on the opportunities they receive to find relevance in their formal schooling. Research indicates that this opportunity often depends on the extent to which schools and their curricula validate the social-cultural and lived experiences of students [23].

All in all, when students' identity formations are developed optimally through social, cultural, and educational exchanges, enhanced educational and developmental outcomes typically follow. However, it is important to emphasize that achieving these outcomes may require educators to structure educational opportunities around students' indigenous cultural perspectives, values, and mores [24].

5. From Student Disengagement to Teacher Disengagement

Engagement policy, research, and practice continue to focus on students as the unit of analysis. Although this orientation is justifiable, it merits a critique from two perspectives.

First: Pathways to effective innovations are limited to what educators know and can implement during the school day. The reminder here is that when school improvement is walled in, family, peer, and community resources for attendance, engagement, academic, and social-emotional learning and school success are walled out.

Second: When individual teachers are isolated in classrooms and left to their own devices on how best to engage students who come to school with multiple, unmet needs, teachers may have their own

engagement-related problem. In fact, researchers have identified “disengaged teachers” who entertain twin doubts: (1) Whether they can engage and teach the students in their charge and (2) whether these students are ready, willing, and able to learn [25].

Novice teachers are of special interest, particularly in schools with recurrent teacher turnover [26]. When new teachers without sufficient preparation and readiness are employed by schools with considerable numbers of disengaged students, their induction is characterized by reality shocks. Discrepancies between teachers’ expectations and realities produce occupational stress, anxiety, self-doubt, and may become instrumental in decisions to leave the school and perhaps the teaching profession.

This complex problem can be called “teacher disengagement,” and it is not restricted to novices. Teacher absenteeism, known colloquially among American colleagues as “a mental health day”, can be viewed as one proxy for teacher disengagement. It implicates a suboptimal relationship between teachers, students, and the overall organizational culture of the school. But the story does not end there.

When teacher disengagement and turnover are pervasive, student engagement becomes more challenging because young people are unable to develop a sense of attachment to a caring teacher, extending to a sense of connection to the school as a child- and youth-friendly organization [27]. Furthermore, when student turnover, caused by family transitions, also is high [28] a suboptimal, condition may develop. In effect, strangers are interacting with strangers. Here, student disengagement and teacher disengagement may become mutually constitutive and self-perpetuating.

Three inherited assumptions produce and sustain this disengagement dyad: (1) Disengaged students’ orientations and action, not school policies, structures, and routines, are the problem to be addressed; (2) teachers hold the keys to student engagement; and (3) the ideal student is obedient and compliant, not an active agent able to assume responsibility for their engagement, learning plans, and outcomes [29]. Entire school systems are vulnerable to get stuck when these assumptions reign without interrogation and interruption, especially when teachers are compelled to work in isolation without both districtwide and community-based systems for assistance, supports, and resources.

6. Engagement-Related Opportunities with Better Data Systems

Public sector policies increasingly prioritize data-informed, research-supported, and evidence-based practices. Toward this end, pioneering school systems are forming specialized data action teams, and data-driven improvement frameworks are being developed and tested in service of learning and instruction [28]. Data system improvement is a student engagement priority.

6.1. Appreciating Conventional Data Systems

Student-related data systems in typical schools and their district central offices have four features [30]. They focus on academic assessments and behavioral indicators, ideally paving the way for response-to-intervention protocols. They prioritize students referred to special education services. They lend special attention to students who repeatedly require referrals to, and interventions from, student support professionals, particularly students with chronic attendance problems and those with behavioral challenges that may warrant suspension or expulsion. Fourth: These systems are walled in, i.e., they are limited to the school-specific data.

Engagement-related research concepts rarely are instrumental in the development of these specialized data systems. Consequently, designations of students as engaged or disengaged tend to be inferred, both formally (e.g., during staff meetings and teacher team-planning sessions) and informally (e.g., lunch time interactions in the teachers’ lounge).

A more subtle process also merits mention. As educators take stock of students who consistently are engaged alongside those who are not, they develop and apply labels to individuals and groups of students [31]. These labels are founded on implicit norms and standards regarding what “good students” do and what “deviant students” need to become and do. In these ways and others, educators’ labels are contagious, influencing colleagues and students. Inadvertently, engaged, “good

students” may network with others of like kind, and the same pattern may be visible in peer groups consisting of disengaged peers. Stratification systems develop in schools and may be implicated in curricular-tracking systems.

A manifest need remains. Absent guidance from engagement research and data systems structured in relation to it, working ideas about engagement, disengagement, and their relationship vary, lack sufficient detail, and are not guided by salient theory and research. Two improvement science principles provide guidance for the work that lies ahead [32]. Variability in student engagement is the core problem to address, and educators must see the system that produces engagement and disengagement outcomes.

6.2. Subpopulation Identification via Enhanced School Data Systems

Manifest differences among different groups of students must be considered when planning engagement-related interventions. School-focused engagement research offers as a guide for what to look for and how to identify and describe different kinds of student subpopulations.

For example, M. Lawson and Masyn [33,34] employed an advanced statistical method to describe several subpopulation profiles among 10th-grade students in public high schools in the United States. They began by analyzing differences in students’ engagement dispositions, i.e., intergroup differences in their thoughts, feelings, and attitudes toward school. Then the researchers turned to students’ behavioral engagement in school, home, and community activities, including participation in school-based, extra-curricular activities (ECAs).

The researchers derived seven behavioral engagement profiles, identifying subpopulation differences. For example, four student subpopulations were characterized by different kinds and levels of involvement in school-based extra-curricular activities (ECAs), and three of these ECA-oriented profiles indicated students’ pro-social participation in school. The other subpopulation profile included students who played sports, but who also manifested behavioral and engagement challenges at school.

The three other behavioral engagement profiles identified students who did not participate in any kind of school-based ECAs. One of these student subpopulations spent much of their out-of-school time reading and doing homework. The second was not involved in any kind of formal, structured activity and spent large amounts of time watching television/playing video games. A third group experienced significant behavioral problems at school (e.g., class cutting, suspensions, and behaviors).

This research yielded four implications. Each has import for practice and future research.

First: Participation in school-based ECAs does not necessarily lead to academic engagement or academically focused student identities. In other words, although students may garner important connections and competencies in ECA participation, the transfer of those competencies to classrooms and academic is not automatic.

Second, and on the other hand, student participation in ECAs all but eliminates the probability of affective disengagement and social withdrawal. In other words, although ECA engagement does not guarantee academic engagement, it prevents academic disengagement!

Third: Although behavioral difficulty in school all but eliminates the prospect of academic engagement and identification, it seldom leads to affective disengagement and withdrawal. This important finding signals considerable variability among students with persistent conduct problems. The ready implication is that one-size-fits-all behavioral interventions for so-called “troubled students” are unwarranted. Indeed, formulaic interventions applied to all manner of students have the potential to cause harm.

Fourth: Academic identification almost always operates in synergy with participation. In other words, students’ academic engagement and identification typically are bolstered by their participation in structured, formal activities at school, at home, and in the community.

These subpopulation examples are not unusual, and so the research-to-practice findings they provide illustrate the untapped potential of research-supported, engagement-focused data systems. They also illuminate needs for an expansive intervention inventory because interventions for one subpopulation may not be effective with others. Viewed in this way, subpopulation identification and

targeting enables interventions to be customized, both for individuals and groups, benefiting everyone. What is more, early intervention and prevention models and strategies for identifiable peer groups and social networks may counteract collective disengagement [35].

7. Beyond the School System: Subpopulation Targeting with Community Data

When social-ecological frameworks frame school improvement and redesign initiatives, extra-school data are a top priority because most of young people's time is spent in extra-school settings. In other words, school data are essential, but they also are insufficient because they provide a partial picture of young people, especially social determinants of their engagement. In fact, limited data circumscribed by what school systems prioritize, collect, and use increases the probability of a suboptimal fit between what an intervention is designed to accomplish and what students need.

7.1. *The Promise of Collaborative, Data-Based, Subpopulation Identification*

There is a better way to proceed, and it stems from a familiar observation. Veteran teachers, student support professionals, principals, and district office leaders who work in small towns, rural communities, and selected suburban schools have developed relationships with community-based professionals representing health, mental health, juvenile justice, and social service systems such as public child welfare (charged with responsibilities for preventing abuse and neglect). These educators have learned that disengaged students are known to community-based professionals because these same students are clients in their respective community-based service systems. Exemplary teachers learn to rely on these kinds of external supports to engage students [36].

But there is more to this story. Most community agencies have their own data systems, and many are linked to statewide systems. Indeed, many of these systems offer information that may help educators understand some of the external causes of disengagement at school. In brief, cross-boundary work holds promise for community professionals and educators to work together in a joint effort, with better data, to stop and reverse student disengagement in school.

Unfortunately, many community agency operations and improvement initiatives, like walled-in school improvement, are prone to be sector-specific. Strict confidentiality requirements surround agency data systems and constrain data sharing. On top of these challenges, heavy caseloads for community professionals may impede data sharing and cross-boundary, interprofessional collaboration with educators.

Fortunately, there are a growing number of research-supported, field-tested exemplars for beneficial configurations involving schools, community agencies, and family systems [37,38]. A potent combination of public policy changes; innovative, informed consent mechanisms; and professional advocacy for disengaged young people has paved the way.

7.2. *Data Sharing as a Boundary-Bridging, Engagement Innovation*

The main idea for future engagement practice and policy is deceptively simple. Educators, especially student support professionals and community-engaged principals [39], need to make concerted efforts to find out which students are system involved. Reciprocally, these inquiries offer opportunities to community-based service providers to inquire about the academic and school engagement profiles of the young people in their care. Insofar as engagement at school facilitates engagement in a community agency and vice versa, the benefits are reciprocal. Students learn and achieve, educators and community professionals develop both self-efficacy and collective efficacy, and the organizational performances of schools and agencies improve.

This important outcome cluster for educators and community-based professionals derives from a recommended practice pattern. Customized interventions need to be fit for purpose for different categories of student need [40]. Mutually beneficial data sharing and resource exchanges between educators and community professionals thus facilitate subpopulation identification, paving the way for customized interventions with homogenous groups of students.

8. Toward Data-Driven School and Community Partnerships

The idea of organizational partnerships between schools and local agencies is not new. On the other hand, a shared focus on student subpopulations is an important enhancement, one that benefits students, families, educators, and community providers.

For example, when students and their families are designated as “clients” in community service systems, student disengagement is a frequent companion. Once this relationship is discovered, some disengaged students may be best served by community-based professionals, in part because many of these students’ needs can be reframed as family system problems. Student support professionals, teachers, and principals thus are served when community-based professionals assume responsibility for subpopulations of disengaged students, particularly those whose needs transcend what educators and schools can provide.

It all begins with solid data systems, which enable collaborative subpopulation identification and special targeting. The ideal is to be proactive, emphasizing early intervention and prevention, in lieu of waiting for crises. Subpopulation identification and targeting facilitated by community agency data systems also facilitate customized intervention development and implementation, both inside the school and outside in community agencies.

8.1. Data-Based Subpopulation Targeting

Relationships with community professionals and their agencies provide special opportunities to learn more about disengaged students, while marshalling assistance, supports, and resources for a school’s student support professionals—e.g., counselors, school psychologists, school social workers. The reminder here is that community organizations and governmental agencies, like schools, also have specialized data systems. When educators and service providers communicate and coordinate, while honoring confidentiality requirements, opportunities arise to improve classifications of student subpopulations and gain intervention supports and resources from community health, mental health, and social service professionals.

American school systems often rely on just two subpopulation categories: (1) Special needs students assigned to special education and (2) imprecise, often informal designations of “students at risk” because they consistently are tardy or absent, do not complete homework, and are not keeping pace with academic work. The limitations associated with this school-centered approach, with its reliance on teachers and a limited number of student support professionals, become apparent when the subpopulations targeted and served by community agencies are identified. The most important examples follow [41,42].

- Children and youths who have been abused and neglected, especially children in foster care (i.e., they have been removed from their homes and placed in the custody of another family).
- Homeless children and youths.
- Children and youths without access to digital learning technologies.
- Children and youths whose parents, especially mothers, have been victims of domestic violence.
- Children and youths in the juvenile justice system.
- Gang-involved children and youths.
- Children and youths in the mental health system.
- Children and youths in the public health system, particularly those with environmentally induced conditions such as asthma and maladies associated with unsafe drinking water.
- Children and youths whose families have moved repeatedly because of housing stress and parental income shortfalls, forcing them to change schools frequently.
- Children and youths with food insecurities.
- Children and youths who reside in violent neighborhoods.
- Children and youths with substance abuse challenges, often accompanied by depression.

- Children and youths who must cope with stressful, unanticipated, and traumatic life course developmental events such as the death of a parent, suicide in the family system, being witness to a murder, or their parents' divorce.
- Children and youths who are bullied and victimized inside and outside of school, particularly by social media.
- Culturally diverse, immigrant children and youths who experience social exclusion and social isolation, particularly those whose first language is not English.
- Boys from mother-headed, single-parent family systems, especially ones challenged by poverty.
- Head-start eligible kids who did not attend preschool and have entered kindergarten late.
- Children and youths who lack a medical home and a dental home.
- Children and youths with inadequate, unreliable, and unsafe transportation to school (e.g., rural students, urban students who risk their safety when they walk to school).
- Misclassified students of color who have been assigned to the special education system.
- Special education students with undiagnosed mental health needs and traumatic brain injuries.
- Gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender children and youths who experience ridicule and social exclusion.
- Obese children and youths, particularly adolescent girls who typically experience ridicule at school.
- Children and youths with suboptimal reading ability at the end of grade three or four.
- Children and youths with school histories of frequent behavioral referrals, suspensions, and expulsions.
- Children and youths who are chronically absent and tardy.
- Children and youths with an incarcerated parent.
- Children and youths who are being raised by grandparents.
- Children and youths with traumatic brain injuries caused by adverse childhood experiences and who require trauma-informed pedagogies.
- Children and youths who are clients in two or more systems (e.g., mental health, substance abuse, homeless shelters, juvenile justice) because they have co-occurring and interlocking needs.

8.2. *A Systemic Mismatch with Profound Consequences*

Despite the fact that the above-named student subpopulations may be likely to present engagement challenges, few American school systems have the organizational capacity and workforce resources needed to identify and serve all of them. Trauma-related adversity and its correlates such as educators' secondary traumatic stress and its consequences are special priorities in the post-COVID-19 environment.

What is more, students with co-occurring and interlocking needs are unlikely to receive all that they need because single-problem interventions remain the norm, especially in schools [43]. This mismatch between what teachers and student support professionals are able to provide in schools and what young people and their families need is instrumental in the systematic production of disengaged students and perhaps disengaged teachers.

Cross-boundary interventions for co-occurring and interlocking needs are a priority. Interprofessional team collaboration, youth development and leadership innovations, and school–community partnerships are practical necessities.

8.3. Realizing the Promise of Intervention Registries

The health care sector offers a timely innovation: Intervention registries. Here, digital age technologies have paved the way for this new technology known broadly as “infomatics.”

One of the main ideas has immediate appeal. Although professionals can assess and perceive young people’s needs and problems, they often do not know what to do in the name of intervention. Nor do they know the full range of intervention antecedents and co-requisites, starting with what implementation fidelity entails and requires. There are no surprises here: Even the smartest and best prepared professional cannot be expected to memorize all that evidence-based interventions entail and require; and school systems and community agencies presently do not provide ready access to these details.

Computer-assisted systems offer a timely, practical solution. They provide practice-friendly, cognitive scaffolds for professionals who need to make sense of the data they have; determine whether they need more data and, if so, how best to obtain it; how to frame and name the student’s presenting problem or need; decide on the intervention that provides the best fit and determine its implementation requirements; and choose the best evaluative strategy to learn and improve. Intervention rationale underlies the system: If you detect this particular need, here is your best bet for intervention. “If this, then that” and “when this, then that” logic drives the system, and professionals’ choices are facilitated by a digitalized platform.

In the meantime, educators and community professionals can proceed with more conventional frameworks for research-supported, engagement-related interventions. Table 1 is an example of the kind of intervention registry needed in school districts and community agencies. It is “a pre-infomatics rendition” of what educators and community professionals need to help with intervention selection after they assess young people’s needs and get clear on which ones need to be addressed, how, and by whom. Joint school–community efforts directed toward such an inventory promise to bridge gaps between what schools prioritize and do and what agencies prioritize and do. They also pave the way for interventions that target and are facilitated by collective impact.

Table 1. An example of an engagement-focused intervention registry.

Focal Priority	Possible Root Cause	Possible Strategies	Intervention Target
Individual-Level Engagement and Disengagement Challenges	Mismatch between learning style and teachers’ pedagogy	Response-to-Intervention (RTI) frameworks Culturally-competent pedagogy and differentiated instruction	Affective and Cognitive Engagement
-	Social and Emotional Learning Needs	Evidence-based SEL programs Mindset Interventions	Affective, Cognitive, and Behavioral Engagement
-	Medical, Mental, and Dental Health Needs and Challenges	School-based or School-Linked Health and Mental Health Services Evidence-based parent involvement and engagement strategies	Cognitive and Affective Disengagement Behavioral and Affective Disengagement
-	Family-related factors extending to regular on-time arrival and attendance	Family Support Interventions Career Counseling and Occupational Support for Families with Economic Challenges	Affective Engagement and Affective Disengagement
-	Perceived social isolation	School-sponsored, co-curricular and extra-curricular activities “Looping strategies” in concert with positive youth development programming	Behavioral and Affective Engagement Cognitive, Affective, and Behavioral Engagement
Individual-Level Engagement and Disengagement Challenges	System involvement in foster care, juvenile justice, and mental health	Collaboration among school-leaders, educators, as well as community-based service providers and caregivers Trauma-Informed Interventions	Affective, Cognitive, and Behavioral Disengagement Cognitive and Behavioral Disengagement
Peer Group Barriers and Challenges to Engagement	Identity-based Motivational Needs and Challenges: School is “Road to Nowhere	Motivational Interviewing Cradle-to-Career System Building Youth-Led Educational and Formal Learning Activities	Affective, Cognitive, and Behavioral Disengagement Affective, Cognitive, and Behavioral Disengagement
Peer Group Barriers and Challenges to Engagement	Anti-Social Peer Group Identity-based Motivational Needs and Challenges: School is “Road to Nowhere	Evidence-based group counseling interventions Restorative Justice Programs Motivational Interviewing Cradle-to-Career System Building Youth-Led Educational and Formal Learning Activities	Affective and Behavioral Disengagement Affective, Cognitive, and Behavioral Disengagement Affective, Cognitive, and Behavioral Disengagement
-	Youth Gang involvement Anti-Social Peer Group	Career Counseling Evidence-based group counseling interventions Restorative Justice Programs	Affective and Behavioral Disengagement
-	Youth Gang involvement	Law Enforcement Collaborations Social Work-Assisted School-to-Work Programs Career Counseling	Affective and Behavioral Disengagement

Table 1. *Cont.*

Focal Priority	Possible Root Cause	Possible Strategies	Intervention Target
-	-	Law Enforcement Collaborations Social Work-Assisted School-to-Work Programs	Affective and Behavioral Disengagement
Teacher- and Classroom-Level Challenges	Negative teacher attributions about student capacity to learn	Teacher-focused mindset interventions	Affective, Cognitive, and Behavioral engagement
-	Limitations and Gaps in teachers' skills/professional repertoires	Professional Learning Communities centered on culturally-responsive and differentiated learning strategies	Teacher (affective and behavioral) disengagement
-	Teacher (Social) Isolation and Withdrawal	Professional Learning Communities, Classroom-linked interprofessional service teams	Teacher affective and social disengagement
-	Teachers' workloads and working conditions	Paraprofessional teaching assistants, revised job descriptions, block scheduling	Teacher affective, cognitive, and behavioral disengagement
School Organization and School-Level Barriers to Engagement	Corrosive/Difficult School Climate	Evidence-based School-Climate Interventions	Teacher engagement, efficacy, and emotional resilience
-	-	Positive Behavioral Intervention and Support Systems	Student behavioral and affective engagement
School Organization Barriers to Engagement	Sub-optimal School Leadership	Embedded professional development for principals	Teacher/School Staff Engagement
-	Wall-in/Building Centered Improvement Planning	School-family-community partnerships, including collaborations with parents and business leaders	Parent, family, and community engagement and disengagement.
District-Level Barriers to Engagement	Sub-Optimal Data Systems No District policies for supporting engagement and addressing disengagement and its correlates Sub-Optimal hiring practices, polices, and training	Identify district wide improvement measures as well as capacity for RTI and PBIS program implementation Comprehensive systems of learning support and tailored professional development supports and resources needed for capacity building and implementation. Customize hiring practices/new teacher induction programs to improve readiness to serve students and their families	Student and teacher disengagement Student and teacher disengagement Student, teacher, and family disengagement.
Community-based Barriers to	Varying combinations of housing stress, drug trafficking and substance use, food insecurity, crime, and delinquency	Comprehensive, integrated family support & community development initiatives which are connected to comprehensive learning support systems in schools	Student and family disengagement
-	Socially isolated, excluded, and/or under-supported families	Research-based family support initiatives with neighborhood collective efficacy initiatives.	Student and family disengagement

9. Five Collective Action Models

Teachers and student support staff members are not the only professionals charged with working alone with disengaged young people who may have co-occurring, interlocking needs. Like teachers, community-based professionals frequently are expected to engage clients in solo practice, encouraging and persuading them to comply with the specialized interventions they select and implement. Like teachers, these professionals need manageable workloads and supportive organizational environments, together with responsive technical assistance, social supports, and requisite resources. Like teachers, community professionals' isolated work with challenging, disengaged clients brings risks of secondary traumatic stress [44], which helps to explain why service provider turnover in mental health, juvenile justice, and child welfare agencies matches teacher turnover.

Several practical questions arise immediately. How can long-standing boundaries between educators and community professionals and between school system and community agencies be bridged? Who will do this work? What are the prerequisites and co-requisites? What short-term progress indicators mark the way? What desirable long-term outcomes justify the extra effort? Because every innovation requires adult learning, what are the implications for preservice education, professional development programs, and school district policy?

Five collective action models have gained currency as innovations for improving the system of professions with their respective organizations (e.g., educators and schools, social workers and child welfare agencies, psychologists and mental health) and specialized policy silos. Individually and together they can be viewed in a special way: They are systems' interventions that proceed with boundary-crossing and bridge-bridging mechanisms, and they introduce new models for what a school is and aims to accomplish [45].

9.1. *Interprofessional Team Collaboration*

Interprofessional team collaboration involving educators and community professionals is the first model. Where these teams are concerned, people are the unit of analysis, and the focus is on ending every professional's isolation by providing ready access to technical assistance, social supports, and new resources.

Though attractive on the drawing board, this cross-boundary intervention often has been difficult to develop and even more challenging to sustain [46]. Emergent exemplars pave the way for others developed to fit local contexts, meeting data-informed needs and involving consequential local determinations regarding who hosts teams, how they are supported and resourced, and whether student engagement is a top priority.

Furthermore, enduring assumptions about students' external barriers to attendance, engagement, learning, and success in school have been instrumental in a team practice model which excuses and excludes teachers, omits pedagogy, and rules out collaborative practice between teachers, student support professionals, and community professionals. This model can be called "fix, then teach", and it is founded on the popular mantra. All students should come to school ready and able to learn. Teams founded on this view assume that teachers, their pedagogy, and the school overall are optimal; the problem is with the students.

Alternatively, teachers are central team members because they offer important data about kids, and they also need help with ones who are not engaged. In this configuration, teams strive to ensure that children come to school ready, willing, and able to engage and learn, but also, teachers and schools overall are ready for the engagement, learning, and academic achievement of all students. This team dual agenda—students ready to learn and educators ready for all students—depends on mutually beneficial knowledge and resource exchanges among student support professionals, teachers, and community service providers. Formal protocols have been developed accordingly for interprofessional teams that include teacher leaders.

9.2. School–Community Partnerships

Professionals from schools and community agencies are not likely to team up effectively and sustainably unless their host organizations prioritize this cross-boundary work, providing conducive conditions, allocating resources, and rewarding it. Toward this end, schools, community agencies, businesses, and higher education form partnerships. Here, organizations are the unit of analysis. School and community agency policies, organizational structures, and recommended routines provide suitable working conditions for individuals and teams in schools and community agencies.

Language matters, particularly for educators. Adelman and Taylor [46], for example, refer to interprofessional teams and school–community partnerships as structural components in comprehensive systems of learning supports. The emphasis on “learning” appeals to educators and enables them to connect the efforts of community agency professionals to their accountabilities as educators. Reciprocally, community service providers need to know how and why student engagement and overall school success facilitate their work with young people called “clients” and “service users” in their respective health, mental health, and social services systems.

9.3. A Grand Partnership of Sector-Specific Partnerships: Toward Collective Impact

As these school-focused, community partnerships are developed, their advocates and leaders may make an important discovery. Other partnerships have been formed to address specialized child, family, and community needs, and they operate in other institutional sectors. Prominent examples include child welfare partnerships, juvenile justice partnerships, substance abuse prevention partnerships, mental health partnerships, and public health partnerships.

Although the familiar phrase “the more, the merrier” may apply, there are manifest risks and challenges associated with many silo-like partnerships. The limitations extend to schools, disengaged students with co-occurring needs, families involved in more than one system, and resource-strapped urban, inner-ring suburban, and rural communities. In the worst cases, partnerships called “collaborative” are something else because their leaders compete for members and resources, and disengaged young people continue to fall through the cracks.

This all-too-familiar problem illuminates a need for connected partnership systems. Phrases such as “the partnership of partnerships” introduce the idea, signaling the potential for place-based collective action and civic capacity to address multiple needs, which are not restricted to a single sector. The idea of collective impact partnership configurations, presently developed for single-sector initiatives, may be adapted and reconfigured for this purpose [47].

9.4. Equitable Cradle-to-Career Systems Founded on Institutional Trust

In today’s world, educational opportunity pathways increasingly are known as cradle-to-career education systems. Some models proceed with collective impact-like partnerships described as “all one system”. Examples in the USA start with STRIVE Together, Ready by 21, and Promise Neighborhoods (fashioned, in part, after the Harlem Children’s Zone). All are structured to unite early childhood education, K-12 schools, and postsecondary education systems. All qualify as collective action formations with enormous potential for enhancing student engagement, academic learning and achievement, and graduation.

Significantly, these new systems offer a student engagement innovation. It is founded on what Yeager, Purdie-Vaughns, Hooper, and Cohen [48] call institutional trust. Institutional trust starts with students’ here-and-now experience with their school, including quality of treatment they receive from educators, particularly teachers [49]. Trust also is founded on the extent to which young people believe that their school system offers accessible, equitable, and effective opportunity pathways to suitable employment, postsecondary education, and productive, healthy adult lives. All in all, student and family trust in the system is a consequential social determinant of student engagement, particularly for culturally diverse young people who, in today’s world, wonder whether they matter.

The development of effective cradle-to-career education systems is not easy, and the work is complicated because local leaders and state policy makers do not think and plan alike [50]. For example, some leaders prioritize young people's engagement in planning [51], while others are controlled by adults in civic leadership roles.

Challenges also loom when there are no nearby community colleges, four-year colleges, universities, and career-technical education institutions. Just as "food deserts" add to the challenges of health-enhancing nutrition, and "digital deserts" describe on-line learning barriers, "higher education deserts" compound the difficulty of building effective cradle-to-career education system building [52,53]. When these challenges are omnipresent, student engagement problems likely co-occur.

9.5. Structural Disengagement in the School-to-Prison Pipeline

Meanwhile, a competing, suboptimal system operates under cover. In the United States, it is known as the school-to-prison pipeline [54]. This "shadow system" encompasses the trajectory to careers involving delinquency and crime, including the income-generating opportunities in the informal economy of the streets. This system operates when young people assess what school systems emphasize and promise, evaluate the degree of difficulty for achieving their aspirations, and conclude that the challenges are too formidable. Towns, cities, states/provinces, and regions hit hard by job loss are special priorities [55].

Viewed in this way, school dropout, gang membership, and crime and delinquency are rational choices made by disengaged students who do not trust the education system to deliver on its promises. Here, it is noteworthy that youth gang leaders manifest many of the same characteristics (e.g., an entrepreneurial orientation, special organizational skills) prized in successful business and civic leaders [56].

These two cradle-to-career systems, one formal and the other operating in the shadows and leading to prison, shift attention from student engagement and disengagement in just one school. How will vulnerable, disengaged students become persuaded that they can trust that the mainstream education system delivers on its promises? How will students develop firm, achievable life course developmental and career goals, ones that enable them to develop aspirational identities (possible selves) founded on achievable goals and facilitated by resilience and "grit" [57]? Who will help them navigate stormy life course developmental seas, particularly during adolescence, convincing them that if they remain engaged, achieve, and graduate, the long-term benefits will justify sacrifices? Educators working in relative isolation in stand-alone schools are ill equipped to address all of these questions.

9.6. Beyond Schools: Companion Community Development Models

There are limits to what the most innovative school design can prioritize and accomplish, especially when poverty, social exclusion, and social isolation are concentrated in communities where unemployment and under-employment continue unabated. Even the best education-related innovations cannot achieve the full complement of desirable outcomes. Something more is needed.

School-linked community development models respond to the inevitable gaps and holes involving, for example, family support needs such as housing supports and food securities, job development, and neighborhood safety and security. Where student engagement and school improvement are concerned, these community-based, school-linked initiatives can be called "outside-in" improvement strategies.

Foremost among the innovative models and promising strategies are ones in England. Comprehensive, holistic models for schools (e.g., community schools) offer services, supports, and resources to communities, while comprehensive community development models offer assets to schools. Dyson and Kerr [58] name this approach "doubly holistic". With schools and engaged, successful students as the centerpiece, it is both inside-out (from schools to communities and families) and outside-in (from external constituencies to schools).

10. Eight Conditions for Collective Action

A fast-growing repository of research and optimal practice models offers important facilitators for school-based and -connected collective action. Seven of these facilitators merit mention because they emphasize companion needs, priorities, and requisite resources.

Every collective action model must be fit for purpose, in somewhat unique school, community, and state-provincial contexts. In brief, the social geography matters for all interprofessional teams, inter-organizational partnerships, and collective impact initiatives. Rural school communities are special priorities [59,60].

Every collective action model develops, advances, and achieves sustainability to the extent that stakeholders' needs, vested interest, and goals are achieved. The main idea is "enlightened self-interest", operationalized in a basic question. What does collective action—e.g., a school–community partnership—promise to provide for me, my colleagues, and my school? This question regarding the value-added effects of collective action derives from several inescapable realities. Working together across inherited professional, organizational, institutional, and policy boundaries depends on firm commitments; requires additional time, energy, resources, and commitments; and necessitates risk taking. Participants must perceive and value the outcomes to commit and sustain their involvement.

Systems' thinking and models are facilitators because they enable participants to map and address social determinants of their respective roles, organizations, policies, and performance outcomes, extending to relations with other professions, organizations, and policy structures [61]. For example, systems' maps of the relationships among a school's priorities, current organization, capacities, resource allocations, challenges, and desirable outcomes yield important relationships among once-separate outcomes. For example, as student engagement increases and disengagement declines, teacher and principal engagement increase [62] and workforce turnover may decrease [63,64].

Collaborative leadership models and strategies with representative youths, parents, and community leaders as planners and co-evaluators are essential for two reasons. Every collective action formation should be tailor-made for somewhat unique places and situations, and local representatives offer essential knowledge regarding appropriate strategies, key constituencies to recruit and engage, optimal starting points, and problematic "trapdoors" and "dead ends." Representative youth leaders are especially important in schools as well as partnerships aimed at schools, community agencies, families, and their connections [65].

Boundary crossing and bridging intermediary people are needed for teams, partnerships, collective impact initiatives, and cradle-to-career frameworks [66]. School leaders also must be prepared [67]. These specialists know their respective schools, communities, and political landscapes. Like language translators for the United Nations, they are able to communicate across professional borders and help specialists understand and appreciate each other and begin to work together. Examples of these intermediaries include interprofessional team leaders, school-family-community coordinators, community-based social workers who routinely work with schools, specialists prepared to develop cradle-to-career education systems, and both community-oriented principals and superintendents who have learned how to go shopping in their local communities to obtain family and community resources for their schools and students.

These collective action models also depend on governance structures consisting of top-level leaders such as superintendents, community agency heads, mayors and city managers, county agency supervisors, and business and corporate leaders. Together they make boundary-crossing and -bridging resource decisions, and they have the power and authority to identify and eliminate organizational constraints and policy-related barriers.

Cross-sector data-systems also facilitate collective action models. These systems start with timely needs' assessments and extend to subpopulation identification and strategic targeting in specially developed cradle-to-career education systems.

The final condition for effective collective action involves *preservice education and professional development* programs. If specialized professionals are expected to work together in teams—communicating, consulting, coordinating, and collaborating instead of working solo—they must be prepared accordingly.

Interprofessional education and training programs are a practical necessity because they provide common purpose, shared language, collaborative intervention strategies, and collective commitments to a grand equity agenda for disengaged students [68].

11. A Challenging 21st Century Agenda

In the United States, the COVID-19 pandemic and the social movement known as Black Lives Matter can be viewed as catalysts for profound societal changes already underway. Other changes include those associated with digital age technologies, global economic and vocational changes, demographic shifts, and new youth subcultures.

The net effect is consequential: Many 20th century, Industrial Age inheritances no longer fit the needs, priorities, and opportunities of 21st century economies and societies. Examples start with stand-alone schools charged with sector-specific outcomes and operating with the expectation that educators are responsible and accountable for student engagement, academic achievement, graduation, and preparation for employment and citizenship. Specialized educational policies can facilitate this work.

These same policy configurations and institutional design limitations are manifest in other sectors. For instance, mental health, juvenile justice, the health system, and the child welfare system also tend to stand alone as specialized entities, and their respective workforces often labor in policy and practice silos [59]

All in all, inherited, Industrial Age policies and institutions have been predicated on the idea that human needs, problems, and aspirations are technical problems, amenable to compartmentalization and then assigned to specialized organizations and professions ready, willing, and able to frame, name, and solve them, if not immediately then over time.

In contrast to this technical view, researchers, leaders, and policy makers may benefit by examining today's engagement-related problems and challenges through two other lenses. The first lens is to view engagement and disengagement as an adaptive problem without easy answers [69]. In this view, engagement and disengagement invites needs, problems, and opportunities where collective action is needed, and every collective action strategy presented in this paper qualifies as an adaptive problem requiring considerable experimentation in the search for a good fit between effective interventions and often-complicated student needs.

The second lens is less comforting. Head and Alford [70], among others [71], describe "wicked problems" and explore their implications and consequences. Where educators and schools are concerned, wicked problems are likely to arise when poverty, social exclusion, and social isolation are concentrated in identifiable places. The challenges mount in these locales because child, family, and elder needs nest in each other such that addressing one entails addressing one or more of the others. In this problem frame, relations matter among student disengagement (and its school-related correlates), crime and delinquency, food and housing insecurities, unemployment, substance abuse, mental health challenges, domestic violence, and child abuse and neglect. Wicked problems blur disciplinary and professional boundaries, and, in so doing, implicate knowledge and organizational capacity gaps, which transcend the knowledge base of any specialized profession or helping institution.

Framed in this way, collective action strategies are central to improving practices and outcomes, and so are university-led research and development efforts that enable professionals and policy makers to better understand how they might "build new airplanes while flying them." More than a technical challenge, professionals and systems' leaders throughout the world are now designing new social institutions in the quest for more equitable, integrated, sustainable, economic, and social development, with schools and other educational institutions representing the forefront of this transformation. The quest for better, more comprehensive, collective action strategies for student engagement is a centerpiece in this 21st century agenda. Presented here as a national priority for the United States, it also represents a centerpiece for a new, expansive research and development agenda for colleges

and universities in service of improving the social-cultural and educational well-being of the world's children and youths [72].

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