



**Washington State Association for  
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**Is Engagement of the Whole Child a Sustainable Educational Practice?**

Educating the whole child is undeniably important in producing healthy, safe, engaged, supported, and challenged students who become productive citizens in our society. However, severe cuts to school funding have forced many districts to make difficult choices in which programs to support. Often times, programs that support the development of the whole child are sacrificed in order to maintain the continuation of support for the core academic curriculum. With diminished funding to school programs, can the practice of “engagement” of the whole child remain a sustainable educational practice?

Wiggins (1993) stated, “Education involves working with the whole child. Students can get excited by what the world offers, by what types of activities they are provided in school” (p. 69). Rather than just presenting information and expecting that it will be absorbed, the astute educator understands how to motivate the learner to work hard. Increased motivation occurs when students see the connection of their learning to the broader community.

Activities that engage the whole child often take students out of the school building to experience real world learning or invite experts into the classroom to impart their knowledge onto the students. These formats may be too costly to sustain as educational strategies. Shrewd educators look at their own instructional practice for ways students can engage with others, challenge their intellect, contribute service to their communities, and encompass participation in extra-curricular activities.

Classrooms with a sense of high energy seemingly support engagement of the whole child. Many educators have restructured their teaching practice to ensure students opportunities to work with their classmates in cooperative learning structures. “Students find working with classmates to be far more engaging than individual effort.” (Danielson, 2009, p. 38) Also, providing students with an audience of their peers as they present their class work often brings out their best performance. Students care deeply about the opinions of their peers. Students are also driven by an innate curiosity about the world in which they live. Educators utilizing inquiry-based learning challenge their student’s intellect to understand incongruous events, solve problems, or understand anomalies. Skilled educators are adept at crafting their lessons to ensure all levels of intellect are challenged throughout the curriculum. Students in high energy classrooms are engaged through creative and careful lesson planning and opportunities to collaborate with their peers.

Students participating in volunteer projects, internships, or service learning see themselves as contributing members of the community. Collecting donations for local charities, becoming pen-pals with deployed soldiers or the elderly in convalescent homes, establishing an ink cartridge recycle program or helping at a local shelter are a few examples of sustainable student learning connected to the broader community. Students engaged in these activities are intrinsically motivated to help

others'. They see firsthand how their efforts at school benefit local organizations, individuals or groups of people.

Providing students opportunities to engage in extra-curricular activities is an effective way to engage the whole child. Some students participate in sports and fine arts activities after school. However, the cost of participating in these activities is prohibitive to other students. Many schools find ways to provide extra-curricular activities at their schools through the use of community and parent volunteers, donations, and grant proposals. Working with local colleges and universities can provide a win-win benefit for pre-service teachers and local schools. Schools that are not able to tap into local resources look among their own talent pool to provide instruction. School schedules purposely include enrichment classes during the school day. Classroom teachers, instructional assistants, and other school staff share their talents and hobbies with various groups of students. Within the school or out in the community, many adults are eager to share their resources, skills and expertise with students to support the development of the whole child.

Developing healthy, safe, engaged, supported, and challenged students is paramount in producing citizens that contribute positively to our society. As each component of the whole child work in tandem, "engagement" is the area that motivates students to learn. Understanding the importance of sustaining engagement of the whole child, classroom teachers are re-designing their instruction, schools encourage students to provide service to their communities, and school staff takes it upon themselves to create extra-curricular opportunities. As school districts work within the constraints of reduced funding, schools are finding innovative ways to educate the whole child.

Danielson, C. (2009). *Talk About Teaching! Leading Professional Conversations*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Wiggins, G. P. (1993). *Assessing Student Performance: Exploring the Purpose and Limits Testing*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

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