

Creating the Social-Emotional Conditions for Engagement

INTRODUCTION ¹

We live during a time of growing concern about the social-emotional well-being of students. Long overdue, present thinking is recognizing that in order for young people to emerge from public schools ready to assume their many adult roles, educators need to foster the emotional, social as well as intellectual development of every student. When schools are characterized by trust, collaboration and meaningful student-teacher relationships, students' overall well-being is fostered.² Simply put, students social-emotional well-being is enhanced when the schools they attend have positive social-emotional characteristics.

FINDINGS IN BRIEF

This research brief shares insights from our study of professional learning provided by the Professional Association of Georgia Educators (PAGE) South Georgia School District Network (SGSDN).³

We found that when teachers and building leaders worked together to *create* positive social emotional conditions in their school, the school's capacity for engagement was enhanced. In particular, we found evidence that these social-emotional conditions are *requisite for creating engagement focused schools* – conditions for unleashing student and teacher initiative and creativity. And, our research suggests that the actions of teachers and building leaders make a real difference in whether or not these conditions emerge.

¹ This research brief was authored by Mark Garrison, Ph.D., Professor of Education Policy & Research at D'Youville College, and President of NewEdu, LLC, which was commissioned to lead PAGE staff in evaluating PAGE professional learning opportunities. For inquiries, please contact David Reynolds: dreynolds@pageinc.org.

² See Patrick B. Forsyth, Curt M. Adams, and Wayne K. Hoy, *Collective Trust: Why Schools Can't Improve without It* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2011); Amrit Thapa et al., "A Review of School Climate Research," *Review of Educational Research* 83, no. 3 (September 1, 2013): 357–85.

³ A special thank you to SGSDN participants is in order. Without their time, dedication and candor, this report would not have been possible.

METHODS IN BRIEF

We examined *trust* primarily between teachers and administrators. *Collaboration* and *relationships* were explored across all role categories: parent, student, teacher, administrator. Nine propositions were crafted to explore these three characteristics. In turn, these characteristics were examined in relation to evidence of a school's focus on engagement, using six propositions (see **Table 1**). Propositions are statements that are checked against evidence that supports *and* counters their validity.

TABLE 1: Propositions for the Characteristics of Trust, Collaboration, Relationships and Engagement

TRUST
→ Teachers trust administrators
→ Administrators trust teachers

COLLABORATION
→ School staff view students as collaborators
→ School staff view parents as collaborators
→ Teachers collaborate with administrators
→ Administrators collaborate with teachers

RELATIONSHIPS
→ Teachers have meaningful relationships with students
→ Teachers have strong work-centered relationships with their fellow teachers
→ Administrators know the students well

ENGAGEMENT
→ The school's purpose is focused on engaging students in meaningful work
→ Students notice and appreciate the school's focus on student engagement
→ Teachers are responsible for leading the design of engaging classroom instruction
→ Teacher collaboration time is focused on designing engaging work
→ Teachers offer students meaningful choices
→ Administrators are responsible for leading teacher leaders and creating the conditions for them to focus on engaging students

Five SGSDN schools from which we had rich data were studied, including two elementary schools, two middle schools and one high school. Three focus groups and one interview from each school were analyzed. These included two focus groups, one with teachers who regularly participated in the SGSDN, and one with teachers who did not regularly participate; one interview with the school's academic coach; and one or two student focus groups depending on school size. Transcribed data were coded by two coders and tallied for evidence and counter evidence of each proposition.

To better understand patterns identified from focus groups and interviews, we compared school staff survey results for two schools that showed the most contrast in social-emotional characteristics. Response rates for these schools were 42% and 64%. Items with the most significantly different response patterns were identified and examined in relation to the focus group and interview data. The school staff survey consisted of over 40 questions covering a range of topics. Results from a 14 item student survey were also examined for these two schools; response rates were low for both and near or at 25%. School improvement plans were also examined.

SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL CONDITIONS AND ENGAGEMENT

When we examined patterns of evidence for trust, collaboration and meaningful student-teacher relationships across the five schools, it became evident that the frequency of each characteristic varied by school. **Figure 1** (top right) visualizes this trend.

Figure 2 (middle right) highlights the evidence that relationships, collaboration and trust are *social-emotional conditions* and are indeed interrelated. Viewing data from **School E** and **School A**, for example, it is clear that the amount of evidence for the social-emotional propositions correlates with higher instances of evidence supporting student and staff engagement. Stated another way, the school with the fewest instances of evidence for the social-emotional propositions also produced the least evidence of engagement.⁴ **School E** had the second highest amount

⁴ While it is possible that some of these patterns result from the difference in the age groups served by each school, analysis of survey data did not support the proposition that elementary students systematically respond differently than their middle or high school peers. Nothing in the transcripts indicated that student or staff engagement was necessarily linked to grade level.

FIGURE 1: Patterns of Trust, Collaboration and Relationships

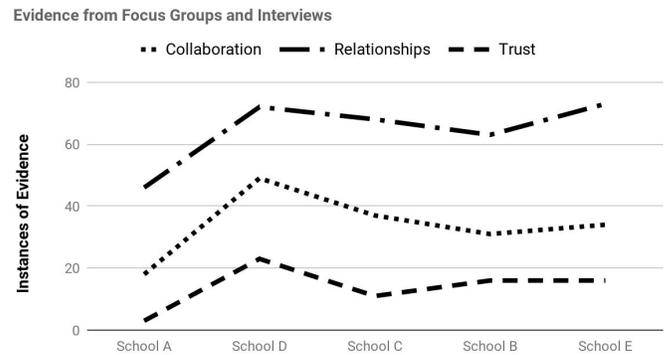


FIGURE 2: Relationship between Social-Emotional Characteristics and Engagement

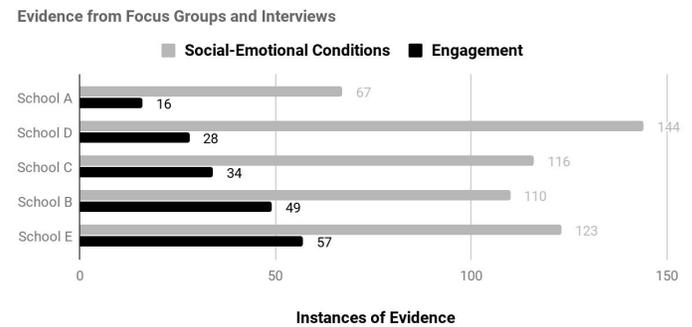
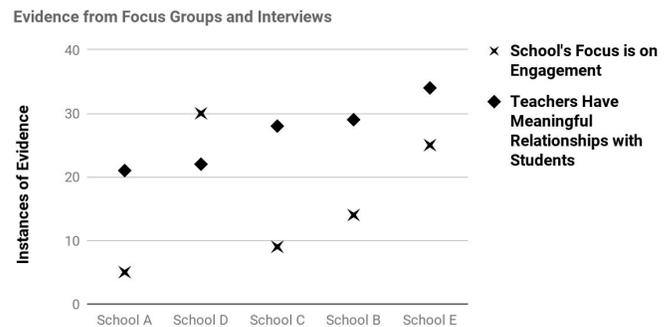


FIGURE 3: Relation Between a School's Focus on Engagement and Teachers Have Meaningful Relationships with Students



of evidence in support of the social-emotional propositions (nearly twice that of School A). **School E** had more than three times the amount of evidence than **School A** demonstrating student and staff engagement.

Figure 1 shows that the most frequent form of evidence across all schools is in support of propositions about relationships. **Figure 3** (above) shows the association between evidence of two proposition: “The school's purpose is focused on engaging students in meaningful work” and “Teachers have meaningful relationships with students.” The pattern across four of the five schools evidences a relationship between these two propositions.

Patterns of counter evidence further support the conclusion that there is a relationship between the social-emotional characteristics of a school and its engagement characteristics. **Figure 4** (right) shows that **School A** had 27 times more evidence counter to the six engagement propositions than **School E**. It should also be noted that instances of evidence for social-emotional characteristics at the school with the least counter evidence nearly doubled that of the school with the most counter evidence.

While there is an association between evidence of engagement and the social-emotional characteristics of a school, the relationship is not always present or linear. **School D** has the most instances of evidence in support of the social-emotional propositions, while having the second lowest number of instances of evidence in support of engagement. Taken together, these patterns suggest that trust, collaboration and strong student-teacher relationships are a *necessary but insufficient* condition for creating an engagement focused school.

TEACHERS MATTER

Why might one school's positive social-emotional characteristics fail to generate greater evidence of engagement? Results from student surveys may offer some clues. Interestingly, teachers in **School A** responded "Strongly Agree" more frequently than teachers in **School D** to the prompt, "students here put time and effort into their school work" (17% vs 4%, respectively), yet students in **School A** responded "Often" at a higher rate than students in **School D** to the prompt, "the work teachers assign me is interesting" (48% vs 31%, respectively).

Those two response patterns are inconsistent with focus group data on engagement. When students responded to the statement, "teachers assign me work that is too easy," **School D** students selected "Often" at higher rates than students in **School A** (16% and 7%, respectively). Taken together, this suggests **School D** students found their work less interesting *because it was too easy*; for this reason they put less effort into school work, leading to less overall engagement.

Therefore, among other things, student engagement requires that teachers thoughtfully gauge students' levels of development and understanding so they are able to design appropriately challenging work. *Trust, collaboration and meaningful relationships* each and together make this possible, but alone do not bring it

FIGURE 4: The Relationship Between Social Emotional Characteristics and Evidence Counter to Engagement

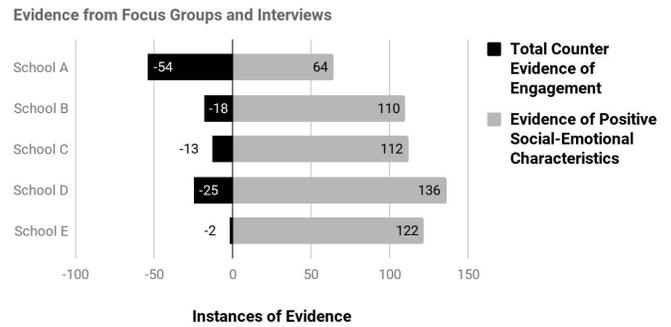
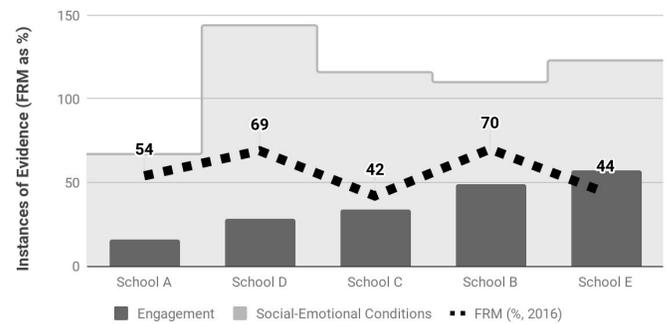


FIGURE 5: No Clear Relationship Between Poverty and School Culture



about. Ongoing professional learning that affirms teacher professionalism is also a vital ingredient.

POVERTY AND ENGAGEMENT

One possible explanation for differences in the social-emotional and engagement characteristics of a school is the level of poverty in the community a school serves. Yet, **Figure 5** (above) shows there is no clear relationship between the social-emotional and engagement characteristics of these schools and the commonly used indicator of poverty, the percent of students eligible for Free and Reduced Meals (FRM). In particular, **School D** had a higher percentage of FRM eligible students than **School A**, but **School D** had the most instances of evidence of a positive social-emotional climate, while **School A** had the lowest. Also note that **School B** had the second highest number of instances of engagement, but the highest percentage of FRM eligible students (at 70%) among the five schools.

LEADERSHIP AND POLICY MATTER

Table 2 (see p. 4) presents the four school staff survey questions where significant differences were

manifested between School A and School D, the two schools which differed the most in their instances of social-emotional propositions.

TABLE 2: The Role of Building Leadership

Question 4: "The principal of this school does not show concern for teachers."

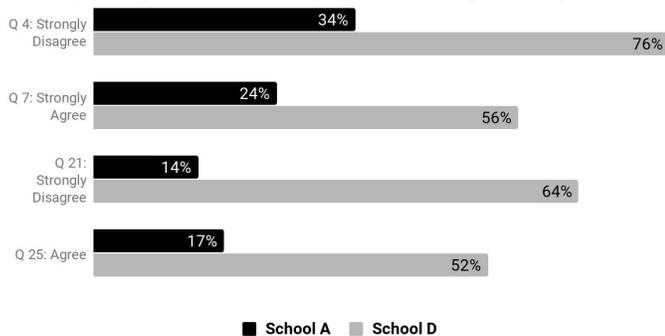
Question 7: "Teachers feel that the principal takes their concerns seriously."

Question 21: "The principal here views teachers as subordinates who need to be watched closely."

Question 25: "Teachers here play a leading role in determining the focus of professional learning."

FIGURE 6: Leadership Affects Social-Emotional Conditions

Staff Responses by Select Response Category (see Table 2 for question text)



Analysis of the school staff survey suggested a significant role for school leadership in fostering a positive social-emotional atmosphere. **School D** had survey response patterns that indicated teachers in that school were regarded more like professionals in comparison to teachers in **School A**. **Figure 6** (above) shows that teachers at **School A** feel less cared for and less trusted by building leaders, and less involved in professional learning decisions than those in **School D**.

Review of these two school's Improvement plans (SIPs, FYs 2016 and 2017) suggest that **School A** was focused on increasing CCRPI scores and generally more compliance oriented. By comparison, **School D's** plans suggested more focus on teacher engagement and collaboration. For all schools studied, SIP documents suggest school leaders' and policy makers' understanding of student engagement is not fully developed (e.g., plans mention the use of rewards to foster student compliance as evidence of engagement).

Viewing this data in light of the focus group and interview data leads us to see that the social-emotional conditions of a school are related to how teachers lead,

how they view the role of teacher, and in turn, what possibilities exist for student engagement.

Table 3 presents four teacher voices from the focus groups and interviews that underscore this point. Collaborating with teachers as professionals is one of the social-emotional conditions for learning. We believe these conditions are required to foster engagement and students' social, emotional and intellectual development and well-being.

TABLE 3: Four Teacher Voices from Focus Groups and Interviews

"I just think that because we have a voice [in our school] and we're respected as professionals that we're more willing to make the changes." (School C)

"When you give teachers a voice, they feel like they're a part of it, they're going to do their job." (School C)

"It's so crazy because we know what squelches innovation as teachers, we know what squelches interest and creativity, but policymakers continue to squelch the innovation of teachers and creativity of teachers when they dictate every [thing]. I believe in structure and I believe in flexibility but I believe there's something called structured flexibility." (School B)

"I feel like they [policy makers] have lost trust in us. I feel like they don't trust us." (School B).

How then, do we best support public school students so that they are prepared for a future in a world of uncertainty? We create trusting, collaborative environments where teachers and other school leaders design intellectually stimulating learning experiences for all students. In addition, and as a requisite for success, meaningful teacher-student relationships must be fostered to develop positive social-emotional characteristics and enhance a school's capacity for engagement. Students matter. Leadership and policy matter. Teachers matter.

NEXT STEPS

To better understand the conditions needed to foster staff and student engagement, PAGE is continuing its research with its partners — the teachers, administrators and systems leaders who join with PAGE to innovate public education. This research is centered around detailed "learning visits" to classrooms and schools to see and hear firsthand from Georgia educators how PAGE professional learning is translating into improved school and classroom practices, and how this professional learning can be further improved.