

## In this issue...

In part two of this series written exclusively for the Alliance, Steve Constantino, national expert in the field of engaging families in education, examines how the interaction of family involvement practices and peer relationships affects the engagement of individual high school students in both instructional and cocurricular settings.

(Part 1 was published in February 2010.)

## The Five Forces for Student Engagement Explored: Desire

By Steven M. Constantino, Ed.D.

The data collected in this case study suggest that the interaction of schools, families, students, and their peers, while catalysts for engagement, cannot be assumed to have an automatic and direct relationship to student engagement. The interactions of these entities act as a catalyst from which a new dimension emerges. This new dimension features five forces for student engagement: desires, attitudes, motivation, behaviors, and actions. These five forces are ignited by the interaction of students, their peers, families, and the school, and when evident in the life of a high school student act as a conduit to individual student engagement with school.

Throughout the cases, it becomes clear that as the forces for engagement fluctuate in a student's life, the student's level of engagement with school is affected. From these cases emerge students who are immersed in school learning and activities and can be characterized as engaged and successful, as well as those who can be characterized as somewhat disengaged, with others falling somewhere between the two on this plane of engagement.

### Desire as a Force for Engagement

#### Dreams and Goals

*Reason to get good grades? I always wanted to make my mom proud of me. The reason I want to graduate so bad is because nobody in my family actually graduated from high school. — Paula*

Students expressed having dreams, goals, and desires for themselves with regard to their future. They understand the correlation between their desires for the present and future, and the need to be successful in school. These desires are sometimes motivated by life-altering events, such as the death of a parent, as is the case with the excerpt from Paula's interview above. The desires of family and friends and the need for these relationships help to shape the force

of desire within individual students. In all of the cases, students had some level of desire to achieve and move forward in their life.

#### Future Plans

*My main thing is that I want to work after school. The reason I am studying is that I want to be able to help my child once he starts going to school. If he does not understand something in English then I can help him out. It is mostly for him, to help him. —Marta*

Students were able to communicate their desire to complete high school and create a plan for their future. These plans included a wide range of desires from entering the family business to being a singing star. There were differences in the degree to which students were able to articulate their plans after high school but the commonality among the students was a desire to do well, or at least not to fail, so as to have options later and hopefully the chance to fulfill

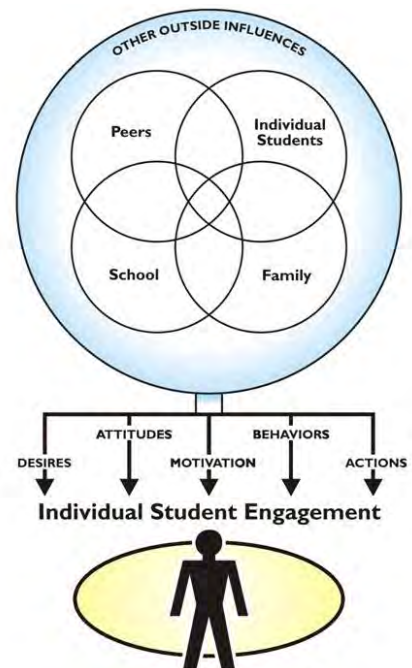


Figure 1. The five forces for student engagement in school as a result of the interaction of schools, families, peers, and individual students

Students understand that their families have dreams for them and these dreams and desires often manifest themselves as expectations placed on the student.

their dreams and future desires.

A notion not considered at the onset of this study was the idea of a student as a parent. When soliciting students for this study, Marta was very eager to participate. She was listed on the student information system as a tenth grade, Hispanic, female. Marta asked for the information to be translated into Spanish and through an interpreter indicated to me that she wanted her family to review the documents. A few days later, Marta reappeared with the signed consent forms eager to have her interview scheduled. It was during the interview that Marta shared that she was 19 years old, a native of El Salvador, married, and the mother of a one-year old. The family that signed Marta's consent was her husband. Marta is part of the school English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) program and had a very different dream and desire for her success, that being a successful life for her child.

### **Parental Desires**

It is clearly evident that students are able to not only express their desires and dreams for their future, but too, understand that their parents also share their desire to achieve their dreams. Students understand that their families have dreams for them and these dreams and desires often manifest themselves as expectations placed on the student.

Unfortunately, expectations are not always high. Students are accepting of their parent's expectations, either because they are able to make the connection between the expectations of their parents, their present desire to succeed, and their future desire to make their goals and dreams a reality, or they have adapted a minimalist approach that their parents seemingly condone. Students from families classified as socio-economically disadvantaged report no less of a desire to succeed nor do they indicate their families' expectations to be less than that of any other family.

### **Family Expectations of School Achievement**

Family expectations almost always manifest themselves into expectations for school achievement, primarily grade expectations. Common to the cases is the desire for families to see their children be successful, meet their dreams, goals, and desires, and often, do better or go further in life than they did. Family expectations range from minimally passing classes, to children demonstrating their personal

best. There was no case in which a family was portrayed as uncaring about their child's success, although the range of expectations did correspond directly with the level of peer interactions and the degree to which the student was engaged in the school. There are also data to support the notion that there are those families who do not articulate high expectations or desires for their children. These students do not see the expectations set as being high.

### **The Role of Friends in Student Desire for Engagement**

As important as family desires and expectations are to individual student desires, friends play an important and often parallel and intersecting role as well. Students report that they tend to be attracted to friends who have similar attitudes and interests and in whom they can place their trust. These similar characteristics that attract peers to one another can include desires to do well, be successful, and set goals for the future, which mirror those attributes of parental expectations as well. This obvious interaction between the families and peers of a student is the primary foundation upon which the force of desire is built.

### **Defining Close Friendships**

Common interests and activities indirectly provide desire to be engaged in school when friends hold similar plans for the future and it seems there is a level of interaction with family to assist in future goal setting and attainment. As has been stated, friends share similar or common interests and have similar future plans. These commonalities indirectly provide desire in students to be engaged with their learning to help shape their preferred future. Overwhelmingly, students rate common interests, trust, and honesty as necessary components for friendships.

There emerges from the data a clear theme of an interaction between families and peers with regards to common interests and desires as well as an emerging theme of expectations and success. It seems that close friends and their families hold similar values and these values help to support and maintain friendships between students.

### **Comparing Close Friends and Acquaintances**

*I don't know, I guess I am just drawn to that kind of person. I guess because I like school so much and I like*

learning that I guess I am really drawn to the more academic people that are more interested in their future and things like that rather than the here and now, just today ... in my very, very, very, close friends, I do think that it is very important because I don't think that I could have a really intelligent conversation with someone who has no motivation or talk about the future as to where I have a plan and they might not. — Karen

The importance of friendships as a component of student desire is strengthened when students continue friendships, even though there are differences that would normally result in less than close friendships, or acquaintances. Friends and families share specific ideals that instill desire in students, chief among them academic success in school and future goals. Students admit that they have various acquaintances that cannot be categorized as close friendships, although they see these acquaintances as important components of school socialization. It is only with close friends that shared desires prove to be a force for engagement with school. Karen is clear about the kind of person she is drawn to and how that relationship inspires her academic progress in school.

## **The Interaction of Family and Friends**

It is clear that both families and friends shape desires, and these interactions are the basis for influence on the individual student. Interactions about the importance of family, grades, achievement, future goals, and dreams are all interconnected when students have both families and friends who provide expectations, support, and inspiration to do well. Desire to be engaged with school and one's own learning then becomes the first force that leads to the successful student engagement with school.

### **Jason**

This research shows various levels of desire in students that can be attributed to the various levels of family expectations and degree to which friends share similar interests and future goals. As evidence of these important relationships, I would like to introduce you to Jason.

*INT: Do your friends get good grades?*

*JASON: I'm not sure, I don't think so.*

*INT: You don't really talk about grades?*

*JASON: Nope.*

*INT: Do you think they probably get similar grades to yours?*

*JASON: I think they get lower.*

*INT: You think they get lower?*

*JASON: Yeah.*

*INT: Maybe F's?*

*JASON: Yeah.*

*INT: Do you think they have the ability to do more?*

*JASON: Not all of them.*

Jason has emerged as a young man who is marginally engaged in school. He is involved in no clubs or sports and places little importance on interacting with school activities. Even though his grades are acceptable, he clearly attributes his success to taking the "easiest courses" and indicates no interest or desire to challenge himself in school. Jason indicated that he does not consider the expectations set by his family as high. His parents are divorced and he spends time with each of them, although the majority of his time is spent with his mother. His primary residence is with his mother, who lives within the attendance boundaries of the school. He reports that he rarely has school conversations with his parents, and outside of occasional comments about not failing, there are few expectations placed on him. Later in the interview, Jason was asked about his friends. He described them as being similar to him, which supports the notion of friendships built on common interests. Jason vaguely refers to college or future education as a goal but does admit it is important to his family. His older brother is presently in community college.

To determine if the interaction of family and friends with regard to desire is a discovery of this research, it is important to know Jason's views of his friends and their engagement. What emerges from this interview are the competing expectations of Jason's family and the low expectations and performance of his friends. Jason's own view of his friends indicates that he not only has low expectations for himself, but also has low, or perhaps lower, expectations for his friends.

### **Matt**

In contrast to Jason, Matt can be described as very engaged in school and school related activities.

*INT: Do your friends get similar grades?*

*MATT: Most of the time. A lot of my friends usually have straight A's or straight A's and B's, stuff like that.*

*INT: Do you have any friends that get lower grades than you?*

*MATT: Maybe just like in one class. For the most part they are all about the same.*

Common interests and activities indirectly provide desire to be engaged in school when friends hold similar plans for the future and it seems there is a level of interaction with family to assist in future goal setting and attainment. ... These commonalities indirectly provide desire in students to be engaged with their learning to help shape their preferred future.

While desire is not the only force from which a student decides to be engaged or disengaged from his or her learning and school, it is very much a necessary component and a foundation for the assemblage of forces for engagement.

Matt appears to be the “All-American” boy. With short-cropped black hair, athletic build, and boyish charm, Matt exudes confidence in himself even before he speaks. He prefers to dress in something more than a tee shirt and jeans to come to school. Matt is extremely personable, thanking the interviewers for their time and repeating his eagerness to participate. Matt sees participating in this interview as helpful to his school and is more than happy to cooperate.

After some problems academically in ninth grade, Matt is now on the honor roll and playing varsity soccer. He also plays on five other soccer teams outside of school and is a paid soccer official on the weekends. Matt informed the interviewers that college and the need to succeed is reinforced by his parents “every day.” Even though his parents are divorced, he maintains close communication with each of them and attributes his desire to do well to their constant encouragement and expectations. Similarly, Matt discusses the academic prowess of his friends, most of whom which are heavily involved with soccer.

Both Jason and Matt are tenth grade Caucasian males attending the same school. Yet each has a very different experience. Jason is barely involved in school, Matt is extensively involved; Jason does the bare minimum to pass; Matt is on the honor roll. During the interviews Jason was evasive and seemingly unwilling to give long or detailed answers. Matt, on the other hand, was relaxed and eager, emitting a kind of self-assurance, with eye contact, smiles, and humor peppered throughout his responses. Jason was quiet, guarded, with little eye contact and an obvious hesitancy to answer questions, and a distinct discomfort during many portions of the interview.

Matt’s parents have a desire for their son to do well and be successful. They encourage his success each day. Matt’s friends have similar interests, and together his friends and family instill in him the desire to be engaged with his learning, his activities, and his future. In contrast Jason, whose parents are also divorced, has little expectation placed on him by his family or his friends. Jason finds nothing at school to be encouraging or interesting and as a result, spends his time with friends in activities not associated with the school in any way.

## Conclusion

The interaction of friends and family can either cre-

ate or not create a desire to be engaged with school. As this study unfolds, it becomes clear that while desire is not the only force from which a student decides to be engaged or disengaged from his or her learning and school, it is very much a necessary component and a foundation for the assemblage of forces for engagement.

*Next: The Five Forces of Engagement Explored: Attitude.*

## References

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