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## OPPORTUNITIES FOR MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION

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Schools can provide students with two sources of meaningful participation: (1) opportunities to make meaningful contributions, and (2) opportunities to engage in meaningful learning.

Participation is meaningful when contributions to the school and classroom environment are facilitated, rather than directed, by adults. Within this context, students lead initiatives and inform important decisions being made at school. Student-led decision-making opportunities have the potential to increase commitment to the school's norms and mission; improve interdependence between staff and students; and improve students' leadership skills.

Meaningful participation at school helps cultivate students' autonomy; decision-making and leadership skills; and personal talents and strengths. In fact, teachers in high-performing schools tend to report that influence over decisions is shared among all groups, including students (Leithwood & Mascal, 2008).

Learning opportunities are meaningful when they are connected to students' personal interests and are applicable to their lives. For example, the practice of having students set challenging learning goals for themselves has been linked to gains in students' feeling of control over their performance, and, ultimately, in academic performance (Phillips & Gully, 1997). Other pedagogical practices that encourage meaningful participation include project-based learning, hands-on activities, field-based learning (i.e., museums, college campuses, etc.), and intra-curricular projects (Benard & Slade, 2009).

Meaningful participation occurs within a physically and emotionally safe context characterized by warm, healthy relationships. To assist in efforts to provide these contexts, schools are encouraged to review other *What Works Briefs*, including: *Caring Relationships and High Expectations (#1)*; *Perceptions of Safety (#3)*; and *School Connectedness (#4)*.

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*What Works Briefs* summarize state-of-the-art practices, strategies, and programs for improving school climate. Based on current scholarship in education, school psychology, and other related disciplines, each *What Works Brief* provides a number of practical recommendations for school staff, parents, and community members. *What Works Briefs* can be used separately to target specific issues, or together to address more complex, system-wide issues. All *What Works Briefs* are organized into three sections: Quick Wins: What Teachers & Adults Can Do Right Now; Universal Supports: Schoolwide Policies, Practices, & Programs; and, finally, Targeted Supports: Intensive Supports for At-Risk Youth.

## QUICK WINS: WHAT TEACHERS & OTHER ADULTS CAN DO RIGHT NOW

### *Support meaningful contributions*

- » Volunteer to be the advisor to a student-led initiative or interest group.
- » Facilitate an afterschool, extracurricular project in your content area. Make it fun!
- » Volunteer to coordinate projects that encourage and amplify diverse student voices. For example, Participatory Photography is a type of project wherein students are encouraged to document and share their lived experiences through photography. Participatory Photography has been lauded for its contributions to positive youth development for culturally diverse youth (Kia-Keating, 2010; McIntyre, 2000). [ajaproject.org](http://ajaproject.org)
- » Volunteer to advise a student-led initiative, such as those with pre-produced materials ([allyweek.org](http://allyweek.org)) or those based on students' own interests and ideas (e.g., environmental education week, alcohol and drug awareness week, etc.).

### *Support meaningful learning*

- » Give opportunities for choice, including choice within assignments, project topics, and subjects of inquiry.
- » Have students set challenging goals for themselves
- » Have students collaborate to set class and school norms, as well as learning goals.
- » Integrate project-based learning, place-based learning, and hands-on activities into your curriculum. Take students where they want to go—literally! Have students brainstorm places they should visit to learn more about their topic of study, then take them there. This need not be elaborate; it might include a trip within the local neighborhood. Project-based learning: [pbl-online.org](http://pbl-online.org); Place-based learning: [promiseofplace.org](http://promiseofplace.org)
- » Collaborate with faculty from other departments to develop project-based assignments that span multiple classes and topics.
- » Add student-selected project-based assignments to your year's curriculum.

## UNIVERSAL SUPPORTS: SCHOOLWIDE POLICIES, PRACTICES & PROGRAMS

### *Provide opportunities for student-led decision making & leadership*

- » Students feel connected and engaged when they are able to make impactful decisions for not only the school community, but for the larger community in which the school exists. Students can inform decisions through short- or long-term consultation exercises, governance councils and advisory board membership, and student-led organizations (Sinclair, 2004).

### *Provide opportunities that match student interests and are meaningfully linked to academic skill development*

- » Afterschool programs and extracurricular opportunities provide an additional opportunity for students to experience meaningful engagement in the school environment. [afterschool.gov](https://afterschool.gov)
- » Add career technical education opportunities to your course offerings. [cde.ca.gov/ci/ct](https://cde.ca.gov/ci/ct)

### *Provide opportunities to serve the community*

- » Service learning projects are meant to meet specific needs within the community through partnership with schools. Within service learning projects, students take active leadership roles, collaborate toward solutions, and impact their communities in authentic, meaningful ways.
- » The California Department of Education ([cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/si](https://cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/si)) defines service-learning as “a method whereby participants learn and develop through active participation in thoughtfully organized service that:
  - Is conducted in and meets the needs of a community;
  - Is coordinated with an elementary school, secondary school, institution of higher education, or community service program, and with the community;
  - Helps foster civic responsibility;
  - Is integrated into and enhances the [core] academic curriculum of the students, or the educational components of the community service program in which the participants are enrolled; and
  - Provides structured time for the students or participants to reflect on the service experience.”
- » Student Action Teams—Meaning, control, and belonging are considered core characteristics of Student Action Teams. This model for service learning focuses on student decision-making around community-oriented projects, formation of student teams, and student-led research and action (Holdsworth, Cahill, & Smith, 2003).



## TARGETED SUPPORTS: INTENSIVE SUPPORTS FOR AT-RISK YOUTH

Students who may feel a lack of purpose at school include youth who are regularly truant, often engaged in disruptive behavior, or are generally socially withdrawn at school. Evidence-based supports that increase meaningful participation are those that provide interesting and engaging learning opportunities in the school environment. Goals of these interventions are to reduce disruptive behaviors and improve a number of student outcomes.

### Career Academies [ncacinc.com](http://ncacinc.com)

Career academies differ from traditional academic and vocational education because they prepare high school students for both college and careers. Career academies link academics to job prospects while providing intensive adult involvement. Common standards for academies include 1) a small learning community, comprised of a group of students within the larger high school, who take classes together for at least two years, and are taught by a team of teachers from different disciplines; 2) a college preparatory curriculum with a career theme, enabling students to see relationships among academic subjects, and their application to a broad field of work; and 3) part-

nerships with employers, the community, and local colleges, bringing resources from outside the high school to improve student motivation and achievement.

### Lions Quest Skills for Action [lions-quest.org/skillsaction.php](http://lions-quest.org/skillsaction.php)

Lions Quest Skills for Action is a curriculum for grades 9–12 that moves beyond the classroom to build essential life and citizenship skills through community and school-based service-learning experiences. Created to help young people become personally and socially responsible citizens, Lions Quest Skills for Action offers students the opportunity to gain the knowledge and skills to make positive contributions at home, at school, in the community, and in the workplace. Students learn to communicate effectively, analyze and solve problems, set and achieve goals, work successfully as part of a team, and resolve conflicts peacefully. Students also develop the means to resist negative peer pressure, make healthy choices, and to understand and appreciate diversity in the classroom, school, and broader community. Skills for Action stimulates students' intellectual curiosity and academic growth, guiding them towards active citizenship and positive social action.

## CITATIONS

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