Testimony of Rebecca Winthrop, PhD
Senior Fellow and Director of the Center for Universal Education
at the Brookings Institution
Before the U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor & Pensions
on "The State of K-12 Education"

September 18, 2025

Chairman Cassidy, Ranking Member Sanders, and distinguished members of the Committee—
thank you for the opportunity to testify on the state of K-12 education.

My name is Rebecca Winthrop, and I am a senior fellow and director of the Center for Universal
Education at the Brookings Institution. My research focuses on education in the U.S. and
globally, with special attention to the skills young people need to thrive in work, life, and as
constructive citizens. I'm testifying today in my personal capacity and the views I express today
are my own.

Three shared problems: chronic absenteeism, low achievement, poor mental health

Across the country, three of the most pressing problems facing virtually every education
jurisdiction today are the high rates of chronic absenteeism, the low levels of academic
achievement, and the ongoing adolescent mental health crisis. On their own, each provides a
challenge to the ability of our nation's schools to help children reach their full potential.

Chronic absenteeism: Chronic absenteeism—when students miss at least 10% of school days—
spiked during the COVID-19 pandemic and has remained an issue since. The U.S. chronic
absenteeism rate was 28% in the 2022-23 school year. More recently, 31% of 12th grade
students reported missing three or more days of school in the previous month. Students
struggle to succeed in school when they are not there. Missing just 10 days of school a year in
middle or high school is linked to noticeably lower scores on math and reading tests. Many
students are missing much more school than this.

Academic achievement: The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) results
released last week highlight declining student achievement in reading and math where 32% and
45% of 12th grade students, respectively, did not meet the basic proficiency levels. Notably,
12th graders, who went through high school during COVID, had average reading scores that
were lower than in all previous assessments: 10 points lower than when the assessment was
first administered in 1992.

Adolescent mental health: There is a clear mental health crisis among our nation's adolescents.
The CDC's 2023 Youth Risk Behavior Survey found that 40% of high schoolers reported
persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness, a 10-percentage point rise from a decade
earlier. As of 2023, 5.3 million kids ages 12-17, about one in every five, had a current diagnosis
of anxiety, depression, or another behavior or conduct problem.

An overlooked driver: student disengagement

I recently spent three years investigating why students don't like school. I have come to the conclusion that there is an underlying cause that is rarely discussed but is an important contributing factor fueling all three of these problems: student disengagement. Student disengagement was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and is amplified by addictive social media. But it cannot be reversed by simply addressing both of these exacerbating factors. In my book with Jenny Anderson, "The Disengaged Teen: Helping Kids Learn Better, Feel Better, and Live Better," we define student engagement as what children *do* with their motivation. A child may be internally *motivated* to do their homework, but if they don't take it out of their backpack, pencil in hand, and start, they are not *engaged* in doing it.

We found that student engagement was not a "nice to have" after school leaders get students to come to school, boost reading scores, and reduce test anxiety. It is the essential and underlying fuel that will help improve each of these things. The research we conducted was robust. We reviewed hundreds of studies, interviewed experts, educators, and parents, but most importantly, we spoke to 100 students, following many of them over three years. Brookings partnered with Transcend, a national education nonprofit, to gather and analyze survey data of over 65,000 students and almost 2,000 parents who were representative of the U.S. by income, race, gender, locality, and age. We learned several important things.

#1 Student engagement helps drive attendance, achievement, and wellbeing.

Across three decades of research, the overwhelming preponderance of evidence points to the power of student engagement. If we care about addressing chronic absenteeism, student achievement, and students' mental health and wellbeing, we need motivated and engaged learners.

- **Addressing absenteeism:** When student engagement goes up, so do attendance and graduation rates.
- **Improving achievement:** When student engagement goes up, students' grades, achievement levels, and college attendance rates go up.
- **Supporting student mental health and wellbeing:** When student engagement goes up, students' drug use, depression, and suicidal thoughts and behaviors go down, and their prosocial behavior goes up.

#2 Many students are disengaged.

According the U.S. Census Bureau's Survey of Income and Program Participation, which asks parents about their students' school related attitudes and behaviors, only about one in three students are highly engaged in school. Asking students about their experiences in school gives us a much richer picture. When examining 10th graders' survey responses, we found in our Brookings-Transcend report, "The disengagement gap: Why student engagement isn't what parents expect," that across public, charter, and private schools:

- Only 33% say they regularly get to develop their own ideas in school
- Only 29% say they get to learn things they are interested in
- Only 39% say they feel they belong at school

This undoubtedly contributes to the rapid decline in students' love of school as they get older. In third grade, over 75% of students say they love school, whereas this drops to just over 25% by the time students reach 10th grade.
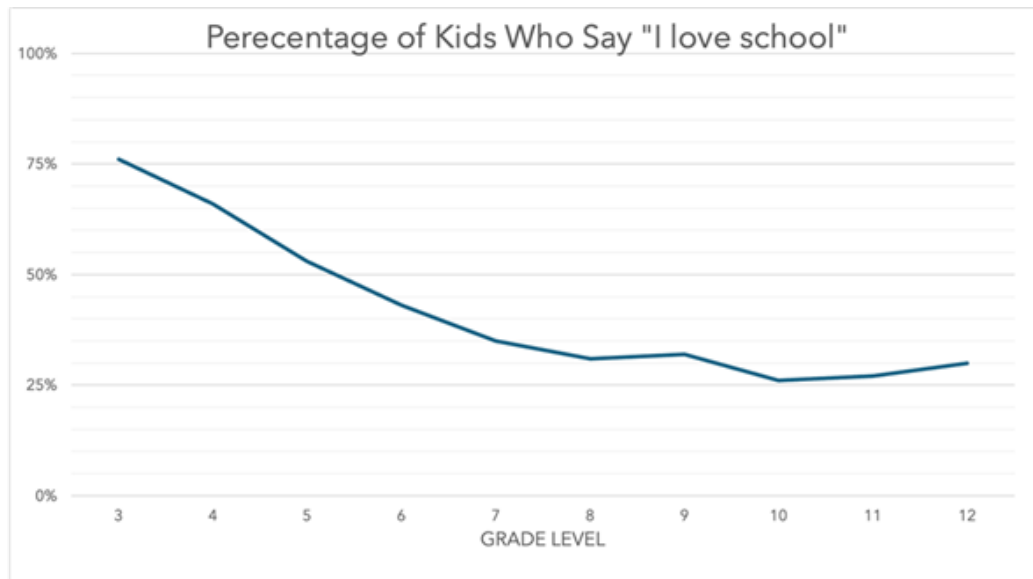
Source: Rebecca Winthrop, Youssef Shoukry, David Nitkin, *The Disengagement Gap: Why Student Engagement Isn't What Parents Expect*, (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution and Transcend, 2024

We did not find large differences in engagement levels across race, socio-economic status, or gender. It appears that schools are equally able to bore kids and turn them off to learning, be they Black or white, rich or poor, girls or boys. However, we did find that the impact of disengagement were disproportionately felt by low-income students. Families with financial means, time available, and connections are more able to help boost their students' engagement by moving schools, exploring different extracurricular activities, providing personal attention and tutoring, and seeking out accommodations for learning differences. Disengaged students from families with limited financial resources or whose parents are time poor because they may be working multiple jobs were less likely to get the support they needed, and thus less likely to re-engage with their learning**.**

#3 There are four modes of engagement.

To improve engagement, we must first understand it and then be able to see it. Engagement includes what kids do, think, feel, and initiate. In academic parlance, this is behavioral, cognitive, emotional, and agentic engagement. My coauthor and I found that engagement is not a simply binary: engaged, not engaged. Students engage differently in different contexts. Sometimes they are behaviorally engaged, attending school, but cognitively disengaged, paying

little attention to the content of instruction. Other times students are exerting their agency, taking initiative to influence the flow of instruction to make their learning environment more supportive or interesting. Ultimately, we found children engage in their learning in four different modes.

The Four Modes of Engagement
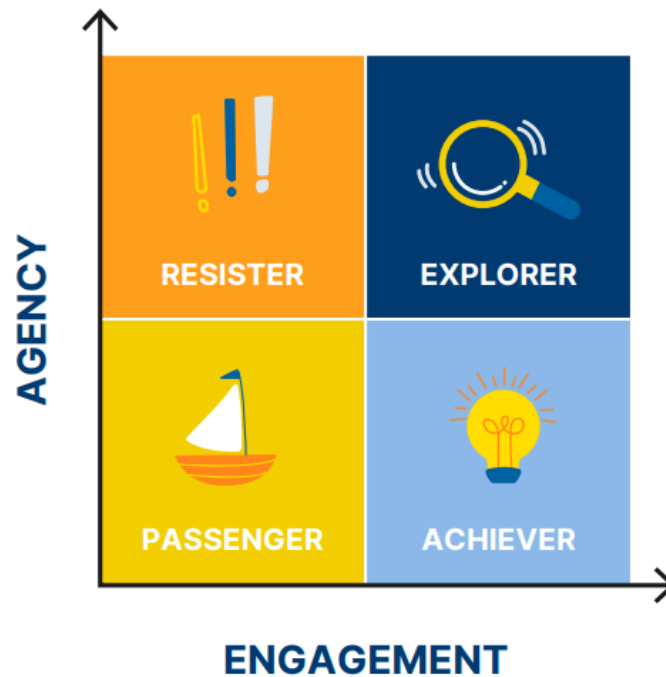

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- **Passenger mode:** When students are coasting, doing the bare minimum to get by. They may be getting good grades and like school because they see their friends.
- **Achiever mode:** When students are trying to get a gold star on everything put in front of them. Students get positive feedback and are developing good skills, but often they are focused on the end goal (the grade) not the process (the learning) and become fragile, risk-averse learners.
- **Resister mode:** When students avoid, or disrupt, their learning. They may interrupt class, withdraw and not participate, refuse to do homework or come to school. They are using their voice, often in inappropriate ways, to signal that something is wrong.
- **Explorer mode:** When students are engaged on all fronts, including taking initiative in their learning. This could include asking to write a paper on a topic of interest or to study with a friend. Given opportunities to be in Explorer mode, students often become highly motivated and excel academically.

#4 Students need more opportunities to learn in Explorer mode.

These modes are dynamic, and kids shift in and out of them. However, too often they are getting stuck in one mode, at which point the mode becomes an identity. The "smart" kid, the

"problem" kids, the "lazy" kid. One thing is certain: kids are not getting enough time in Explorer mode, able to have some agency over how they pursue their learning. The opportunity to learn this way makes all the difference. In fact, across 35 randomized control trials in 18 countries, academic Johnmarshall Reeve and his colleagues have found that when students are "agentically engaged"—what we call Explorer mode—they perform better academically along with having more prosocial behavior and motivation. And yet a minority of kids have these opportunities. In our Brookings-Transcend research, we found that less than 4% of students in middle and high school say they have experiences that help them regularly explore in school.

Learning Experiences by Mode of Engagement and Grade
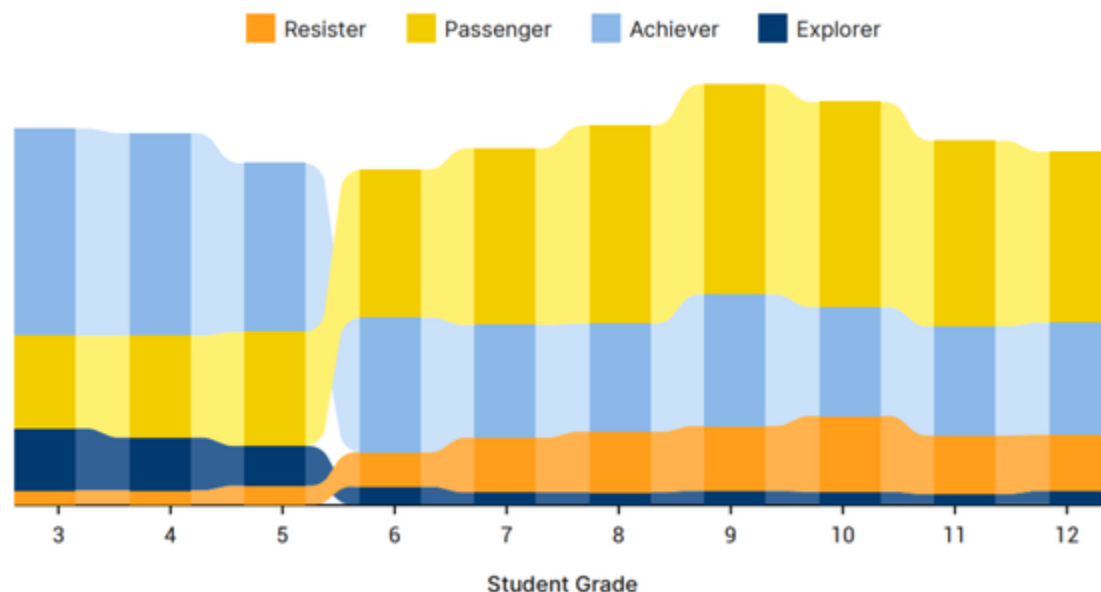
Source: Rebecca Winthrop, Youssef Shoukry, David Nitkin, *The Disengagement Gap: Why Student Engagement Isn't What Parents Expect*, (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution and Transcend, 2024)

#5 We can do better.

We need to do better by our children. We can boost student agency without sacrificing academic rigor; we can strengthen their wellbeing without lowering our expectations; they can be in school and be excited to learn.

I fully support the steps needed to help students master fundamental academic knowledge and skills, including the call to have:

- **High expectations:** We need to have high expectations for our children. This includes families and educators. If we do not believe our students can rise to the occasion, attend school, and achieve excellence, how will they?
- **Distraction-free schools:** We need to provide students with a distraction-free environment for engaging in learning, which includes bell-to-bell cell phone bans and restricting interaction with open-ended generative AI tools.

- **Instruction based on the science of reading:** We need to ensure we effectively teach students how to read because literacy remains a gateway skill for educational success.

These initiatives are necessary, but I believe not sufficient. Students need an opportunity to see why what they learn in school matters in the real world. They need to feel they belong to a community that not only cares about them but where they can contribute. I have heard from countless students across the country that they just don't see the point of school. Adolescents in particular feel stuck, like they have little say in how they spend their days, and disempowered. Indeed, by many measures they are disempowered. One study found American teenagers were subject to twice as many rules as incarcerated felons.

In contrast, Finland, regularly lauded for its high-quality education system affords a great deal of autonomy, and by extension respect, to its children. One study comparing children's independent mobility noted the freedom granted to Finnish children is "striking." At 7 years old, children can walk and cycle alone. Most 8-year-olds can cross main roads, go to school, and go out after dark alone. By 10 years old, a majority are allowed to ride on local buses alone. Japan, another country that stands out for its high performing education system, also gives children the chance to be agents in their own lives. Children walk to school, often in groups, but they also contribute to their community. Japanese schools employ few janitors as all students have responsibilities for cleaning and tidying their school. This daily practice recognizes children's importance as part of a community and respects their contributions. It builds children's ability to collaborate and is tied to school's character education goals. Learning how to contribute to the world is essential in developing healthy children, especially in adolescence.

We will not succeed in reducing absenteeism, boosting achievement or improving wellbeing without also providing young people with some measure of autonomy and the ability to engage in learning experiences that they perceive as relevant to their lives. A 2024 Gallup and Walton Family Foundation survey found that almost half of young people do not feel prepared for the future. In a recent Brookings and Family Work Institute student focus group, one high school student said: "*It's like there's only one path in school, and there's infinite paths in life. To prepare students to make good decisions, you have to let students make some decisions.*" This is why the School Superintendents Association has recently made "real skills for real life" one of the five principles of its Public Education Promise framework.

There are a continuum of actions schools and communities can take to help boost student engagement and give them an opportunity to learn in Explorer mode. **Teachers** of any subject, and in any school, can use autonomy-supportive teaching practices. Rigorously evaluated, these subtle shifts promote Explorer mode by giving students an opportunity to exercise their agency in small ways (e.g., choosing how to do their work, giving feedback on the lesson). When used regularly, students improve on all fronts: achievement, motivation, and behavior.

Schools and families can help motivate students by supporting their interests. Families are uniquely placed to support student's engagement and are equally influential alongside educators and peers. As long as students are not hurting themselves or others, pursuing their

interests is an engagement booster. Helping students "find their spark," as the late leader in positive youth development Peter Benson calls it, gives student energy and motivation. But not all students are equally supported to pursue their interests. For example, almost 60% of students with straight As participate in extracurricular arts activities; only 30% of those with Cs and Ds do. Schools and families should not require academic success as a prerequisite for extracurricular participation. Instead, they should require good attendance and behavior as the criteria for participating in sports, arts, and other extracurricular activities. Taking away the thing that motivates a struggling student, be it sports or skateboarding, just accelerates their disengagement from school.

Ultimately, however, we need to remind ourselves of the profound role school plays in **our society**. Schools are not just places where children come to learn important content. They are also where children learn to live with other people who are not their family and neighbors. It is where they can practice using the knowledge they learn to solve problems in their community. Place-based initiatives across the country from Kentucky to California to New York show that when schools become community hubs for children's learning and development, students thrive.

Community schools partner with families, social services, and leverage community partners for enriched learning experiences. Health care providers reach needy students in schools; families provide input on how to best support their children's wellbeing. Employers partner with schools to provide mentorship and learning experiences. In Appalachian Kentucky, the non-profit Partners for Rural Impact supports full-service community schools, including embedding students in local newsrooms to boost engagement and civic learning. A recent Learning Policy Institute evaluation of California's statewide community schools initiative, the largest in the country, shows impressive early results. Compared to the control group, community schools in the treatment group saw chronic absenteeism drop by 30% and achievement rise, especially for the most marginalized students. Black students and Englisher learners gained the equivalent of 50 additional days of learning in math and ELA. This builds on the early evidence established by New York City's community schools initiative that demonstrated a reduction in chronic absenteeism and a boost in ELA and math performance.

In a world of generative AI, the role of our nations' schools, but especially our public schools, is even more important. My current work leading the Brookings Global Task Force on AI and Education has shown me the potential risks that unfettered access to open-ended interaction with generative AI poses to young people. Not only is children's cognitive development at risk, but so too their emotional development, their ability to connect with others, and their sense of belonging to and purpose in society.

Children are accessing consumer AI tools through multiple platforms, including social media where AI friends can dispense relationship advice and do children's homework for them. Generative AI is powerful and when carefully designed using quality pedagogical approaches, it has the potential to help children learn and explore. But general purpose models are not optimized for children and do not support learning. Stanford University and Common Sense

Media found that AI companions can hurt children and argue that no one under 18 should use them. At their core, the vast majority of generative AI tools are designed for individual use, not to amplify in-person relationships. AI overuse undermines the very learning processes schools seek to support. Learning requires friction, struggle, and strong in-person relationships. Students need connection and relevance alongside rigor. This may be why China's Ministry of Education, while requiring 8 hours of AI literacy a year starting this month, also prohibits primary school students from independently using AI that provides open-ended discussion and from replacing human teachers.

AI enters our world at a time when our social fabric is fraying. Schools must play an essential role in helping develop not just strong academics, but also young people who are willing and able to build strong communities, renew our civic commons, and help repair our divided nation.