

# Relevance and Engagement Aren't Magic and Mystery: They're Rooted in Research and Common Sense



Professional  
Learning





Randi Weingarten  
PRESIDENT

Fedrick C. Ingram  
SECRETARY-TREASURER

Evelyn DeJesus  
EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT

## **OUR MISSION**

The AFT is a union of professionals that champions fairness; democracy; economic opportunity; and high-quality public education, healthcare and public services for our students, their families and our communities. We are committed to advancing these principles through community engagement, organizing, collective bargaining and political activism, and especially through the work our members do.

Copyright © AFT, AFL-CIO (AFT 2026). Permission is hereby granted to AFT state and local affiliates to reproduce and distribute copies of the work for nonprofit education purposes, provided that copies are distributed at or below cost, and that the author, source, and copyright notice are included on each copy. Any distribution of such materials to third parties who are outside of the AFT or its affiliates is prohibited without first receiving the express written permission of the AFT.

**E**ducators know a lot about the preconditions for student success. They know that students cannot learn and thrive if their health and well-being needs aren't met. Educators also know



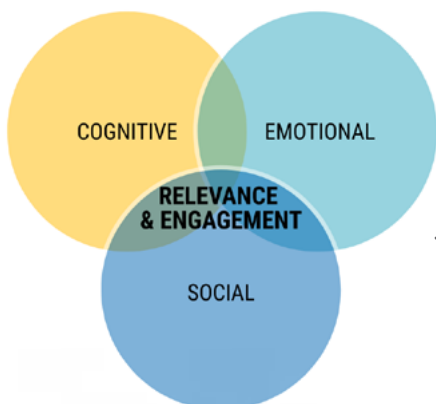
that if what students are learning is not relevant and engaging, they will not learn to their potential. Today's students are pulled in countless directions. So much competes for their attention: screens and social media, developmental challenges, peer dynamics, responsibilities at home and in their communities, and a world experiencing rapid technological and social changes. Popular thinkers and researchers alike cite the barriers society has placed in front of students and some remedies. Rebecca Winthrop has written extensively about the power of effortful and active learning while warning about the dangers of consumption culture and using artificial intelligence to shortchange students instead of supporting critical thinking, problem-solving and metacognition. Jonathan Haidt's *Anxious Generation* describes how social media platforms have hijacked developing brains by design and have undermined mental health and social development—creating fissures in our democratic lives.

While it's true that the pressures of our time are great, some of the challenges are timeless. Relevant and engaging teaching and learning go beyond *what* students are learning. Relevance and engagement are just as much a function of *how* students learn and how that content resonates with their **emotional lives, social identities and sense of purpose.**

**Relevance and engagement must be cast as social and emotional operations embedded in all teaching, not just specialized programs like career and technical education.**

Mary Helen Immordino-Yang and her colleagues remind us that emotions are the “rudder” for cognition; without emotional salience, academic information does not transfer into durable learning. To appreciate why, it helps to know a

little about the brain. Let this fact sink in about how the human brain works: *“There are no brain networks... that process only social, emotional or cognitive information. In fact, all brain networks appear to contribute to social, emotional, and cognitive processing. ... All brain networks show the effects of past social, emotional, and cognitive experience on*



*their functioning.*” (Immordino-Yang, Darling Hammond, & Krone, 2019). Said differently, there are no discrete parts of the brain that are used just for cognitive activities. Yet, there are active and powerful voices calling for diminishing or even eliminating social and emotional designs of learning. These include prominent right-wing think tanks, statehouses and even the [U.S. Education Department](#). To make this a partisan issue or politicize students’ emotional lives is wrong. It inflicts tremendous harm and flies in the face of what teachers know about the science of learning and how it’s tied to developmental psychology. Worse, it contradicts [recent evidence](#) that links social and emotional learning to significant gains in student achievement—the highwater mark standard for so many policymakers (Ha, C., et al., 2025).<sup>1</sup>



## Relevance and Engagement Are Key to Learning


Much has been written about the merits of relevance and engagement for student learning. For something to feel relevant to a child (or anyone, for that matter) it requires more than just someone saying it’s important.

When all this comes together, some key goals of education, like academic achievement and college and career readiness, are more easily reached.

Even though social and emotional learning has recently been entangled with attacks on diversity and equity, giving it its due isn’t just a problem of the po-

---

<sup>1</sup> Findings reveal that students in grades 1-12 who participated in universal school-based social and emotional learning programs demonstrated better academic achievement ( $g = .101$ ) compared with those who did not participate. Analyses further confirmed that student standardized test scores and grade point averages are improved by participating in SEL programs and that student test scores are the most proximal and accurate estimate of the effects of an SEL program on student achievement. Further, students showed significantly improved achievement in both literacy and math across grades 1-12, suggesting the impact of SEL across academic domains.



litical moment. Broadly speaking, schools allow for a lot of self-discovery and active play during the early years; but as students age, we lose our appetite or will for student-centered discovery. Instead, society pushes students to master volumes of content without stopping to consider the entirety of human development, what motivates us, how people create meaning, and the degree to which the reward systems in our society are even aligned with any of this.

**There must be a connection through emotion, sustained engagement within a social context, and meaning-making supported by links to other interests and prior knowledge.**

**The research is clear. Supporting students through relevant and engaging teaching and learning leads to the outcomes we want for students. The AFT has been paying attention to this for a long time because educators know that when students feel engaged, they can tune out the distractions in their lives, the screens, the social media, the attempts to divide us, and truly focus on learning and solving problems in safe and welcoming spaces.**

**—AFT President  
Randi Weingarten**

## **What Children Need at Different Stages of Their Development**

The life cycle of a developing child is highly complex. The preconditions for optimal learning are vast and wildly underappreciated. Shrugging off the social and emotional lives of children by dismissing SEL and its foundations for anything to be relevant and engaging for a child is a recipe for declining learning outcomes. As a society, we must instead emphasize SEL and commit ourselves to taking the entirety of childhood development seriously.

Children go through multiple stages of development and require both structured and looser learning environments to reach their potential. The research literature is vast on these subjects but can generally be summed up into several phases of childhood development:

- **When students are young**, there's more consensus as to what constitutes a relevant and engaging curriculum. The active play young children participate in allows them to notice patterns, see cause and effect, develop a sense of self, and begin to figure out how the world works (Shtulman & Carey, 2007). Working alone and with others aids their curiosities and allows them to reach goals. Students develop

empathy, learn to share, play cooperatively, wait patiently, take turns, solve conflicts, and manage frustration or anger. These contribute to core aspects of social and emotional learning—like motivation, self-determination, self-regulation and self-awareness—that are foundational skills for schooling (Immordino-Yang, Darling Hammond & Krone, 2019).

- By **middle childhood**, learning involves “internalizing and reproducing the cognitive and social-emotional patterns, procedures, and beliefs they are exposed to at school, at home, and in the community” (Immordino-Yang, Darling Hammond, & Krone, 2019). We want children to begin to set goals for themselves and develop strategies for achieving them all while building relationships and managing emotions (Barker & Munakata, 2015; Diamond, 2013; Paradise and Rogoff, 2009). Learning

environments need to allow children options for inquiry, how to look for and evaluate evidence, reach conclusions, and work out real-world problems to help build abstract thinking designs through artistic, linguistic and mathematical disciplines (Anderson, 2002).



- **Adolescence** requires very supportive learning environments to ensure that young people continue to have strong relationships with adults who know them (Osher and Kendziora, 2010). This is the period where the amygdala matures and reward structures of the brain lead to heightened ability to sense social cues (Albert, Chein & Steinberg, 2013). Executive functioning and higher-order thinking develop intensely, resulting in more risk-taking and emotion swings (Blakemore, 2018). These are ideal ages for students to be in settings where they can investigate to develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills, pursue interests and receive feedback for how to improve (Darling-Hammond, et al., 2019).

## Reframing Relevance to Get to Student Success

**Relevance that taps into emotion, identity and social belonging doesn't just make learning meaningful; it actively supports academic performance, retention and can lead to longer-term success, which can lead to employment and help people build careers.**

## Research-based practical strategies that schools and teachers can use:

- **Building students' hope strengthens GPA, persistence, and graduation.** (Gallagher et al., 2017; Marques et al., 2017). Schools can cultivate hope and optimism for children to give students a future-forward motivational glide path by using intentional “hope-building” activities like goal setting, pathways mapping and various reflection-based activities.
- **Emotional and relational engagement predicts academic growth and readiness** (Fredricks, Fredricks, Blumenfeld & Paris, 2004; Immordino-Yang & Damasio, 2007). Schools can promote engagement through curriculum that treats emotion as foundational to how we experience the world by using SEL-aligned practices that connect learning to identity and aspiration. Schools can measure emotional engagement as a key indicator in addition to academic benchmarks.
- **Interest-driven, socially supported learning links to higher academic performance and career outcomes** (Barron, 2014; Ito et al., 2013). Schools can implement connected learning structures by allowing students to build projects around their interests. These can be supported by mentors or community experts. Schools can also create different pathways for learning focused on real-world applications and networks of experts.
- **Belonging and peer networks improve academic achievement and reduce dropouts** (Williams et al., 2019; Walton & Cohen, 2011). Teachers can intentionally design their curricula around social learning opportunities. By building peer collaboration and classroom communities into everyday work, teachers can forge relationships between students that are supportive of learning.

### RESEARCH-BASED STRATEGIES TO SUPPORT RELEVANCE FOR STUDENTS

#### Building Students' Hope



Goal setting, pathways mapping and reflection activities

#### Promoting Engagement



SEL-aligned practices and measuring emotional engagement

#### Interest-Driven, Socially Supported Learning



Projects around student interests and real-world applications

#### Belonging and Peer Networks



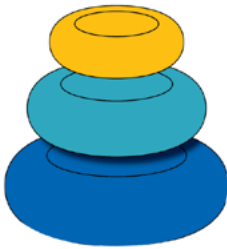
Building peer collaboration and classroom communities

# How the AFT Promotes Relevant and Engaging Teaching and Learning

The AFT has been laser-focused on enhancing student engagement for a long time because our teachers recognize the challenges of disengagement. Educators know all the things that compete for students' attention, and they know that not all students learn the same way. It takes a lot of skill rooted in research-based strategies like the ones above to cut through the noise to help students learn.

Using three domains of **emotional, social and behavioral, and cognitive engagement** for students, the AFT offers an array of professional learning for educators.

## Dimensions of Student Engagement



### Cognitive Engagement

Accessible and challenging learning tasks



### Behavioral Engagement

Active participation in learning experiences



### Emotional Engagement

Identity-affirming practices and belonging

## Emotional Engagement

The AFT supports educators to create emotional engagement through courses like [Identity-Affirming Classroom Practices](#), [Universal Design for Learning](#) and [Culturally Responsive Pedagogy](#). These courses explore research-based approaches to how educators welcome, include, affirm and elevate students in learning environments. The courses embrace research that shows learning is deeply tied to students' perceptions of themselves, including their sense of belonging, their confidence in the subject matter, their relationships with peers, and their willingness to take academic risks.

## Social and Behavioral Engagement

The AFT supports educators as they create meaningful learning experiences through courses like [Experiential Learning in STEM](#), [Deepening Civics Skills Through Classroom Dialogue](#) and [Game Factor](#). In each case, experiential learning, student voice and inquiry, student-guided dialogue, and academic discourse help bring engagement to life. Stimulating activities such as game-based learning, simulations, and collaborative projects foster connection and active learning while ensuring content remains relevant. Working toward clear goals and a broader purpose strengthens student motivation.

## Cognitive Engagement

The AFT supports educators in creating cognitive engagement through courses like [Differentiating Instruction](#), [Questioning](#) and [The Trio: Inquiry-Based, Problem-Based and Project-Based Learning](#). These courses push educators toward creating learning experiences that are accessible, appropriately challenging and grounded in a growth mindset. Educators do this by supporting students in setting goals and ensuring their background knowledge is assessed, activated and expanded. Educators offer pathways for student choice and intellectual challenges, allowing learners to build both confidence and competence.



# Works Cited

- Albert, D., Chein, J., & Steinberg, L. (2013). The Teenage Brain: Peer Influences on Adolescent Decision Making. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 22(2), 114-120. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0963721412471347>
- Anderson P. (2002). Assessment and Development of Executive Function (EF) During Childhood. *Child Neuropsychology*. 71-82. <https://doi.org/10.1076/chin.8.2.71.8724>
- Barker J.E., Munakata Y. (2015). Time Isn't of the Essence: Activating Goals Rather Than Imposing Delays Improves Inhibitory Control in Children. *Psychol Sci*. 26(12):1898-908. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797615604625>
- Barron, B. (2014). Formative Assessment for STEM Learning Ecosystems: Biographical Approaches as a Resource for Research and Practice. *National Research Council Committee on Out-of-School Time STEM*. Washington, D.C.: National Research Council. [http://sites.nationalacademies.org/cs/groups/dbassesite/documents/webpage/dbasse\\_089994.pdf](http://sites.nationalacademies.org/cs/groups/dbassesite/documents/webpage/dbasse_089994.pdf)
- Blakemore, S.J. (2018). Avoiding Social Risk in Adolescence. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 27(2), 116-122. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0963721417738144>
- Darling-Hammond, L., Flook, L., Cook-Harvey, C., Barron, B., & Osher, D. (2019). Implications for Educational Practice of the Science of Learning and Development. *Applied Developmental Science*, 24(2), 97-140. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10888691.2018.1537791>
- Diamond, A. (2013) Executive Functions. *Annual Review of Psychology* 64:135-68. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-psych-113011-143750>
- Fredricks, J.A., Blumenfeld, P.C., & Paris, A.H. (2004). School Engagement: Potential of the Concept, State of the Evidence. *Review of Educational Research*, 74(1), 59-109. <https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543074001059>
- Gallagher, M.W., Marques, S.C. & Lopez, S.J. (2017). Hope and the Academic Trajectory of College Students. *Journal of Happiness Studies* 18, 341-352 <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-016-9727-z>
- Ha, C., McCarthy, M.F., Strambler, M.J., & Cipriano, C. (2025). Disentangling the Effects of Social and Emotional Learning Programs on Student Academic Achievement Across Grades 1-12: A Systematic Review and Meta-analysis. *Review of Educational Research*, 0(0). <https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543251367769>
- Immordino-Yang, M.H. and Damasio, A. (2007). We Feel, Therefore We Learn: The Relevance of Affective and Social Neuroscience to Education. *Mind, Brain, and Education*, 1: 3-10. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1751-228X.2007.00004.x>
- Immordino-Yang, M.H., Darling-Hammond, L., & Krone, C. R. (2019). Nurturing Nature: How Brain Development Is Inherently Social and Emotional, and What This Means for Education. *Educational Psychologist*, 54(3), 185–204. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00461520.2019.1633924>
- Ito, M., Gutiérrez, K., Livingstone, S., Penuel, B., Rhodes, J., Salen, K., Schor, J., Sefton-Green, J. & Watkins, S. C. (2013). *Connected Learning: an Agenda for Research and Design*. Digital Media and Learning Research Hub. [https://researchonline.lse.ac.uk/id/eprint/48114/1/\\_lse.ac.uk\\_storage\\_LIBRARY\\_Secondary\\_libfile\\_shared\\_repository\\_Content\\_Livingstone%2C%20S\\_Livingstone\\_Connected\\_learning\\_agenda\\_2010\\_Livingstone\\_Connected\\_learning\\_agenda\\_2013.pdf](https://researchonline.lse.ac.uk/id/eprint/48114/1/_lse.ac.uk_storage_LIBRARY_Secondary_libfile_shared_repository_Content_Livingstone%2C%20S_Livingstone_Connected_learning_agenda_2010_Livingstone_Connected_learning_agenda_2013.pdf)
- Marques, S.C., Gallagher, M.W. & Lopez, S.J. Hope- and Academic-Related Outcomes: A Meta-Analysis. *School Mental Health* 9, 250-262 (2017). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12310-017-9212-9>
- Osher, D. & Kendziora, K. (2010). Building Conditions for Learning and Healthy Adolescent Development: A Strategic Approach. *Handbook of youth prevention science*. 121-140. [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/292710707\\_Building\\_conditions\\_for\\_learning\\_and\\_healthy\\_adolescent\\_development\\_A\\_strategic\\_approach](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/292710707_Building_conditions_for_learning_and_healthy_adolescent_development_A_strategic_approach)

- Paradise, R., & Rogoff, B. (2009). Side by side: Learning by Observing and Pitching In. *Ethos*, 37(1), 102-138. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-1352.2009.01033.x>
- Shtulman, A., & Carey, S. (2007). Improbable or Impossible? How Children Reason About the Possibility of Extraordinary Events. *Child Development*, 78(3), 1015-1032. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8624.2007.01047.x>
- Walton G.M., & Cohen G.L.. (2011). A Brief Social-Belonging Intervention Improves Academic and Health Outcomes of Minority Students. *Science*. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.1198364>
- Williams, E. A., Zwolak, J.P., Dou, R., & Brewes, E. (2019). Linking Engagement and Performance: The Social Network Analysis Perspective. *Physical Review Physics Education Research*. <https://doi.org/10.1103/PhysRevPhysEducRes.15.020150>



Education | Healthcare | Public Services

AFT, AFL-CIO | 555 New Jersey Ave. N.W. | Washington, DC 20001 | [www.aft.org](http://www.aft.org)



[aft.org](http://aft.org)



[@aft.org](https://twitter.com/aft.org)



[AFTunion](https://www.facebook.com/AFTunion)



[@AFTunion](https://www.instagram.com/AFTunion)



[@AFTunion](https://www.instagram.com/AFTunion)

Item number: 39-04262