



## Student Engagement

### WEBINAR QUESTION AND ANSWER SUMMARY

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On July 13 and 14, 2011, the Safe and Supportive Schools Technical Assistance Center hosted a Webinar, entitled *Student Engagement*. During the session, the presenter, Dr. Sara Truebridge, an education consultant and researcher, received several questions from the audience. Since the presenter could not answer all of the questions during the event, the Center has prepared the following Webinar Question and Answer Summary with responses to each question. For additional information, please email or call the Center ([sssta@air.org](mailto:sssta@air.org); 1-800-258-8413).

*Please note the content of this summary was prepared under a contract from the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools to the American Institutes for Research (AIR). This Q&A summary does not necessarily represent the policy or views of the U.S. Department of Education, nor do they imply endorsement by the U.S. Department of Education.*

#### **Q1. What is the most effective way to get student voice?**

**Sara Truebridge:** The answer is simple, ask them. It sounds so simple but we just don't do that enough. Teachers are so inundated with feeling like we have so much material to cover in so much time and we don't take the time to ask the students. Eric Schaps talks so much about giving an opportunity to build community. One of the best ways to do that that I've found, and I do this with kindergartners as well as with high school students, is to have class meetings. Have a meeting to start the day and have a meeting when you end the day and it doesn't have to take up a lot of time. After you've done a lesson, ask the students: *What did you like about this? What do you wish I could have done? What would you have done if you were doing this lesson?* I think it's time to authentically and sincerely ask the students, but then really listen and incorporate what they have to say.

#### **Q2. Are any national school professional organizations really promoting use of forums for securing student voice?**

**Sara Truebridge:** There is a wonderful website, and it is in my resource section. It is called Sound Out ([www.soundout.org](http://www.soundout.org)). Their primary purpose is promoting student voice in school. You will see that this resource discusses student voice, talks about many different ways of incorporating it, and provides many examples of what students are looking for. I also encourage, on a national perspective, going to some of the resources that are provided at the end of the Webinar slides. In addition, if your school participates in a School Climate Survey, the results of the survey can be presented to the students and used as a catalyst for further dialogue and course of action.



**Q3. What's the first step in getting schools to take a strength-based approach to problem-solving?**

**Sara Truebridge:** The first step is to not call it a problem, but rather look at the situation. What I do when I work with schools is I actually work first on getting individuals to understand really deeply what the difference between a deficit-based and strengths-based perspective is. When you look at things from a strengths-based perspective you no longer are looking at things as problems. You're looking at things again by what is working right and by looking at what is working well, we then move forward and can start unpacking some of the challenges that we have. In other words, we're getting to the same end, but we're using a different language and different strategies. One of the difficulties that many teachers face is that we do have a strengths-based perspective. What's unfortunate is that as a whole, the system is still predominately deficit-based; we have deficit-based assessments and deficit-based hoops to jump through. This makes working from a strength-based perspective difficult, but not insurmountable.

**Q4. What would you recommend would be one of the first steps to rolling-out that information? Would it be at a faculty meeting? Would it be at a professional development event? Is it through an e-mail or newsletter or, I mean, what are some of the effective ways to actually get that information in the hands of staff?**

**Sara Truebridge:** I've done this through professional development but if it's going to be through professional development, it can't be the kind that's a "hit and run," or "stand and deliver" kind of thing. As an example, I'm on my third year with one school working on just this issue. If you don't have the time or the funds for professional development, staff meetings are a great venue to get information to the staff. What I would do is start out by using stories, having people go around and say, "Tell me a story of when you as a student felt engaged." This is what I started with in this Webinar. People love talking about themselves and talking about "oh yes, I remember this teacher . . ." and you start dissecting that. "Well, what did that teacher do and how did that make you feel?" or "What was that lesson?" When you ask people to tell their story, you can then start to extrapolate factors and you'll see so many of those three factors I presented earlier: the **caring relationships**, **high expectations** and **opportunities to participate and contribute** come out.

**Q5. You made a statement that maybe we need to focus on increasing student motivation, rather than instructional strategies. I would suggest that if a classroom teacher is using differentiated instruction that is designed to meet student needs then motivation will follow. Is there a difference in semantics here or are we talking about the same thing?**

**Sara Truebridge:** That's exactly what I mean and I actually talk about the concept of getting rid of tracking because what we need to do is focus on differentiated learning. We need to focus on inclusivity and that's exactly what is meant.

**Q6. Can you explain more about what you mean in eliminating formal and informal tracking?**

**Sara Truebridge:** What I still see in classrooms, for instance in a school where I was teaching, they identified gifted and talented students and put them in their own classroom instead of integrating all students together. Another tracking situation, is putting kids in ability groups when reading. I



am not saying not to ever put kids in groups, but there is a lot of benefit in making groups heterogeneous rather than homogeneous. There are some high schools that are so heavily tracked— students are tracked for remediation, they are tracked for honors and tracked for AP, and so forth. As I said earlier, some grouping may be necessary at times but what we need to do is recognize the benefits of heterogeneous grouping to give everybody an opportunity to be in places that create interaction between peers because we all have something to learn from each other.

**Q7. How do we access the student engagement tool you just referenced? I think it was student engagement assessment surveys.**

**Sara Truebridge:** You can find that either on Schlechty's website (<http://www.schlechtycenter.org/>), or if you go to his book which is cited in the resource section of this Webinar. In his book there is an extensive area where he talks about doing classroom engagement profiles and he goes in depth into some work that I wasn't able to discuss today.

**Q8. Is there research on specific aspects of "student voice" that best help create an environment for learning?**

**Sara Truebridge:** I run student focus groups and it's very interesting to hear from the students what they want to be involved in. Consistently this is what we hear—students want a voice in what the food is, students want a voice about the bathrooms, and the cleanliness in their schools. There are students who are afraid to go into the bathrooms, so it's again largely about getting their needs met. This is getting their physical needs met, and some of the aspects are not as difficult as people think. The other thing about the aspect of student voice is, don't ask unless you're willing to act on it because what's worse than anything is to ask students for their input and then just turning away saying "thank you for sharing" without acting on it. It is imperative that if you're asking students, you don't have to bite it all off at once and put everything into effect, but you have to share with them that you are listening and not only share it, but show them. Sometimes what happens out of student focus groups that I run, it's as simple as a suggestion box gets to be placed in the office and students get to contribute just to a suggestion box so again it can be very simple.

**Q9. What are your suggestions for assisting teachers and administrators not to become so defensive (to become more open) in responding to what the students share about caring, what interests them, what they would like to see happen in the classroom and at school?**

**Sara Truebridge:** We all need to recognize that we each have a responsibility and it isn't a matter of being defensive as much as being respectful of what we each have to say. Just as the teachers feel defensive, think how the students feel when we ask them questions. It's even just the tone of voice we use and I think that the responsibility isn't with one sector— when I say sector, I mean district, school or teacher. It's the responsibility of all of us to embrace this as an initiative and something you value in the district and have everybody doing it as a parallel process, because that same question can be asked about principals. If I'm a teacher and I go to my principal and say, "I love what I'm doing. I didn't get into teaching to get rich. I came to really expand minds and to



work with students, but I don't have the time." It's really hard when a principal then comes back and says "Well, I have to get this test met and I've got to do this". I think a better way is to validate what's being said, "Yes, I totally get it. How can we work on this together?" I want to keep bringing this back to the fact that the research bears out that when we do focus on motivation, caring relationships, high expectations, students given opportunities to participate and contribute, test scores and academics follow. It's a way to meet an end. Most teachers know that these factors will lead to an increase in academics—we see it every day—but with such an emphasis on testing, we feel that we don't have the time or support to do it.

**Q10. How have you seen schools effectively communicate the need for focus on relationships to parents and community members and teachers related to that topic?**

**Sara Truebridge:** I work with a continuation high school in Oakland and they decided three years ago to embrace a philosophy rooted in resilience. Resilience research is actually where these three protective factors - caring relationships, high expectations, and opportunities to participate and contribute - come from. This school embraced a philosophy of resilience, that we can overcome all adversities. We have resilience not only as individuals but as a school and as a community and what has been happening over the course of the three years is students have been given more voice and more opportunities to express themselves, but it doesn't happen overnight. Little things can also make a difference in terms of engaging the community, like walking around the block, talking to neighbors saying, "come on over, we're having an ice cream social" or, "the students did this exhibit., you're welcome to come and see it!" One of the things that has happened in our communities is that parents don't necessarily always feel welcome. Another thing that I work with in urban communities is to hold parent meetings outside the school. We did some parent meetings and instead of doing them at the school, we held them in a church. The reason was there are parents who have baggage about going to school. They don't want to be in a school. It brings back thoughts of their own experience or they make assumptions about what school is and they're much more comfortable in an environment that they trust, one that they know of.

**Q11. You mentioned restorative justice (RJ). Do you know of any RJ programs that have been implemented in high schools?**

**Sara Truebridge:** Restorative Justice Online ([www.restorativejustice.org](http://www.restorativejustice.org)) is a helpful resource for learning more about restorative justice in schools. Put "schools" in the search field when you go to that site and it will direct you to more information and examples about restorative justice in schools.

**Q12. Will you be offering strategies for increasing the motivation of teachers to use the strength-based model? How can we begin to get districts and/or states to utilize standards as a source for direction, not tied to funding?**

**Sara Truebridge:** The biggest motivation for teachers to use a strength-based approach is that it works in increasing school and classroom climate, student engagement, and academic performance. Unfortunately, the timeframe in this Webinar didn't allow to specifically address the issue of motivating teachers to adopt a strength-based approach but it's a BIG one! We could



easily spend an entire Webinar on this topic. Perhaps there will be an opportunity to discuss it in a future Webinar. (*Editor's note: We've made note of this request and will consider it in future Webinar schedules.*) In the meantime, some resources that talk more in depth about strength-based strategies in schools include: *Resiliency: What We Have Learned* by Bonnie Benard; *Fostering Resiliency: Expecting All Students to Use Their Minds and Hearts Well* by Martin L. Krovetz; and visiting <http://appreciativeinquiry.case.edu/>, a Web site all about Appreciative Inquiry. If you visit this website you can put "school" or "education" in the search field to find information relevant to this question.

**Q13. Any suggestions for community members to help the district/teachers to understand and adopt the social and emotional learning concept? Some feel that it is the parents' responsibility to teach social skills, and there is not enough time in the day. The research on academic performance has been shown to them. Who would be the best person to champion the idea?**

**Sara Truebridge:** Everyone! We all have a shared responsibility in recognizing children and students as "whole beings" and addressing their social emotional learning. Raising children to become healthy, caring, independent, bright and creative contributing members of society takes everyone communicating and working together. The most important aspect to keep in mind with anything that anyone does is that it is not about "what" you do, but rather "how" you do it. Are you doing "whatever" in a manner that is strength-based, respectful, ethical, and from your heart as well as from your head? The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL -- [www.casel.org](http://www.casel.org)) and the Developmental Studies Center ([www.devstu.org](http://www.devstu.org)) are two wonderful resources to further explore issues around social emotional learning.